

Msgr. Frank Patsula remembered fondly as a pastor, canon lawyer and fix-it man

Monsignor Frank Patsula, an Edmonton priest who was known as much as an expert in canon law as he was an all-around handyman who could fix anything, has died. He was 88.

“He was the sort of person who always had a positive attitude. He was always helpful. He was a good person and a good servant of the Lord,” said Rev. John Hesse, a retired priest and a friend of Father Patsula since they met in Grade 10 at St. Joseph High School.

Over nearly 65 years as a priest, Father Patsula served parishes in central Alberta, Sherwood Park and Edmonton. He also taught canon law at St. Joseph Seminary and Newman Theological College and served as judicial vicar in the Archdiocese. He retired in 2009.



Monsignor Francis 'Frank' Patsula

Even in retirement, Father Patsula continued to assist in various parishes. Patsula died Dec. 17 at Villa Vianney, the Archdiocese of Edmonton residence for retired priests.

Visitation is on Dec. 27 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at Connelly-McKinley Funeral Home in Edmonton. A funeral Mass will be held Dec. 28 at St. Joseph's Basilica with interment to follow at Holy Cross Cemetery.

Funeral details are expected to be finalized shortly.

Born Francis Joseph Patsula in Regina, he came from a family of 10 children, most of whom married. He moved to Edmonton in 1944 and attended Sacred Heart School.

Father Patsula and Father Hesse's lives and vocations followed a similar path. They both attended St. Joseph High School from Grades 10 to 12; later they were in the same seminary class, and both were ordained as priests in 1955.

After his ordination in Edmonton, Patsula's first appointment was at St. Anne of the Prairies in Trochu, followed by St. Joseph's Basilica and St. Patrick's Parish in Edmonton. He also assisted in Vermilion, Camrose and Red Deer before he started teaching at the seminary in 1960. Two years later, he obtained his licentiate in canon law from the University of Ottawa.

In the summer, Father Patsula would return to his uncle's farm near Moose Jaw and work on machinery there.

"He was a handyman," recalled his friend, Father Hesse. "In seminary and in parishes he was good with mechanical things. He'd help with things like the TVs, electrical work and lighting and sound."

In a 1974 profile for the *Western Catholic Reporter*, Father Patsula said he was strict about not bringing his work home with him. He had a passion for electronics, which he picked up without any formal training.

"I like fixing anything, washing machines televisions, PA systems," Patsula said in an interview. "Anything that I can open up and see what's mechanically wrong, I can fix. But the trouble these days is the manufacturers who like to seal off the insides so you can't see what's broken. Then, you either have to pay for a repairman or buy a new machine."

Patsula's passion for fixing earned him a reputation as lock picker when he opened a safe in Heisler, Alta., for which the combination was not available. "It was just plain luck," Patsula said.

A few weeks later he set the combination for a safe near Trochu that hadn't been closed for years because the priest didn't know how to open it. Patsula also enjoyed fishing, involvement in the Christopher Leadership Course in effective speaking, and serving as a chaplain for the Knights of Columbus.

Father Hesse said Patsula often helped with the TVs, audio and video systems at Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Sherwood Park and Good Shepherd Parish in Edmonton.

For many years, Father Patsula was judicial vicar of the Interdiocesan Tribunal

of Edmonton, which rules on applications for nullity of marriages – a job he described as a mixed blessing.

“It’s rewarding in the sense that I can help so many people return to the faith,” Patsula said in an interview. “But discouraging when I encounter the many innocent people I can’t help.”

Patsula was described as jovial man who liked to gesture with his hands and a pen to make a point.

“He was always interested in people at a person level,” Father Hesse recalled. “He took pleasure in learning what people were doing, and in matters of faith, he was open to anyone asking him questions.”

As a canon law professor, Patsula remarked how seminary students were more mature because they didn’t begin studies directly from high school.

“The whole atmosphere of the seminary has changed,” Father Patsula said at the time. “It’s no longer under the old system of a closed community where the young men are cut off from the rest of the world.”

Rev. Don MacDonald has known Father Patsula since 1968, when both they were teaching at what would later become Newman Theological College.

“First of all, he taught canon law and he was one of the best in Canada,” said MacDonald, a past president who still teaches at the college. “He was a quiet person. But he was always open to people asking him questions and he would give them advice.”

In 1985, Father Patsula was named prelate of honour by Pope St. John Paul II and given the honorific of Monsignor.

In later years, Father Hesse recalled that he and his friend would take trips together, along with other priests, throughout the world and across Canada. Hesse retired to Villa Vianney, and a year later Father Patsula joined him – never losing his trademark humour.

“As he got older, he was becoming a bit deaf and he was asking people to repeat themselves,” Hesse said. “At one point, one of the priests said ‘Maybe you should think about getting a hearing aid.’ He said if people would speak louder he could understand what they’re saying!”