

BODHOLT'S DINER

A hangout for friends from Newark, NJ

R.I.P Fr. Paul Wickens

John C.

Posted: **8:28 PM - Jul 11, 2004**

In the Crowley household we knew him as Father Paul, my father's best friend since boyhood. The back yard of the Wickens house on N. Seventh Street butted up against the Crowleys' back yard on N. Sixth. My dad went into the service and Paul Wickens went into the priesthood. He married my parents and baptized us kids. Later he got into hot water with the church but always maintained his integrity and great personal warmth and love for his friends. Fr. Paul Wickens died last week, and I reprint here the *Star-Ledger* obituary. I just spoke with my mom and she figures he and my father are up in Heaven playing poker right now.

Rev. Paul Wickens, Latin Mass advocate

Saturday, July 10, 2004

BY GEORGE BERKIN

Star-Ledger Staff

On Ash Wednesday, the Rev. Paul Wickens was where he loved to be, at the altar of his West Orange church, articulating the stately cadences of the traditional Latin Mass.

Weeks earlier, the priest had been diagnosed with esophageal cancer, but on that day, he carried himself with confidence, friends said.

Rev. Wickens, who defied the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church to return to the traditional Latin Mass that was practiced before the changes ordered by the Second Vatican Council, died Thursday. He was 74.

The founder of the St. Anthony of Padua Chapel in West Orange, Rev. Wickens resided in housing adjacent to the chapel. He died at Overlook Hospital in Summit.

A dissenter from the changes handed down to Roman Catholics in the 1960s, Rev. Wickens did not like how he was portrayed in the public square, said his brother, Albert Wickens of Madison.

"He's not a rebel, because he's more Catholic than any priest I know, and any bishop I know, completely orthodox," Albert Wickens said. "The word I like to use with him is a traditional priest, that's what he is."

Traditional priest or rebel, Rev. Wickens certainly raised a stir. Unhappy with Vatican II, a Roman Catholic Church council that mandated changes in church policy, Rev. Wickens became increasingly vocal about his discontent.

"He saw the church declining after Vatican II, a loss of faith by many people," Albert Wickens said. "Certainly the young people were not being instructed properly. Priest were leaving, nuns were leaving. The church seemed to be in a free fall."

Rev. Wickens placed the blame for the decline squarely on a vernacular church liturgy.

"The source of the weakness was the new Mass that was promulgated in Vatican II," Albert Wickens said. "That's why he returned to the old Mass."

Relations between Rev. Wickens and the church hierarchy, already frosty, reached a breaking point in 1983.

That February, Rev. Wickens held a press conference in Newark, denouncing another result of Vatican II -- the introduction of sex education into Catholic schools.

"The material was without moral guidance and was inappropriate for some of the age groups," Rev. Wickens' brother said. "He felt they were stealing from children their innocence."

That's when the hierarchy pushed back. The following month, then-Archbishop Peter L. Gerety of Newark ordered Rev. Wickens reassigned to an out-of-the-way posting. "It was clearly to get rid of him," his brother said.

When Rev. Wickens refused, the archbishop suspended him.

Nearly three decades after he was ordained June 4, 1955, in the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Newark, Rev. Wickens was officially out of a job.

At first, Rev. Wickens directed his energies to a newsletter, denouncing the changes wrought by Vatican II. He continued the publication in subsequent years using even more pointed language.

A recent newsletter, for example, warns about "a sharp decline in faith as the homosexual prelates gained the upper hand."

In 1994, Rev. Wickens began construction on the St. Anthony of Padua Chapel in West Orange. The church was completed two years later.

The church has 900 members, and its three Sunday Masses typically draw 500 worshippers.

The Latin Mass appeals to many who grew up hearing the traditional phrasing, said Andrew Flock of Basking Ridge, a parishioner and longtime friend of Rev. Wickens.

"That's what I was brought up in," Flock said. "I didn't want to go with the English version."

The old-style service has garnered quite a following, Flock added. "We've got people from all over who come, Pennsylvania, New Jersey all over, New York, they come, and they're happy."

"Father Wickens' name is known throughout the country," Flock added. "He's a legend for the Latin Mass."

