

Fr. Michael F. MULVOY 91 USA
* May 15, 1901 Norwalk, CT

+ March 11, 1993 Bethel Park, PA

He entered the Congregation in Cornwells in 1916, made his vows at Ridgefield, CT, on August 15, 1922 and did his higher studies at Ferndale in his hometown. He was also ordained there on August 26, 1926.

After one year of teaching at Cornwells, he became in 1928 an assistant at St. Mark's busy parish in New York's Harlem. Five years later, he was made its pastor.

It was the time of the Great Depression and South Harlem, where the parish was situated, felt its effects very deeply. The whole area had become dilapidated, the location for warehouses, incinerators, full of abandoned buildings, etc. Only the poorest among the poor lived there and little had been done by government agencies to help the desperately deprived.

Fr. Mike, as everyone called him, set to work there as a man who put no limits on his dedication to being 100% involved with the people entrusted to his care. He became everything for every one. The place he came to occupy among the African-Americans of Harlem can best be illustrated by a summary of an address he delivered in 1937 to the Cardinal Archbishop of New York and his council when the future of St. Mark's was at stake.

On that occasion he had to list his accomplishments and it must not have been easy for someone as humble and unpretentious as Fr. Mike to do so. But, like St. Paul he reluctantly did it.

I am, he said, the best known priest in Harlem; I attend every meeting of general interest to Harlem's people; I am the only white person on Negro committees conferring with relief agencies: Home relief, Housing and School committees, the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A., the Harlem Art Guild and a sponsor of the Arts and Cultural Center; I give lectures on ethics to all the nurses in Harlem Hospital; I belong to various Harlem organizations for the promotion of all branches of sports, for raising funds to send slum children to summer camps, as well as for looking after Harlem's sick poor. I personally know every relief administrator and have visited every relief precinct in Harlem to see that the Negro gets his due—all this in addition to the regular parochial duties at St. Mark's. The people here, Catholic or not, think that the priest is all-powerful and storm the rectory at all hours seeking favors of all kind.

No wonder he was known as the "Blackest White Man in Harlem," as the New York Sun reported in 1938 when it spoke of an appeal of the famous Baroness de Hueck on his behalf and mentioned that he totally backed her efforts to implement the lay apostolate in Harlem among his parishioners.

In 1940 he was transferred to Alabama, where he ministered to the St. John the Baptist Church at Tuscaloosa as its pastor till 1947 and, at the same time became the Newman Chaplain at the State University of Alabama. From 1948 on this chaplaincy became his sole responsibility. The bishop was very pleased to see the unlimited energy of this priest devoted to the university town, and the university officials appreciated his theology lectures—they even gave the students official credits for his courses—and the way he exercised his chaplain duties. They also gave him an honorary Doctorate of Laws, which was the second such doctorate he received in Alabama.

His way of approaching students can best be illustrated by the following story. Every few weeks he would ask a student to cook dinner for him and then bring along a dozen other students at his own discretion. The young man could, of course, buy what ever was needed at the chaplain's expense. And the request was always prefaced by the words, "Will you do me a favor by cooking for me this Saturday?" Fr. Frank Hanley, his assistant, asked him "Why do you say it that way when it is rather obvious that you are doing them a favor?" During and after the meal the conversation would gradually come around to the religious or ethical questions that were on the students' mind and that was what made his dinners also rewarding to him as a priest.

He never complained about his health--and only very exceptionally about anything else. However, his physician noticed in the 1960s that he was becoming overworked and asked his provincial superior to consider giving an assistant to Fr. Mike, who "has commanded more respect than any priest ever assigned here". And this was done.

When he had finished building the new chapel at his Newman Center in 1974, Father departed from Alabama after 33 years as chaplain at the university. His retirement years were spent in Ferndale, Norwalk and Bethel Park. He lived long enough to celebrate the diamond jubilee of his priesthood in 1986 and the 70th anniversary of his religious profession in 1992. Until the end, he remained the ever graceful and congenial confrere, whose sitting room became a kind of community room for handicapped fellow-retirees.

His death occurred a few days before "the storm of the century"--a collision of a rare winter hurricane with a cold air mass--hit the East coast and dumped some 26 inches of snow in the Pittsburgh area. Traffic came to a grinding halt there and in much of the eastern states. No one outside the Bethel Park community could come for the Mass of Resurrection on March 13. Funeral services and burial were scheduled for March 15 but postponed till the 16th at Cornwells. Traffic conditions, however, were still so bad that even then only four people from outside the immediate area could manage to attend the service. Interment took place in the Cornwells community cemetery.