

TRIBUTE: A priest most humble and always smiling

02/04/2011, 9:56 pm

[Comment on this story](#)

Alfie D'Souza of Ottawa

Got Ham?

Yes — Ottawa got Monsignor Jerome N. Ham, the parish priest at St. Francis of Assisi Church, who is always smiling, most humble, very spiritual and very much loved by the parishioners in and around Ottawa.

Monsignor Ham has made a difference in people's lives as a parish priest at various churches -- by walking with people, journeying together with them, interacting with them at the most special moments of their lives, the greatest joys and the deepest sorrows. Therefore parishioners respect and adore him as a religious leader, a devoted priest, a religious educator of children and adults and as true role model.

In the past I have written tributes on religious people such as Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa (whom I met personally during their visit to my hometown, Mangalore, India in 1984), Sister Joan Pardel and Sister Tarcissia Buchele, two devoted nuns of Ottawa. Now it's my greatest joy to write a tribute on Msgr. Ham — a religious figure I met in 1990 when I moved here from India.

Coming from a warmer country, I didn't mind waking up on those frigid winter Sundays and get ready to attend Msgr. Ham's masses at St. Mary's Church, Naplate — because his homily and kind words of wisdom always made me feel like a better person after a church ceremony. He delivered the homily with words coming right out from his heart, and not reading out from a piece of paper! And the way he greeted me with a dazzling smile after church always brought joy and comfort in me. All I can say is that Monsignor Ham is one of the most humble people I ever have known.

Born in Vietnam, Nguyen Ngoe Ham — now known as Msgr. Jerome Ham — came to the United States in 1975. He probably understands the word "freedom" better than any one of us because he lived in Vietnam during the time of war under communist regime. Once he had close encounters with the communist soldiers who were about to kill him or put him prison.

Msgr. Ham, who didn't wanted to be put in a prison, made a request to the soldiers — either they kill him or send him back to his rectory. God answered his request. The soldiers let him go back to the rectory, and later he escaped. We should be grateful to the Vietnamese soldiers for sparing the life of Msgr. Ham, thereby giving America one of its best-ever international priests.

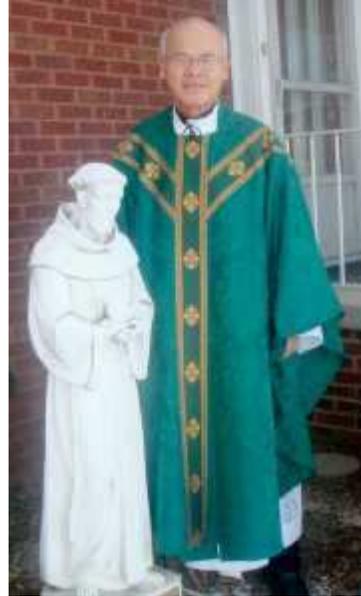


Photo: Provided

Monsignor Jerome N. Ham stands beside the namesake statue in front of the St. Francis of Assisi statue at the St. Francis parish in Ottawa.



Photo:

Alfie D'Souza

During his 36 years in United States, Msgr. Ham has served the Catholic community in Rapid City, SD, Moline, Naplate, Marseilles, Streater and Ottawa. Because he is kind and gentle to everyone he meets, Msgr. Ham touches the lives of so many people wherever he is assigned. He always is courteous and ready to assist anyone in need regardless of their religion or way of life.

As a foster parent, Msgr. Ham has been a mentor and father figure to four young Vietnamese men who came to America. Because they studied diligently, they have successful careers in the Chicago area and have happy families. Even though Msgr. Ham is a priest, in many ways, he is like a father and grandfather because of his mentoring experiences. He loves to connect with people through ministry and shared life experiences, thereby touching people's lives.

During his spare time, Fr. Ham loves to golf, watch football and basketball, read and prepare for homily, visit the sick and be involved in community and church activities.

"The priesthood is the love of. ... Jesus," said John Vianney, the 19th-century French priest who is now the patron saint of Catholic clergy. This ideal -- to lovingly serve the faith community -- is the central focus of the church's ordained ministry, according to the catechism.

For Catholic Christians, priests are mentors, teachers and friends who celebrate both the ordinary and special events in their lives. Therefore, it is important to find the right priest to share these moments with you -- and for that matter, Msgr. Ham is the right example!

As a parish priest, Msgr. Ham has been attracting quite a few new members including members from other parishes -- the reasons behind this is because of the friendly church atmosphere, active involvement of the parishioners, and above all, because they love Msgr. Ham!

When I asked Msgr. Ham if he would make me a member of his church, he replied, "The church door is open always. You are welcome to join any time!"

"I am ready. Take me in, Father!" I replied. He smiled and burst into laughter.

