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St. Ann's community mourns priest

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Parishioners at St. Ann's Catholic Church mourned the loss of one of their priests this week, with the sudden death of Father Paul P. Iaia. The 75-year-old associate pastor had served at the Bethany Beach church for eight years and would have celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination this May.

Iaia was administering the Sacrament of the Infirm (formerly known as Last Rites) to a parishioner on Wednesday when he suffered a stroke, dying shortly thereafter at Peninsula Regional Medical Center in Salisbury, Md.

According to Bethany Beach Town Council Member Lew Killmer, who both is a parishioner at St. Ann's and was Iaia's neighbor in Bethany West, the circumstances of the priest's death spoke to his great passion in life: service to the church and its parishioners.

"He died doing what God put him on the Earth to do," Killmer said.

The son of son of Antonio and Ignazia Iaia, Paul P. Iaia was born Dec. 16, 1930, in New Britain, Conn. Iaia was ordained May 26, 1956, at the Basilica of the Assumption in Baltimore, Md. He served as associate pastor at Our Lady Queen of Peace, All Saints, in Baltimore; at St. Patrick's in Havre de Grace, Md.; and at St. Charles Borromeo, in Pikesville, Md. He served as pastor at St. Peter's in Libertytown, Md., and St. Mary's in Pylesville, Md. He was pastor emeritus at St. Joseph on Carrollton Manor, in Buckeystown, Md., and senior priest at St. John in Frederick, Md.

Iaia had come to St. Ann's after retiring from the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1998.

Killmer said that upon arriving in Bethany Beach, Iaia had focused on ministering to individual parishioners with work such as bringing communion to the sick and performing the Sacrament of the Infirm. He heard confessions and conducted masses several times each week.

Iaia particularly enjoyed golf and bowling, Killmer noted. He would take in a round with his parishioners and was also a member of the St. Ann's bowling team.

"He enjoyed his food. He enjoyed life," Killmer recalled. "He enjoyed having people around him."

Iaia's sense of humor was also notable, Killmer said, as was his involvement with his community and his neighbors. The councilman said the priest was in the habit of coming over to visit every day to keep abreast of recent construction work at his house, often offering a bit of advice.

Killmer said his neighbor had also enjoyed something he'd acquired just the week prior to his death — a brand new car. "He was so excited about it. He called me over and got right in. He said, 'Look at this thing, Lew! Look at this!' That car probably doesn't have a hundred miles on it," Killmer noted. He noted wistfully that parties had already been planned to celebrate Iaia's ordination anniversary.



Bethany Beach Mayor Jack Walsh, also a parishioner at St. Ann's, this week authored an official letter from the town council to St. Ann's, expressing collective sympathy for the loss.

In the letter, Walsh wrote, "He was, in the very best sense of the word, an outstanding representative of Bethany's religious community who, though his day-to-day ministerial functions, comforted so many who were suffering from various illnesses to those who were grieving from the loss of loved ones.

"His energetic involvement in innumerable social events, including his own neighborhood's homeowners' activities, was another of his many contributions. He was loved and respected by the many with whom he came in contact by his participation in various recreational activities from bowling teams to golfing engagements," Walsh wrote.

"We are truly saddened by knowing he will no longer be a part of the Bethany Beach community but, at the same time, most grateful to have benefited from his presence these past eight years," Walsh concluded.

Personally, Walsh described Iaia as soft-spoken but said he had a tremendous impact on the people who met him. The priest had in recent months attended a party celebrating Jack and Geri Walsh's 50th wedding anniversary and there met the couple's three grown children for the first time. But he made an instant impression on the Walsh children, the mayor emphasized.

"When we told them about his death, they connected immediately," Walsh said.

"He made you feel very comfortable," Walsh recalled of Iaia, noting with a smile that the priest also had an unusually good singing voice. "He was a good priest, a good person, a good citizen."

Parishioners at St. Ann's clearly agreed with that sentiment, turning out en masse Tuesday morning this week to honor him in a funeral service that Walsh described as "jammed" with people.

"He's going to be missed," Walsh concluded.

Iaia was predeceased by his parents and by a brother, Joseph. He is survived by a brother, William Iaia of New Britain, Conn. Iaia was to be buried in a private ceremony in his native Connecticut.

