



He has Kept the Faith
He has Run the Race

**An Appreciation of the Life and Ministry
of
The Reverend Monsignor Paulin J. Dobkowski
(Monday, July 9, 1928 – Thursday, May 12, 2011)
By
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(On Monday, May 16, 2011, I was the Principal Celebrant and homilist for the Liturgy of Christian Burial for Monsignor Dobkowski. This reflection is based upon that homily.)

When he was a young man, his brothers, Theodore, Alphonse, Boniface, and Roman and his fellow seminarians at St. Henry Seminary and St. Mary of the Lake Seminary admired Monsignor Paulin J. Dobkowski's physical strength and his athletic prowess. Tall and imposing, he was an agile athlete of outstanding ability. He was a great basketball player (with an excellent "jump shot"), an exceptional baseball player (with a strong pitching arm), an outstanding swimmer (whose diving was impressive), and a good golfer.

It is not surprising then that he took a special interest in the writings of his namesake, St. Paul of Tarsus, who often used images of athletic competition to convey the different challenges we all face if we commit ourselves to being disciples of Jesus Christ. Monsignor Dobkowski often meditated on this passage from the First Epistle to the Christians living in Corinth:

"Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus Our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all men, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the Gospel, so that I too may have a share in it."

"Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? You should run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way.

They do it to win a perishable crown, but we win an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified from the race.” (1 Cor. 9, 19-27) These words written by St. Paul nearly 2,000 years ago are now Monsignor Dobkowski’s words to us. They epitomize his fifty-seven years of ministry in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

My first memory of Monsignor Paulin Dobkowski, known to his beloved family as “Father Paul” or “Uncle Paulie,” and known to many priests as “Father Doby,” is the memory of him ringing the doorbell at my residence rather insistently. It was within the first days after my installation six years ago. He said he did not have an appointment but he wondered if he could talk with me for a few minutes. Those few minutes turned into more than an hour. He shared the wisdom and insight of a dedicated and faithful priest with years of experience caring for the People of God in Southern Illinois. It was the first of many heart-to-heart conversations. From that day on, I experienced his constant support and fidelity. Indeed, just as the words *fidelity* and *faithfulness* aptly describe St. Paul, they are the most apt description of Monsignor Dobkowski. He was faithful to God, faithful to his family, faithful to the Catholic Church, faithful to the priesthood, and faithful to the thousands of parishioners he served so well. It was because of this Pauline connection that I usually called him, “Monsignor Paulin.”

His family members not only enjoyed his great sense of humor, they also admired his generosity, his thoughtfulness, and his love of his faith. His brother, Theodore said that no one in the family was surprised when he responded with an open heart to the call to serve Christ and His Church in the priesthood. Through the years the members of his family knew they could rely on him, no matter what. He was always there for them – their brother, the priest. It was no surprise that they could look to him for support and comfort this past July when Theodore suffered the death of his dear wife, Mildred.

When Monsignor Dobkowski was ordained a priest by Bishop Albert Zuroweste on May 5, 1954, his First Mass highlighted his lifelong devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of the Savior. (He would later speak of Mary lightheartedly, “Allow me to introduce to you my girlfriend, my sweetheart, the Blessed Mother!”) His First Mass also showed his fidelity to his rich Polish Catholic culture in which he took great pride. One example of this was the presence of a bride and groom in his First Mass procession. Grapes and wheat, symbolizing the Eucharist, were also carried in the procession. The bride and groom processed before the newly ordained priest, symbolizing the nuptial commitment Father Paulin was making to his bride, the Church. His dear cousin, Sylvia took the part of the bride, and she told me that the memory remains fresh in her heart more than fifty years later. She has kept the white dress to this day.

Many years later, when she was in fact a bride, Sylvia and her husband would remind Father Paulin, “Remember, you married us!” But, speaking from his knowledge of an authentic theology of marriage, he would say, “No, I did not marry you. You, exercising the priesthood that is yours, married each other. I was the Church’s witness to the sacrament.” Because of this bond, it is not surprising that, now forty-eight years since he

witnessed Sylvia's marriage, she has played such an important role in assisting him in recent years, when he experienced back problems in 2007, his subsequent back surgery and his many recent visits to the hospital.

Monsignor Dobkowski's nephew, David enjoyed serving Mass and going fishing with "Uncle Paulie" at lakes near his parish assignments. He quietly observed the thoughtful ways in which his uncle served his parishioners, and he realized he had indeed answered the call of Christ to be a "fisher of men." David also observed his uncle's acts of kindness large and small – making sure younger family members were able to attend Catholic high schools, or his habits of giving small gifts of appreciation (especially angels), which endeared him to his parishioners in every parish.

He thoroughly enjoyed life. He delighted in the breaks he took in Florida with fellow priests. Those who have known Monsignor Dobkowski since his youth are quick to point out that his fun-loving, easy-going manner did not keep him from being very focused on his ministry, even as a young priest. "He was always a straight arrow when it came to his faith! He did not tolerate any belittling of the faith or the priesthood, any disrespect of the Holy Father or the Bishop by anyone. In his more reflective moments he would speak of his only sister, Mary Ann, who died at birth. His mother was told she would have no more children, but he and two of his brothers were born to his parents after this loss. This often led him to reflect on the hand of Providence in his life."

Like St. Paul, his baptismal patron, Father Paulin brought to his life of faith in God the same athletic discipline that he brought to his enthusiasm for playing sports. This spiritual discipline was apparent in the effective manner in which he taught the Catholic faith to those he catechized. As it turned out, life had its way with him and he needed every bit of that spiritual discipline!

