

Father John H. Olivier, SS remembered for music talent, seminary career

By Gerald D. Coleman, SS

When John Olivier taught chant to high school, college and theology seminarians, the last question in every exam was the same: what is the best class of the week? The answer, of course, was chant. This reply came easily and truthfully as the teacher himself had nothing but an abundance of class.

He was truly a gentleman of St. Sulpice and virtually no one else came close to him in this regard. He was a teacher *par excellence* whether the subject was music, speech, Latin, English or French.

He was a pedagogue in so many other ways, especially evidenced in the reverent way he celebrated the Eucharist, made more memorable by his personal and reverential style marked by solemnity and exquisite vestments. He never "said Mass." He always celebrated the Eucharist.

He served in many parishes in the Bay Area and forged lasting friendships. He enlivened liturgy and demonstrated his unique ability to create a singing community. He formed a friendship with Sister Suzanne Toolan, RSM and often celebrated Masses worthy of a cathedral at the Sisters of Mercy Motherhouse in Burlingame.

He wrote special music for the Chrism Mass for the Diocese of San Jose which is still used. He was one of only a few musicians invited to play the organ at Memorial Church on the Stanford University campus. He preached



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frequently at Presbyterian churches in Palo Alto and Menlo Park where he forged a lasting friendship with Robert McAfee Brown.

He possessed appreciation of all types of music, including musical settings in numerous languages. At St. Joseph College, he introduced "concerts" after Vespers during the winter months where he explained classical music and Broadway scores.

He seemed to sing more than he talked, often creating lyrics that captured specific characteristics of people. He was an accomplished pianist and organist but could modify any moment by singing, "I'm an Oscar Myer Wiener!" His innate humor overflowed in delightful iconoclastic insights.

He would occasionally speak of his childhood upbringing and mention ways that darkness and depression

entered his life, creating insecurity. Everyone around him knew better, and once in a while he did, too. These times of brightness helped balance an inner critic that hammered messages of unworthiness and inadequacy. At the end, John was peaceful, but he might never have grasped fully how much people truly loved him.

He stands tall in the memory and heart of everyone he met including those enlivened by his music, liturgies and homilies. He was a marvelous man and priest. While he was forced to deal with physical blindness and an inability

to walk well in the last few years of his life, his indomitable spirit and interest in listening to music and books on tape helped him to override these debilitating handicaps.

His favorite musical arrangement is his testimony to all of us in this Easter season: *O sacrum convivium: In quo Christo sumitur/ Recolitur memoria/ Passio-nus ejus/ Mens impletur gracia/ Et futurae gloriae. AMEN. ALLELUIA!*

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