

Fr. Desmarais was a ‘people person’

DETROIT — Fr. Rene Desmarais had a special love for the people of Port Huron, the town where he had grown up, and served them with everything he had, said long-time friends upon learning he had died last Sunday, June 26.

“He was a hometown hero. He was born and raised in Port Huron, and he went back to Port Huron when it wasn’t such a popular place to be,” said Fr. Jerome Singer, a seminary classmate and now pastor of Nativity of Our Lord Parish in Detroit.

“He was just a terrific guy, whom the people loved and he loved the people – just a dear friend to everybody who knew him. He was a true shepherd to his people – he loved them, and he laid down his life for them,” Fr. Singer added.

Fr. Desmarais died in Port Huron Hospital, where he had been hospitalized since June 22 for double pneumonia, complicated by kidney failure. He was 67.

Another classmate also ordained in 1963, Fr. James Scheick, pastor of Sacred Heart Parish on Grosse Ile, said Fr. Desmarais “was always a tremendously friendly people person.”

“He stretched himself pretty far for the people all the time,” Fr. Scheick said.

Frank Warsalla, parish council president at St. Joseph Parish, Port Huron, where Fr. Desmarais had been pastor for 15 years, said he was “a very caring person.”

“He would help anybody else and forget himself,” Warsalla said.

Fr. Desmarais had become chaplain to the John Courtney Murray Newman Center at St. Clair County Community College in 1969, then St. Joseph Parish was added in 1990, and then St. Stephen Parish and Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission were added in 2004 under a cluster arrangement.

“Even though he was overworked like crazy, he never slackened on any of them,” Warsalla added.

Born Sept. 8, 1937, the young Rene Desmarais attended public grade schools, then St. Stephen Grade School in Port Huron. After Sacred Heart Seminary high school and college, he went on to St. John’s Provincial Seminary in Plymouth Township.

He was ordained June 1, 1963.

Fr. Desmarais served as associate pastor at St. Lawrence Parish, Utica, and St. Edmund Parks, Warren.

He first served in campus ministry at Macomb County Community College before his Port Huron assignments began. Over the years, Fr. Desmarais also served as chairman of the Michigan Campus Ministers Association, on the board of the National Catholic Campus Ministers Association, and as a trustee of St. Clair County Community College.

He is survived by a sister, Dorothy Richter of Port Huron; a niece, Theresa O’Donnell; and a nephew, Paul Richter; as well as several greatnieces and greatnephews.

A funeral Mass was to be celebrated Thursday, June 30 at St. Stephen Church, Port Huron. Burial was to be in Mount Hope Cemetery, Port Huron.

– *Robert Delaney*, The Michigan Catholic