

Father Harney brought humanity and humor as a priest

By CHRISTINE BORDELON

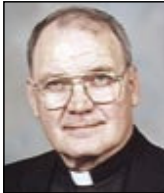
The beautiful Gospel of the beatitudes and humor opened an insight into Father Evan Kenneth Harney, a man parishioners at St. Christopher the Martyr Parish in Metairie knew as their beloved pastor.

Father Harney died Feb. 20 of cancer at age 68 and was eulogized by friends and fellow priests at a Mass Feb. 24 held at St. Christopher. Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes was the principal celebrant. A special Mass with a memorial exercise by the U.S. Marines was celebrated the night before.

"He was the blessed person who was poor in spirit and totally relied on the mercy of God," said Father Vien The Nguyen, a classmate of his at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans who added how Father Harney's oft-heard saying, "There go I for the grace of God," was known to all.

Father Nguyen illustrated Father Harney's openness about his life experiences with many colorful stories, including outliving members of a military underwater demolition team that he was kicked out of due to drinking.

Father Nguyen said God had a spe-



cial plan for Father Harney.

"Not only did he outlive his (military) classmates and recover from alcoholism, he would become a priest and, as a priest, he could reconcile with his mother, baptize her and anoint her and send her back to God," he said. "We should all feel grateful to have been touched by Brother Ken. Through Ken's life, we have seen the fingers of God touch us."

HAVING BEATEN alcoholism by joining Alcoholics Anonymous at age 35 made Father Harney more of a "regular Joe" than a priest to people. He was open about his problem, a fact people appreciated.

"He was able to relate to anyone and brought so many wanderers back to the church," parishioner Anne Madding-Taylor eulogized. "He made them feel welcome no matter how long they had been away or what they had done. The people here considered him their friend, their father, their consoler and their shepherd. We are lost right now, but we know he is in the palm of God's hand."

Born in Lexington, Ky., Father Harney moved to New Orleans in 1979 with the U.S. Navy, where he served for 23 years. He attended the University of New Orleans and earned an education degree, his brother Eugene Harney said, and briefly taught in the Orleans Parish Public School System.

Searching for meaning in life, Eu-

gene Harney said his brother began to find peace after meeting a Catholic chaplain while stationed in California and working with him on a program for troubled youth. He then converted to Catholicism.

"That priest was pivotal in him becoming a priest," Harney said.

Father Nguyen joked about him joining the priesthood in New Orleans.

"The Archdiocese of New Orleans was his fifth and last inquiry," Father Nguyen said, after being rejected from other religious orders. "He told God, 'This is it, if I don't get in now, that's it for the priesthood.'"

Father Harney entered Notre Dame Seminary in 1983 and was accepted by now-Baton Rouge Bishop Robert Muench, Nguyen jested, on a trial basis for a year. He outlasted the year, received a master of divinity from Notre Dame and was ordained a priest Aug. 12, 1989. He was assigned associate pastor at St. Margaret Mary in Slidell from 1989 to 1993, then a parochial vicar at St. Christopher the Martyr from 1993 to 1998.

ONCE NAMED pastor at St. Christopher on July 1, 1998, parishioners said he strengthened the parish over eight years with his priestly advice delivered in a humanistic way.

"He really wanted to unite the parish and made an effort to reach out by building the different ministries in the parish," head usher and lector Travis Meinert, who did the second reading at the Mass, said. "He empowered the people who wanted to work to come together."

His dedication to his priestly duties was never more evident than on Christmas Eve when he celebrated Mass, for the last time at St. Christopher, from a wheelchair. He had left the hospital only a few days before.

Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, whom Father Nguyen said Father Harney considered his "true shepherd," regularly visited Harney at the hospital. He, too, referenced the beatitudes when he spoke of Father Harney at the conclusion of the Mass.

"In a very powerful way, Father



ARCHBISHOP Alfred Hughes was the principal celebrant of the funeral Mass Feb. 24 for Father Ken Harney. (Photo by Christine Bordelon)

Ken experienced poverty of spirit," Archbishop Hughes said. "This is what grounded him in being able to reach out in an extraordinary way to pastor others. He knew his strength was God, and he had God to turn to every day to sustain his sobriety and to carry on the priestly gift that was his."

Hughes petitioned those present to follow Father Harney's example to trust in God, take up the chalice and answer the call to the priesthood.

"We need to recognize how profoundly we are in need of God and each other," Archbishop Hughes said. "I thank Father Ken for being a powerful witness to that. He could be real. He could be outrageous. At this moment all is forgiven, and all is swallowed up in His mercy."

Father Harney is survived by a brother and cousins, Gary Harney and Jerry Fuller. He was buried on property he owns with Father Nguyen in McComb, Miss.

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