The church hierarchy was less enthusiastic. In a 1997 interview, a spokesman for then-Newark Archbishop Theodore McCarrick said Rev. Wickens' chapel was not a legitimate Roman Catholic entity. "He had no authorization to build it, to say Mass, to hear confessions or to preach. Those faculties were suspended in 1983 and have never been reinstated," said the spokesman, Michael Hurley.

Last night a spokesman for the archdiocese expressed sorrow at Rev. Wickens' death.

"It's doubly sad because there had been attempts to reconcile with Father Wickens but that reconciliation was never fulfilled," said the spokesman, James Goodness.

Despite the death of its pastor, the work at St. Anthony of Padua Chapel will go on with temporary fill-ins until a permanent priest is found.

"We have very dedicated parishioners," Albert Wickens said. The parish may call on members of the Society of Saint Pius X, founded by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, to run the church, Rev. Wickens' brother said.

In addition to his brother, Albert, Rev. Wickens is survived by three additional brothers, Joseph of Roselle Park, John of Roseland and James of Westfield, and three sisters, Mary Meade of Ocean Grove, Barbara Wickens of Cranford and Jean Sexton of Westfield.

Friends and family may call at the church, 1360 Pleasant Valley Way, West Orange, from 1 to 8 p.m. tomorrow and 4 to 8 p.m. Monday.

Three priests from the Society of Saint Pius X will offer a traditional Latin funeral Mass at 10 a.m. Tuesday at the chapel. Burial will take place on the chapel grounds.

Bob Davis Jr.

Posted: **9:17 PM - Jul 11, 2004**

Great job John. I didn't find out until today. I missed the obit in the Ledger and I'm glad you posted it. Maybe I'll see you there on Monday or Tuesday. Bob

Bob Davis, Sr.

Posted: **10:46 PM - Jul 11, 2004**

John, Thank you for remembering Father Paul Wickens. Yes, he was a great friend of your fathers and also a great friend of mine. He was a graduate of St. Rose of Lima grammar school and spent his teenage life in and around the Church; and the playground where he excelled. My family grew up with him in our close circle of friends. He will be sorely missed.

I had the opportunity to have spent a full day with him about three weeks ago, during which I drove him to his sister's home, so he could say a Mass for her. He knew that his condition was terminal and in keeping with the way he always lived, he thought of others first.

He was a priest who had very high principles and only wanted the very best for the Catholic Church and its parishioners. It is fitting that his final resting place will be at Saint Anthony of Padua Chapel in West Orange, which he built and served so well. I am certain that God will embrace him in heaven.

Barbara O'Brien Dedman

Posted: **7:46 AM - Jul 12, 2004**

I remember when the newly ordained Father Wickens and his brother came to SRL to give their "first blessing" to us schoolchildren. I guess I was in the fifth grade and was very much in awe of these new priests. In the Fall of 1962 I met Fr. Paul again when I started nursing school at Orange Memorial. Fr. Wickens was assigned to St. Venantius at the time, but he was also hospital chaplain and chaplain of the Newman Club at OMH. I saw him nearly every day for my 3 years as a student as well as the 2 years I worked at OMH after graduation. He was a genuinely good man. When the rectory housekeeper was away, a few of us student nurses would go over and cook a few simple meals for him and clean up the kitchen which he had managed to get into a big mess within days of being left on his own!

Barbara (again)

Posted: **12:48 PM - Jul 12, 2004**

It's funny how the mention of a name (in this case Fr. Wickens) can unleash other memories. I just remembered Father's father, Mr. Al Wickens, who served as (head?) usher at SRL as far back as I remember. He was rather small, compared to his sons, and he was always meticulously dressed, standing at attention at the rear of the Church next to that coin receptacle in which "seat money" - a nickel or a dime - was deposited by some folks, a practice that probably vanished by the sixties and

which I suspect was related to the early congegationalists/puritans "buying" their place in a pew with an annual offering. Anyone else remember the "seat money" contraption???

John C.

Posted: **1:54 PM - Jul 12, 2004**

Mr. D, I know you lost a great friend, and I am sorry. I agree Fr. Paul will get an excellent reception. I will see you tonight at the wake.

(Bobby, I didn't see your original post or I would have attached my comments to it.)

All times are UTC-04:00