

William F. O'Donnell, 87

War Hero, Lawyer Became Priest, Administrator

By Patricia Sullivan
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William F. O'Donnell, 87, a Catholic priest who worked at several Washington area parishes, edited a religious newspaper and most recently was the priest director of area Catholic cemeteries, died April 23 at Manor Care nursing home in Potomac after a heart attack.

Monsignor O'Donnell, a diocesan priest, was assistant pastor at St. Jane Frances de Chantal in Bethesda from 1962 to 1966, at the same time serving as chaplain of the National Institute of Mental Health clinical center. He edited the Catholic Standard newspaper from 1966 to 1979 while also working as a priest at St. Ann's Catholic Church in Washington.

He was appointed a monsignor in 1970 and spent the next year as administrator at St. Ignatius in Oxon Hill. In 1973, he became pastor at St. Hugh's in Greenbelt, and in 1982, he became pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes in Bethesda, a post he held until 1993.

During that last posting, he asked John A. Hurson, a Bethesda lawyer and Democratic candidate for the Maryland House of Delegates, to resign from the parish council at Our Lady of Lourdes because of his support for abortion rights. Hurson was the first Catholic political candidate in the Archdiocese of Washington to be disciplined by a parish priest for espousing views on abortion contrary to those held by the church, according to a church spokesman at the time.

Monsignor O'Donnell told a Washington Post reporter that he removed Hurson from the church panel after being given copies of Hurson's campaign literature that identified him as "pro-choice" on abortion and as a member of the parish council, on which he held a leadership position.

"That left me no alternative," Monsignor O'Donnell said. "He knew the rules. He knew it was incompatible."

By the time he became the priest director of Catholic cemeteries in 1993, Monsignor O'Donnell was also in residence and a participating priest at St. Thomas Apostle in Washington. He retired in 2007.

A native Washingtonian, William Francis O'Donnell was the oldest of eight children. He graduated from Gonzaga College High School in 1939, where he played on the varsity football and basketball teams and ran track. He graduated from Georgetown University in 1943, then joined the Army.

He fought in the Battle of the Bulge in the infantry and was a platoon leader, special unit commander and aide-de-camp to the division commander. He also participated in the liberation of Nazi death camps.

He received a Silver Star for his actions in combat in Europe. While his unit was pinned down under heavy enemy fire, he spotted three U.S. soldiers who were wounded and cut off from the unit. He made repeated trips under fire to rescue them, carrying them to safety on his back. His other military awards included two awards of the Bronze Star Medal and two awards of the Purple Heart. He was inducted into the Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame at Fort Benning, Ga., in 1984, almost 40 years after he left active duty.

After World War II, Monsignor O'Donnell served in the Foreign Service as U.S. vice consul in Hamburg, Germany. When he returned to the United States, he went to law school at Georgetown, graduating in 1952. He joined the Justice Department's criminal division as a trial lawyer.

By 1957, the future monsignor turned to the priesthood, enrolling in Christ the King Seminary in St. Bonaventure, N.Y., and graduating five years later. He was ordained in Washington.

Monsignor O'Donnell served on numerous organizations, including the Priest's Senate and Personnel Board and the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council. He also was a moderator of the John Carroll Society; spiritual director of the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, a Catholic organization; chaplain and advisory board member of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad; chaplain for the Rock Creek Council of the Knights of Columbus for more than 30 years; and national chaplain for the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge.

Survivors include a brother, John Jude O'Donnell of Bethesda.