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Fr. Jay Matthews (Courtesy of Catholic Voice/Oakland Diocese)



by Dan Morris-Young

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A nationally known figure in the Black Catholic community and a fixture in the Oakland Diocese for a generation, Fr. Jay Matthews was found unresponsive following an apparent heart attack March 30 at Cathedral of Christ the Light where he had been rector since 2015. He was 70.

Matthews built a reputation as a gregarious, thoughtful and caring priest during his long pastorate of Oakland's St. Benedict Parish (1984-2015).

In 1974, he became the first African American priest ordained in Northern California.

"Father Jay," as he was known by most, served multiple roles in the Oakland Diocese including vicar for Black Catholics, member of the Pastoral Council, representative on the Priests' Council, and a chaplain for the Oakland police and fire departments.

The fire and police departments will lead a procession in honor of Matthews Sunday, April 7 from St. Benedict to the cathedral in advance of a scheduled 4-6 p.m. viewing, said Fr. Jayson Landeza who succeeded Matthews as pastor at St. Benedict.

An interfaith vigil will immediately follow. Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated April 8 at 7 p.m. at the cathedral. Interment will be April 9 at 11 a.m. at St. Joseph Cemetery, San Pablo California.

"Jay saw Christ in everyone, and was not afraid of reaching out and inviting others to walk in God's warmth and love," said Landeza, a close friend. "Jay's impact extended well beyond the boundaries of St. Benedict's."

Matthews had a gift for "putting you at ease" and quickly "making you feel like you were a close friend," added the St. Benedict pastor. In a Facebook posting, Landeza called his friend "Mr. Oakland."

Another close friend of Matthews, Archbishop-designate of Washington, D.C., Wilton Gregory, released a note to NCR on April 5: "I extend to Fr. Jay Matthews' family and the Diocese of Oakland my sincere condolences and the promise of my prayers as you commend this excellent priest to the Father of Mercies. May Jay be with Christ."

The Oakland City Council recognized Matthews' civic contributions in 2014, designating May 6 as "Father Jay Matthews Day."

In an April 2 message sent to the Oakland chancery, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf said the city had "lost a beautiful soul" and "will miss him as a faith leader in our community and an ambassador for Oakland."

She and her husband, she added, "were honored to have him officiate our wedding and we will always remember his radiant light."

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In a March 31 [statement](#), California Gov. Gavin Newsom described Matthews as "a trailblazer and ambassador who built bridges between people of different faiths and communities."

"Quick to lend a helping hand, he embodied the California values of generosity and acceptance. Father Jay has made a lasting imprint and set an example for all of us to aspire to," Newsome said.

U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee, (D-Oakland), lauded Matthews' years of service to the Oakland community in a March 31 [posting](#).

"Fr. Jay lived a life of both faith and works — a life of love in service to others," Lee said. "We will miss his great wisdom. His passing is a loss for our entire community."

"Fr. Jay and I were personal friends — and like for so many, he was there for me in good times and bad times," the lawmaker added.

"Father Matthews' infectious love for his faith, his parishioners and his community was a source of joy and inspiration for me," said Oakland Bishop Michael C. Barber in a statement. "He truly lived what St. John Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests, described the priesthood to be: 'the love of the heart of Jesus.' I shall really miss him."

Noting Matthews' stature as "a national figure in the American Black Catholic community," retired Oakland Bishop John Cummins praised the Berkeley native's "remarkable visibility and outreach" and "how much he just enjoyed being a priest."

Overflow attendance for Matthews' rites at the Cathedral is being anticipated, officials said.

Matthews earned a bachelor's degree from St. Patrick's College, Mountain View, California, and a master's degree from St. Patrick's Seminary, Menlo Park. He did post-graduate studies at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley and the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR West Coast correspondent.]