



BROTHER PAUL J JOHNSON

June 15, 1937 - June 22, 2020

Miami 'modern monk,' advocate for the poor dies. Brother Paul Johnson led Camillus House.

Brother Paul Johnson, the monk who transformed Miami nonprofit Camillus House from a soup kitchen to a nationally recognized charity that serves tens of thousands of homeless people every year, liked to remind the powerful that it takes a tough character to take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience.

By day, he served meals to the hungry and the poor, and provided shelter and treatment for the homeless and addiction counseling to derailed youths at the nonprofit's overnight shelter and free clinic in Allapattah and Overtown.

By night, he persuaded millionaires to fund housing projects and lobbied for the voting rights of the underserved.

On Wednesday, Johnson died at his home in Miami, leaving behind a legacy of service and a community of thousands that he considered family. He was 82 and suffered from heart disease.

Originally from Kentucky, Johnson was led to Miami through his calling to help people.

At age 21, he joined the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd, a Roman Catholic order. He led missions in Ohio, New Mexico and Louisiana before he joined Camillus House in Miami in 1978. He served as the nonprofit's executive director for 22 years.

"Before you can do good, you must do well," Camillus House CEO Hilda M. Fernandez said in a tribute to the brother on Wednesday — that was Johnson's motto, as he launched the organization into ambitious projects and expansions, never taking no as an answer.

He co-founded Camillus Health Concern, a health center program for the homeless in Miami, raising \$4.5 million to build a facility to house it.

In 1998, Johnson was featured in the Sun Sentinel as the “modern monk” that fundraised aggressively to bring the project to life.

He purchased a \$3 million three-story office building just west of Interstate 95 at Northwest Fifth Street, where the nonprofit continues to serve local communities today, according to reporting by the Miami Herald at the time.

The building was significantly over budget for Camillus House, but Johnson persuaded landowners to donate the property and a congressional subcommittee to allocate \$2 million to pay for the structure.

He covered the remaining expenses with a \$960,000 government grant and a \$200,000 donation by millionaire businessman Foutanga Dit Babani Sissoko, of the West African nation of Mali, the Herald reported.

By that July, the clinic was up and running, with two full-time doctors, 50 volunteer doctors and more than a half-dozen nurses and social workers.

Today, Camillus House employs 160 staff members working in over 30 programs in 10 sites countywide. Its sister agency Camillus Health Concern, housed at the clinic, has an additional 60 employees.

Johnson also made it his mission to elevate the self-esteem and self-sufficiency of the communities he served. He remained in touch with many of those he helped, meeting them on weekends to learn about their new jobs, homes and friends.

He was known for responding to donations with handwritten letters.

When in 1998, Gemma-Lee Rita Cole, from Miramar, sent a small donation to the nonprofit, she told the Herald she was surprised to receive a personal note from Johnson assuring her that her request would be honored.

“This personal touch has become Brother Paul’s trademark,” said Cole, who died last year after volunteering for years at Camillus House. “Brother Paul’s compassion, energy, vision, and humor are an inspiration to everyone who knows him.”

“Before anybody in our community knew anything about homelessness, Brother Paul and the Brothers of the Good Shepherd were out there taking care of the last, the poorest, the forgotten,” said Ronald L. Book, the chairman of the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust on Friday. “He was the conscience of the community for two and a half decades.”

At 61, Johnson asked for dispensation from The Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd after the brotherhood’s superiors tried to send him to Albuquerque, N.M., to raise money for the congregation, the Herald reported in March 1999.

Johnson saw more work to be done in Miami and continued to serve his local communities as the vice president of Catholic Cemeteries in Miami-Dade and Broward counties.

“With cemeteries, there has been a sense of sacredness lost because they have become very commercial. And I hope to bring this sacredness and dignity back. After all, they are a monument to people’s lives,” Johnson told the Herald.

He also recently served as the president of the Lady Suzanna Tweed and Carleton Tweed Charitable Foundation, overseeing the support of programs for the underserved, according to Fernandez.

Johnson met the Tweeds at the Marian Center Ball, an event that raises money for children with disabilities, in the 1990s. Before Suzanna Polas Tweed died in May 1998, Johnson would accompany her to every opera opening for years.

Her dying wish was that her friends and family donate to Camillus House instead of sending flowers.

“His vision, compassion and love for the poor among us was evident throughout his life,” said Camillus House Board Chair Paul Lowenthal. “So many of those we serve will never know the impact that Paul had on the programs and services we provide them today. The homeless of this community owe much to his good work.”

Services were held privately.

Comments



“ 3 files added to the album Memories Album



Van Orsdel Family Funeral Chapels - June 29 at 02:12 PM



“ Paul, i thank God for your friendship! Knowing and sharing with you,several times a week was a real blessing in my life! You taught me so much. Your sense of humor made me laugh. I will ever,remember you,as,a good and kind man and as my friend, one of the best I had! I will miss talking with you. I believe Almighty God said to you "well done my son". May you be blessed in His Presence always!
Dan Fidler

Dan Fidler - June 25 at 08:15 AM



“ 4 files added to the album Memories Album



Van Orsdel Family Funeral Chapels - June 23 at 05:05 PM