Nine years into his priesthood, Father Paulin's faith was put to the test in an excruciatingly painful way. It was the July 4th weekend in 1963. His parents were at the picnic for St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Todd's Mill. He had to return to his parish, St. Charles Borromeo in DuBois. Eleven months earlier, Father Paulin had witnessed the marriage of his younger brother, Roman, known as "Babe," and his wife, Bernice. This night they visited with him until he had to hear Confessions at 7:00 PM. When they left they were driving down Blacktop Road, near the church, when a speeding car hit them from behind. Bernice was thrown from the car and died instantly. Paulin rode to the hospital with his dear brother, "Babe," who died two hours later.

This terrible event, these senseless deaths broke his heart. The visitation lasted for two nights. He knew he had to be strong for his father and mother, Telesfor and Cunegunda, and for family and friends. He held all of his pain within like an athlete running a marathon! When everyone had left the funeral home he felt like hitting his head against the wall and simply asking, "Why? Why has this terrible, incomprehensible thing happened to his beloved brother and his dear wife? They were so young. They had their whole lives in front of them." So great was his pain and suffering that he could not speak about it for two years. When Ted and his wife, Mildred, who lived next door to Babe and

Bernice finally asked Father Paulin how he was feeling about this devastation, he said, “There are no words. I cannot begin to tell you how I feel.” It was the great suffering of his life.

The depth of his struggle was apparent in the deep emotion with which he recounted these profoundly sad events to me almost fifty years later. I am convinced that this great spiritual trial eventually strengthened his faith and deepened his priesthood. This *purgatorio* opened his already compassionate heart to a greater empathy for others enduring excruciating suffering in the face of untimely, tragic death.

Monsignor Dobkowski embraced his entire priesthood with enthusiasm from his first assignment at St. Dominic Parish in Breese (1954-1955) to his very influential years on the faculty of Mater Dei High School (where he warmly welcomed the future Bishop, Father Stanley Schlarman to the faculty), to his last pastorate at St. Paul Parish in Johnston City. He took pride in the fact that he baptized two future priests, Father Joseph Rascher and Father Andrew Knopik.

Paulin’s last assignment, which began on the evening of Friday, May 6, 2011, the day after the 57th anniversary of his ordination, brought his life closer to the life of Christ crucified as preached by St. Paul. “Proclaim the Word. Be persistent in season and out of season. Convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. Be self-possessed in all circumstances. Put up with hardship. Perform the work of an evangelist. Fulfill your ministry! For I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have run the race. I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord just judge that He is will give me on that Day.” (2 Tim 4, 2-8)

On the morning of May 6, I celebrated the Mass of Eastertide with the priests of the Hincke-Sense Home and joined them for a lunch in their honor hosted by the Serra Club. Neither I nor his brother priests ever imagined that we were concelebrating with Monsignor Dobkowski at his last Mass! The reading from the Gospel of John (6:1-5) was the account of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish, a Eucharistic reading particularly powerful for all priests, reminding us that the Greek word for fish, ICTHUS is an acronym for “Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of the World.” Paulin participated fully in the Eucharist and enjoyed the festive luncheon. I had the opportunity to talk with him and he spoke with optimism about the progress of his recovery from surgery for an aneurysm several weeks earlier. His last words to me were, “I’m doing fine, Bishop. I’m just a little unsteady on my feet. Don’t worry about me.” Sometime late that evening he suffered what may have been a massive cerebral hemorrhage while sitting in his favorite chair.

His only living brother, Theodore (with his son David), his cousin Sylvia, his brother priests, Bishop Schlarman and I kept a quiet vigil at his bedside in intensive care at St. Elizabeth Hospital. An operation on Saturday and another on Monday could not end the hemorrhaging. His physicians said there was “no hope.” We anointed him again and continued to pray the rosary for him, to speak to him, and simply to be with him long past visiting hours, knowing with Easter faith that “Christ is our Hope!” The Wisdom

Community gathered at my Residence prayed the prayers for the dying. At 3:00 PM on Wednesday I returned to the hospital to be with his family and Father Stanley Konieczny, his executor, as all life support was discontinued. We continued to support dear Paulin with our prayers and comfort. In spite of that we could not ignore the radical aloneness of dying. At 7:25 on Thursday morning he simply slept away. He has kept the faith. He has run the race. I later recalled his words to me several years earlier, "Bishop, I have had a wonderful, happy life as a priest. My bags are packed. I'm ready for the Lord at any time. Don't worry about me."

"Let your belts be fastened around your waist and your lamps be burning, ready! Be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Be prepared and ready, therefore, for the Son of Man will come at an hour when you least expect him!" (Lk 12, 35-40)

Paulin was ready! He was not "running aimlessly." Nor was he "unsteady on his feet."

On one occasion when I visited him in his room at the Hincke-Sense residence, I observed the expressions of his devotion to the Blessed Mother and Blessed John Paul II. He said, "You know, when I met him in Rome I had something in mind all practiced to say to him in Polish. But he looked at me with those wonderful deep blue eyes and I didn't say a word. I knew I was looking at a saint." He spoke of his pride in sharing the name of St. Paul with the Polish Pontiff. He was so happy that he lived to see his beatification! He told me he was praying to him asking him to watch over me and all bishops.

Anyone who ever went to Monsignor Dobkowski for the Sacrament of Reconciliation knows that he often gave the same prayer as a penance, the *Memorare*. Our prayer today is that Mary the Mother of the Lord and Blessed John Paul II will escort, dear, dear Paulie, dear Doby, dear Paulin to the throne of grace, to the heavenly Eucharist accompanied by our grateful prayers. How we admire you! How we love you! How I love you! *Ecce sacerdos magnus qui in diebus suis placuit Deo!*

"Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee, O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me. Amen. Alleluia!"