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Saint Leo University Remembers Father Damian DuQuesnay

Father Damian DuQuesnay, age 96, the oldest living monk in the Order of Saint Benedict of Florida, left this earth for his eternal home on Friday, May 8. Greatly loved and admired by colleagues, students, faculty, and staff, Father Damian was a remarkable man of faith.

A funeral Mass for Father Damian will be held at 4:30 p.m. on Friday, May 15, in the Saint Leo Abbey Church, 33601 State Road 52, Saint Leo, FL. There will be a visitation starting at 10 a.m.

Born on July 24, 1918, in Highgate, Jamaica, he graduated from Jamaica College Prep and Saint Benedict College (now Benedictine College) in Atchison, KS, in 1943 with a B.S. in zoology. He received his M.S. degree from Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, in 1951.

He was ordained into the Holy Priesthood on the Feast of Corpus Christi Day, June 20, 1946, by Bishop Emmet Michael Wash in the unfinished Abbey Church. Father Damian was the first Jamaican to ever wear the habit of Benedictine.

Father Damian's abiding love was apparent to all with whom he came in contact. He loved the rule of Saint Benedict and his brother monks of Saint Leo Abbey.

"Father Damian is one of the giants in the history of Saint Leo University, all the more so because of his modesty and humility," said Dr. Arthur F. Kirk, Jr., president of Saint Leo University. "By his example he was a teacher his entire life. He loved science and the wonders of the natural world." He also loved the students he taught in the science labs of Saint Leo Preparatory School, Holy Name Academy, and Saint Leo College. While at Saint Leo, Fr. Damian taught biology, histology, and zoology. He was always fascinated with animals and started an aviary at the abbey.

His faculty colleagues speak of his academic knowledge and his skill as a teacher and administrator in the highest terms of respect and admiration. "Above all, Father Damian loved

our Blessed Lord with a simple, unquestioning faith that puts us in the mind of Saints,” stated Dr. Kirk. “How many of our students, passing this gentle, elderly monk working in the Abbey garden or administering the Blessed Sacrament in the Abbey Church had their own faith rekindled? Only God knows.”

In 1957, he was appointed abbey prior and also novice master and brother master.

One of the greatest adventures of Father Damian’s life occurred in 1963. With an opportunity to implement the Benedictine philosophy of missionary service, he was assigned by Abbot Marion Bowman to an appeal for monks to serve the remote mission of Sumampa in Argentina.

On May 15, 1963, a missionary band of four monks – two priests and two brothers – left Saint Leo for Argentina. “This effort is in direct response to the Holy Father’s plea for immediate assistance for the Church in Latin America and to the request of the Most Reverend Manuel Tato, bishop of Santiago del Estero,” said Abbot Bowman.

The Benedictine monks assisted Bishop Tato in the Sanctuary of Sumampa in the diocese of Santiago del Estero (600 miles northwest of Buenos Aires), with the hope of eventually establishing a permanent Benedictine foundation. There was no electricity or indoor plumbing, and travel was limited to primitive roads.

In response to the remote locale and grim surroundings, Father Damian reflected: “It was the most difficult task I’d ever been obliged to undertake. There was no possibility of support. It was a hopeless location and a hopeless situation. We were in the outback. Everything was an adventure.”

Later in his life, Fr. Damian maintained a modest two-room apartment in the Bishop’s Office in Saint Leo Hall at the Abbey. He remained faithful in his daily prayers and devotions right up until his death.

“We were so blessed to have him living and praying in our midst. We continue to be blessed to have the memory of his example of faith to sustain in the days ahead,” concluded Dr. Kirk.

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