

THE REV. NEAL MICHAEL O'CONNOR, O. CARM.

October 16, 1910 – January 22, 1950.

By the REV. REGIS A. DONEHUE, O.Carm.

REQUIEM

*Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.*

This be the verse that you grave for me: Here he lies where he longed to be; Home is the sailor, home from the sea, And the hunter home from the hill. — Robert Louis Stevenson.

We used to talk about poetry now and then when we were in college. Mike was not esthetic and it was beyond him to compose anything in that line, but he did enjoy reading good poetry. Stevenson's "Requiem" was his favorite, he said, because it expressed what he felt as he would have liked to state it. Nothing, therefore, it seems to me, is a more fitting introduction to this brief biography of Father Neal "Mike" O'Connor, O.Carm.

Mike O'Connor was born in Chicago on October 16, 1910, the oldest son of Michael and Nora O'Connor. Two weeks later he was baptized Michael at the font of Our Lady of Good Counsel church. His grade school education was divided evenly between the parish of his birth and St. Sabina where he received his diploma in 1924. Along with ten of his classmates, Mike enrolled that Fall in the first Freshman class of the new Mount Carmel High School. There his classwork was good, as always, and he showed considerable athletic ability, playing on the flyweight basketball team.

Our present Father Provincial, the Very Reverend Leo J. Walter, chose to single out Mike among others as a likely student for the priesthood. In September, 1925, Mike entrained for Niagara Falls. There he continued his good work in the classroom and was outstanding in all sports. In August, 1928, Mike became Frater Neal and was professed with his class a year later. There followed two years at Catholic University in Washington and his Philosophy course back at Niagara. Frater Neal made his Solemn Profession at the Falls August 15, 1932, and in 1933 he began his Theology studies at St. Cyril, Chicago. Three hectic years followed. Every possible minute of the day was filled with teaching in the high school, Theology classes, courses at De Paul University — all in addition to the regular exercises of monastic life.

At last the great day arrived, and on May 31, 1936, Father Neal reached his goal in Quigley chapel with nine of his class mates. Of him, too, it could now be said: "*Tu es sacerdos in aeternum.*" For the next two years Father Neal taught Latin and Mathematics at Carmel. In January, 1939, he was transferred to St. Clara as assistant pastor and worked there until June when he moved to St. Mary's in Joliet to serve in the same capacity. There Father Neal busied himself in parish work and supervised the parochial C.Y.O. activities until he entered the Army as chaplain in June, 1944.

Father Neal went through primary training, served a while in the States, then sailed with his unit to France where they arrived in March of 1945. July saw him on his way to the Pacific. He landed in Manila, September 13. His outfit was headed for the invasion of Japan when the war ended. Father Neal, then, spent some months with the occupation army in Japan, was returned to the United States, and discharged from service in November, 1946. His letters home during his Army

days showed his sturdy character and his deep religious convictions which led him to deplore the moral decadence of the countries he visited. His were the words of a true son of our Lady.

Father Neal was back at St. Mary's in December of 1946 and resumed his parish duties. He was made first assistant and took full charge of the C.Y.O. work in Joliet. At the time of his Dad's death in April, 1947, Father Neal was under a doctor's care for a heart murmur and strain. He told me at the wake that his heart had been really "kicking up." However, he left as a delegate to the General Chapter of the Order in May, 1947.

Excessive weight and continued activity combined to take their toll of Father Neal's resistance. Being young and optimistic, he failed to heed the warnings of the doctor about the burden his weight was putting on his heart. One Saturday night after confessions Father Neal drove to Chicago to see his sister-in-law in the hospital. He stopped in to visit his mother for a few minutes and then started back to St. Mary's. It was January 22, 1950. Six miles from home a sudden heart attack, as he sat at the wheel, proved fatal. "Mike" evidently slumped to one side, and the parish car crashed off the road into a tree and was demolished.

Death is no respecter of persons. Father Neal had often spoken in the pulpit of its uncertainty, of the necessity for being prepared. That God chose to call him in the prime of life is perhaps beyond our understanding, but it is not for us to question God's will. In his short lifetime Father Neal had done inestimable good. In the classroom, in the confessional, in the pulpit, who knows how many souls he saved from damnation both by word and by example? After all, it is not the length of the service given to God but rather its quality which will determine our merits. Generous, whole-hearted, faithful in his duties as an "alter Christus," "Mike" was thorough in his every task. It was typical of him that the act of charity coincidental with his death was performed *after* he had heard confessions that Saturday night. Like all of us, he had his faults, but they were far out weighed by the good qualities we will always remember in him. Once a friend with Father Neal meant always a friend. A real man, a good priest, a sincere Carmelite — that was Father Neal O'Connor!

