



FR. MICHAEL SMITH, OMI

(1911 – 2002)

Fr. Michael was born in 1911 near Edmonton (Alberta). He did part of his Oblate scholasticate in Battleford and part of it in Poland at Odra where he was ordained a priest on June 12, 1938. In 1939 he received an obedience for his Province of origin St. Mary's of Regina.

“My first appointment was to Ashern, Manitoba in 1939. The priest who brought me there left me on Friday the 1st of September with these words, ‘Here’s a \$500 cheque for you from the Catholic Church Extension Society. You are to go up the road 60 miles straight north. At the end don’t worry you won’t get lost because that will be the end of the road. There somewhere in THE bush you’ll find ten or twelve Catholic families. You are to build a chapel for these people.’ It was my first experience at building. That Christmas we had our first Mass in a brand-new chapel.” The place was Gypsumville. There had been a colony of Polish Catholics there for 20 or 30 years. It was visited only intermittently. As soon as the good news of the Father’s arrival spread everyone rushed to help him build. In 24 days the church was up. It was dedicated to the Little Saint Theresa.”

Fr. Michael was later sent to St. Stanislaus Parish in Toronto where the parish priest Fr. Stanley Puchniak put him in charge of the youth. ***“After two years of hard work we had the largest youth organization in the city. A variety of programmes – spiritual educational and recreational.”***

“With the end of World War II in 1945 thousands of immigrants began arriving in Toronto penniless. They sought help at the parish but there were no funds available. Fr. Puchniak and I decided to organize a Credit Union to answer the financial needs of the new arrivals.... The arrival of the Polish immigrants led to the creation of St. Casimir’s Parish. I was entrusted with the responsibility of founding it.”

“Upon the return of the men from the military there were many weddings. The young couples began seeking help in adjusting to a new life. This was when I began dreaming of a centre whose primary focus would be couple relationship and family life. After five years of dreaming Queen of Apostles Renewal Centre was built in 1963....”More than 5000 couples have taken part in “Marriage Encounter” sessions there.

In 1956 the Superior General decided to create Assumption Province detaching it from St. Mary’s of Regina Province. *“Its principal ministry will be among old and new Canadians of Polish descent.”* Fr. Michael Smith became its first Provincial. The Province had 61 Oblates in 1960. After serving nine years as Provincial, Fr. Michael went on to spend nineteen years as Provincial Treasurer.

“In the early ‘70’s several parishioners and I shared concerns about the aging sector of the Polish population who had no family to care for them. We began dreaming of providing suitable accommodations for them and Copernicus Lodge was born in 1979 with 250 beds. Time has shown that this facility is insufficient as we have presently over 200 seniors on a waiting list.” ***“There is still much to be done.... I continue to pray that someone will be able to take over the work of building Phase III there. In the meantime I refuse to give up to sit back and begin a life of retirement. As long as the need exists for a part I can play in fulfilling it, I will be there....”***

Father Michael Smith, Chairman Emeritus of the Board of Directors, was a visionary. He took his idea of building a home for the elderly within the Polish community to the Oblate Fathers in 1972 at their annual retreat. It was then that he was entrusted with the task of developing that dream and in 1979 it became a reality when Copernicus Lodge opened its doors.

After 91 years, of which 64 years were as a Roman Catholic Priest, Fr. Michael Smith passed away peacefully at Copernicus Lodge in Toronto on October 26, 2002. He will be known as a man who not only served the Oblates and the Polish Community but also his country.