More than a priest, Msgr. Ham has been a great family friend to many of his parishioners, and they all admire his love and friendship. Here is what some of his parishioners had to say about Msgr. Ham:

- Chick and Mary Klumke, who are known as the pillars of St. Francis of Assisi Church, Ottawa: "Msgr. Ham's vibrant personality and love flows throughout all our parish functions, CCD classes and even basketball games. We as parishioners are blessed with this kind and gentle man understanding all of us, as we all have different journeys in the life of Catholicism."
- Raymond Wielgopolan, member, St. Mary's Church, Naplate: Msgr. Ham was my best neighbor and also my best friend for 11 years during his tenure as parish priest at St. Mary's. He was friendly and acquainted with new parishioners. His nature of closeness and friendliness endeared him to all. He still remains much loved by many of the people who attend St. Mary's Church."
- Ottawan Margaret Lavery a close friend: "Msgr. Ham always creates a welcome atmosphere at his church. He represents humility and has way of making his parishioners and acquaintances feel equally important. People are attracted to him because he is always kind and friendly."
- Barb Hanley (eucharistic minister and lector at St. Francis of Assisi Church: "Msgr. Ham is a very powerful spiritual leader for our parish. He is very gentle, cheerful and always smiling. He is a loving and intelligent man, and also very caring about people's needs."
- Linda Cordial, parishioner, St. Joseph's Church, Marseilles: "Msgr. Ham was always so warm, compassionate, and had a smile on his face, always. We've seen his journey in his walk with God, and so many parishioners were blessed to be on that path with Msgr. Ham and his smile that transcends any barrier."

- Eric and Ann Deobler, parishioners, former St. Anthony' Church, Streator: "Msgr. Ham had a reputation as a 'true pastor.' He loved children and they loved him back. We think it is obvious that Monsignor Ham finds great joy in being a priest."
- Jean Drendel (organist, former St. Anthony Church, Streator): "Msgr. Ham's smile lights up his face, and all those around him. He even smiles on the golf course and that's something for a left-handed golfer! He always appreciates the contributions of the parishioners towards the Church."

Following are the excerpts from the interview with Msgr. Ham:

Q. What is your opinion on Roman Catholic priests and celibacy ?

A. Read Mathew 19:12, 1 Corinthians 7: 32, it is easy for me work. I love being a priest. I want to give God my whole life. Celibacy is something to be valued and something that makes you stand out. I think celibacy is a gift; it certainly is a charism.

Q. What's your perspective on the Pope and bishops who handle the Church?

A. The Church is holy, but the members of the Church are not perfect. The Pope and all the bishops are guided by the Holy Spirit. All empires were collapsed, but not the Church. Jesus said, "I am with you." Let's all trust and believe in Jesus.

Q. There has been a lack in praying practice. How can Catholics learn to pray better ?

A. Prayer is the communication between you and God. Prayer is a time to empty ourselves of whatever is going on in our lives. Everyone should find time to pray. In the quietness and calm, you can meet God in a very deep way and relate the things that are in your heart to him. Talk to God, listen to him, and wait patiently for his answers. For example, between husband and wife — if they have a good communication, they'll have a good relationship.

Q. What do you have to say about Church closings in Streator?

A. It is my vision. Catholic community in Streator needs to be one for human resources and unity.

Q. What should be the qualities of a good priest ?

A. Love, understanding, affection, and closely associate and interact with the people. Being there for people in their time of needs, guiding them to Jesus and his Father. But also, in order to be good and faithful steward, priests also need the constant encouragement, love and support of the people they serve.

Q. Finally, what's your message to the Catholics who are losing faith in their religion ?

A. We live in the best country, with lots of freedom, food and opportunities. September 11, 2001 was an eye-opener, which brought many people back to the Church --people started believing in prayers and their faith. It's not only the Catholics losing interest in their faith, other denominations have the same problems, too. We must start believing in our faith. We must live our faith, not have faith without action.

Monsignor Ham learned many years ago in his priesthood how to instill in others a will to be a better person by serving and being appreciative of God. Msgr. Ham expects to serve than be served. He preaches with a smile rather than "Now hear this!" He appreciates and acknowledges spiritual and wordly blessings.

Finally, Msgr. Jerome truly remains humble in all situations. I feel that Ottawa is indeed blessed to have such a fine pastor. And I feel so blessed to know Msgr. Ham. May God bless him!

- **ALFIE D'SOUZA** of Ottawa is a frequent contributor and former Write Team member and can be reached via e-mail at lonnyc@mywebtimes.com.
- **DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE** who deserves a tribute, a public pat on the back or remembrance? Share your tribute by e-mailing to newsroom@mywebtimes.com or mail to The Times Newsroom, 110 W. Jefferson St., Ottawa, IL 61350 or drop off at our Streator office, 115 Oak St.