Father Neal died as he had lived — active to the end. He would have wanted it no other way. He had had a short but full life in the livery of our Lady. How well those words of Stevenson seem to fit his lips:

Glad did I live and gladly die, And I laid me down with a will.

May he rest in peace!

rites will be Wednesday for Father Neal*
St. Mary's Church Assistant Killed In Auto Accident

THE Rev. Neal O'Connor, O.Carm., first assistant at St. Mary's Carmelite church, was killed Sunday morning when the car he was driving went off the road and struck a tree on route 6, about six miles northeast of Joliet.

The priest suffered a skull fracture, and both legs were fractured, according to Coroner Willard Blood. It is believed that the priest may have suffered a heart attack before the crash.

The body will lie in state at St. Mary's church until Wednesday morning at 10:30 o'clock when the funeral services will be held. A Solemn Requiem High Mass will be celebrated by the Very Rev.

Leo J. Walter, O.Carm., provincial of the Province of Pure Heart of Mary. The assisting officers at the funeral Mass have not been selected, nor have the pallbearers. Father Fabian is to deliver the sermon.

Father Neal had been under the care of a physician since his return from the armed forces several years ago, according to the Rev. Fabian Donlan, O.Carm., pastor of St. Mary's church. The priest had heard confessions Saturday afternoon and evening. He left Joliet shortly before 9 o'clock to visit his mother in Chicago and a sister-in-law who is in the hospital. He was en route home when the accident occurred before 1 o'clock.

There were no witnesses to the tragedy. He was alone in the 1947 parish Buick. Farmers, residing nearby, heard the crash and notified the state police, who called the county coroner. With the body lying in state in the church, the members of the Holy Name society are to form a guard of honor and will remain on duty throughout the night.

Tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock there will be a Solemn Requiem Mass at the church. Father Fabian will be the celebrant with the Rev. Nicholas Staresinic as deacon and the Rev. Gerald Henrici, as the Subdeacon. The children of St. Mary's parochial school and Providence High School will attend the Mass.

At 7 :30 o'clock tomorrow night, the office of the dead is to be recited by the Carmelite fathers of the area.

Members of the Holy Name society of the church are to meet at 8 o'clock at the church to recite the rosary.

Word of Father Neal's death was a blow to the entire Catholic population of the community. He was popular with the parishioners as well as the priests with whom he served.

Possessed of an unusual vitality and exuberance, Father Neal was extremely active. He was director of the CYO activities in the parish which brought him in close contact with the young people. He also taught religion at the Providence High School and was spiritual director of the Holy Name Society.

Just recently he and Father Fabian formed a Joliet Newman club at the Joliet Junior College and were moderators for the group.

Father Neal first came to Joliet in 1937. He served as a teacher at Catholic High School for about four years, specializing in mathematics.

During the war, he served as army chaplain with the 35th infantry division. For 2 1/2 years he was on duty in the European theater of operations and, without even coming back to the States, was assigned to Japan.

Since his return to civilian life, he had redoubled his efforts in parish work. An avid sports participant while in school, he still retained an interest in baseball, basketball, football and ice skating. He was an ardent golfer. He came from a family that was athletically inclined as two of his brothers were on the championship St. Leo's high school basketball team when it captured Chicago city top honors.

A son of the late Michael O'Connor and Mrs. Nora O'Connor, Father Neal was born in Chicago. As a young boy, he attended Our Lady of Peace parochial school, and then entered Mt. Carmel High School where he was active in all athletics. From there he went to Mt. Carmel college at Niagara Falls and with the completion of his studies there, was sent to the Catholic University at Washington, D. C. In 1935, Father Neal, who had entered the Carmelite order in 1929, was ordained a priest in Chicago.

For a year after his ordination, he served on the faculty at Mt. Carmel, coming to Joliet on his second assignment.

His father, who was traffic superintendent for a large packing firm in Chicago, died April 24, 1947.

Surviving are his mother, Nora, of 7919 South Marshfield avenue, Chicago; three brothers, Patrick and Donald, both of Chicago; and John of Boston, Mass., and a sister, who is a nun, Sister Mary Nora, with the School Sisters of Notre Dame, stationed at the Longwood Academy in Chicago; and numerous nieces and nephews.

At the funeral Wednesday, military rites are to be in charge of the Cantigny Post, VFW. Burial is to be in Mt. Olivet Cemetery, Chicago.

* This account of Father Neal's death appeared in the Joliet *Herald-News* on Monday, January 23, 1950. Other papers carried the story of his tragic accident but they were not as complete as the story that was carried by the *Herald-News*.