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Jesuit Father Joseph Neuner, dead at 101, eulogized

by Thomas C. Fox

NCR Today



Jesuit Fr. Joseph Neuner, spiritual adviser to Mother Teresa and

probably the world's oldest Jesuit, died Dec. 3 at 101 in Pune, India. Neuner, born in 1908 in Feldkirch, Austria, had been a Puneite since 1938. For many years, he taught theology at the city-based Jnana Deep Vidyapeeth. In the 1960s, Neuner served as an expert at the Second Vatican Council.

Janina Gomes, an *NCR* contributor and author of the recently published *Prayers from the Heart*, (Pauline Publications @ Sister Bombay Society), wrote the following tribute.

IDEAL PRIEST

By Janina Gomes

If ever there was an ideal priest, I knew one. Father Joseph Neuner, who died at the ripe age of 101 years, sowed many seeds in his life and also reaped a spiritual harvest that is only possible for the faithful, humble and true servants of God.

I knew him for well over 30 years. As a friend, he saw me through the best and the worst, through

moments of failure and moments of success. He wrote letters faithfully, even to those others had given up on, and I was one of them. I remember Fr. Richard De Smet, another Jesuit giant telling me that Neuner had an apostolate of letters. He wrote faithfully to those who needed spiritual direction and help in their lives.

A great theologian, who worked on documents for the Second Vatican no doubt, but his spirituality was practical and down to earth. I remember once writing to him about a bathroom leakage I had in my flat. When he visited next, he walked in and immediately asked to see the leakage. That must be what great theology is like, irretrievably linked to the daily and mundane details of life.

How did such a prolific priest who wrote regularly for, the Indian theological journal, *Vidya Jyoti*, in a series called 'Listening to the Spirit' get his originality and wisdom? When he was teaching theology at De Nobili College, he would everyday take a walk to the graveyard and meditate, most in touch with life by reflecting on death.

I remember the long walk he once took me on, the open maidan outside De Nobili. He was able to understand and resonate with the young as well as the old. I also remember the times I would meet him at Shradhha Vihar (He was founder of the Daughters of the Helpers of Mary and wrote their constitution.). He would share with me the special meals made for him by the nuns and be the generous host that he was.

Neuner was a walking marvel. He could walk from Bandra Station to my house and back, taking everything in his stride. When he had a fall and injured himself, once again it was the hardy, determined side of him that won over and gave him a longer lease of life. He was still exercising through most of the latter years.

He did present me with his memoirs which he wrote at the age of 90. But, his personality and person were much richer than a book could capture. He had a capacity to reason and analyze that would be the envy of many a scholar, but it was balanced by an earthy humaneness, compassion and quite strength.

I have a vivid memory of him in a bright yellow cotton checked shirt showing me the original rosary presented to him at his ordination, which he had tucked below his pillow.

The last I saw him was about a year ago still concelebrating mass from a wheelchair. Though he did not recognize people, he was still lucid in mind in many respects.

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I once wanted to write a profile of him, but did not do it to his satisfaction and he was a little bit of a perfectionist in his work. What I could not do when he was alive, I am now attempting to do after his death- to pay tribute to a great soul and an ideal priest.

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