

Latecomer to priesthood, Father Victor Botari remembered for his passion for social justice

Father Victor Botari, who was ordained to the priesthood late in life but brought a passion for social justice to the Alberta parishes he served, has died. He was 73.

“It bothered him a bit personally that he was seen as an ‘old’ priest. But it didn’t seem to bother the people he served,” said Father John Hesse, who was Father Victor’s spiritual director.

“We serve in an atmosphere that even if you celebrate one Mass as a priest, it is worthwhile to be ordained.”

Botari, who had been retired for the last five years, died on May 21 after suffering from failing health. Ordained at age 63 on Aug. 25, 2008, he served as associate pastor of St. Joseph Basilica and as pastor at St. Peter’s Parish and others in the Villeneuve area northwest of Edmonton.



Father Victor Botari

Victor Botari was born in Welland, Ont., and raised along with two brothers and two sisters in a large Italian family. An altar server starting at age 8, Botari would later tell reporters that it had been a dream of his to become a priest even though it seemed unattainable at the time.

“All of us who were altar boys who were thinking of being priests got the message that the people who were chosen by God as priests were just something far too special, far too removed from normal people with normal faults,” Botari

said in an interview.

Botari would realize his dream, but only after a long career with the Canadian International Development Agency coordinating aid programs overseas, including two years in Bangladesh. Back in Canada, he taught at the community college level in Inuvik, N.W.T., and in Calgary. He then spent years developing social programs and working with the poor and marginalized in Vancouver, then later at Boyle Street Community Services in Edmonton.

Botari was a member of the choir – and later a deacon – at St. Alphonsus Parish, just blocks away from where he was living, and where Father Tesfu Kelati, the pastor at the time, got to know him.

“His was a late vocation for sure, but he had worked in social justice for many years. He was very connected to the liturgy through music but he wanted more,” said Kelati, who would write a personal reference letter for Botari when he applied to and entered St. Joseph Seminary in 2003.

“He eventually responded to God’s call.”

Botari replaced Kelati as the new pastor at St. Peter’s parish in Villeneuve in 2010. He retired in 2014.

Throughout his ministry, his age was an advantage, not a handicap, Father Hesse said.

“I found that with his life experience he was very patient with people,” Hesse said. “For example, if someone asked a question about the liturgy that others might brush off, Father Victor would be very patient and explain the history and significance. He was a good listener when people came to him.”

Father Kelati adds: “He was very connected with serving people.”

At his 2008 ordination, when asked his advice for young people, Father Botari reflected on his own vocation, saying: “Don’t run away, because if God is really calling you, he is not going to let go. You save yourself a lot of grief if you just accept it from the beginning.”

In retirement, he continued to celebrate the sacraments in various parishes, including Assumption and Resurrection parishes in Edmonton, as needed.

Vigil prayers for Father Botari were scheduled for May 29 at 7 p.m. in St. Joseph Basilica. The funeral Mass was set for May 30 at 11 a.m. at St. Charles Parish in Mearns, about 60 kilometres northwest of Edmonton in Sturgeon County, with interment taking place at the St. Charles Parish cemetery.