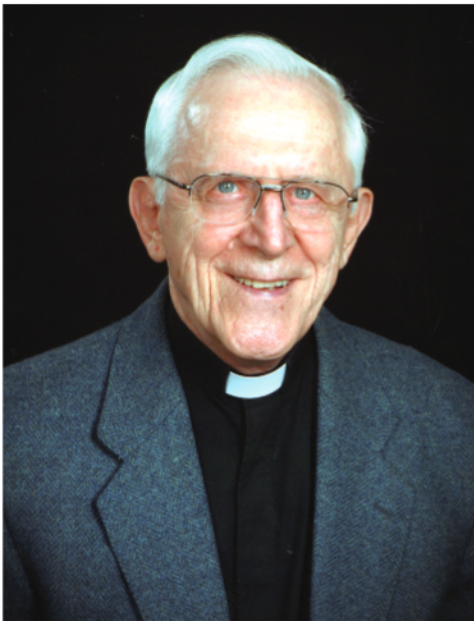


From local taxi driver to foreign missionary, Father Sikorski found joy in serving the poor

From the Diocese of Saginaw to the coast of Brazil, Father Harold (Harry) Sikorski exemplified the Gospel call to live humbly and charitably.



He appeared in a short documentary film, "Mission at Recife," produced by the Archdiocese of Detroit.

In 2006, Father Harry Sikorski celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination with a special Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Recife, Brazil.

owned his own vestments. "Every church has a set of vestments, so he had two albs, two clerical shirts and one pair of shoes. He would only own what he absolutely needed—except books."

With an ever-inquisitive mind, Father Harry spent much of his free time in the library at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit pouring over books and studying.

"He was always interested in primary sources," said Father Timothy Laboe, dean of admissions at the seminary.

Father Harry studied the early Church Fathers and documents in their original language, comparing the translations over time. He was especially interested in Church history. Not only did he study in original languages, he was fluent in several: he spoke and read Flemish, Portuguese, Latin, Greek, German and French.

"He could have been an ivory tower theologian, but he had this heart for the poor and that's really predominantly where his ministry was," said Father Bert Gohm, senior priest of the Diocese of Saginaw. "It's just a fascinating dichotomy in a sense, because rarely do you find someone with

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COURTESY PHOTOS

According to his sister, Sister Darlene Sikorski, O.P., Father Harry lived Jesus' words: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me," (Mt 19:21).

Born in 1929 on Saginaw's East Side, Father Harry grew up attending St. Rita Parish. He completed theology studies at the University of Louvain, Belgium and was ordained to the priesthood there in 1956. As a priest, Father Harry made it his life's work to serve people in need.

"He wanted to be with the poor," Sister Darlene said. "When he could be with the poor, he was the happiest person he could be. He had a real uncanny understanding

of their lot in life."

Though Father Harry felt the call to the priesthood at a young age, his love of the poor likely started through the example of his parents. One of seven children born to Peter and Antoinette Sikorski, Father Harry saw his parents give generously what they could, and they always had enough.

"Harry lived a very simple lifestyle," his sister said. "He gave everything away and kept very little." As a parish priest, she said he never

Father Harry Sikorski, who attained senior priest status in 1987, spent years as a missionary priest in Recife, Brazil.

that much interest in Church history and language and all of that, who is also so passionate about the poor.”

He had an archive of documents and books, but never wanted to be a writer. Sister Darlene said he wanted to use what he learned from the early Church Fathers, the saints and literature to benefit others.

“It had a deeper purpose,” she said, adding he wanted to use what he learned to make a difference.

For most of his priesthood, Father Harry served in the Diocese of Saginaw. Throughout his ministry, he served the marginalized and needy, even forgoing life in a parish rectory to live with the people he ministered to. He didn’t wait for people to come to him, either; Father Harry reached out in unprecedented ways— like being a midnight cabbie when he was pastor at Sacred Heart Parish in Saginaw.

“He got a job working for the Red Ball Cab Company,” Sister Darlene said.

He drove during the midnight hours because, as a priest, he wanted to be able to serve at any time he was needed, Sister Darlene explained.

“If he could at least listen to them, they would be able to see that there was a God who loved them,” she said.

Father Harry also had an old van with “Noah’s Ark” painted on the side. Sister Darlene recalled he drove the van full of bicycle parts to Daniels Heights Apartments to repair bikes for local kids, hoping to counter the influence of gangs.

“He didn’t do it for free,” she said— but he wouldn’t take money either. “He gave them each a trash bag and had them pick up trash as payment. He always came up with practical ways to help people.”

Those practical ways stretched far beyond the Diocese of Saginaw to the coastal city of Recife, Brazil, where the Archdiocese of Detroit



had established a mission in the 1960s. Named the Our Lady of Lourdes Mission, it was located in one of the city’s poorest areas.

“The struggles there are very difficult, but he had a real passion for it. He loved to be with the people there,” said Father Timothy, who first met Father Harry when the Saginaw priest came to the mission during a two-week leave.

Once he retired to senior priest status in 1987, Father Harry left for Recife, some 4,700 miles away from his home. He spent the next 17 years there, ministering to and praying with the people, until health issues brought him back to mid-Michigan.

Over the last several months of Father Harry’s life, Sister Darlene stayed with her brother. While she worried about making sure he had his finances in order, he was still giving his things away. “Darlene, I’m not going to need anything,” he told her near the end of his life.

“He had enough – didn’t have too much—only what he needed,” she said.

Even then, he was asking himself, “Did I squander any of what I was given? Did I do enough?”

In “Mission at Recife,” a short documentary film produced by the Archdiocese of Detroit, Father Harry joyfully shared a discovery made while serving the poor.

“The great discovery is the people, who are really people of



God,” he said, and despite the poverty and suffering, “there’s a joy here that you find nowhere else in the world.”

He gestured around at the bustling open-air market, filled with people.

“This is where the church is,” he told visitors.

“He loved to listen to people,” said Father Timothy. “I think he was that way, just very interested in the people living that life – not necessarily in the streets, not just in poverty and the struggles they had. He had a heart for the poor.”

Father Harry strove to spread the love of God, living simply and following Christ. He wanted to make a difference in the lives of God’s people around him, especially those in the margins.

“He took the Gospel to heart,” said Sister Darlene. He confided in her that his image of the final judgment was the Good Shepherd, and he knew the Good Shepherd was going to come and carry him home.

Father Harry died Oct. 10, 2021, at age 91.

Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him. May the soul of Father Harry, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. †

Father Harry Sikorski was ordained on July 1, 1956 in Louvain, Belgium and served in the Diocese of Saginaw before spending his later years as a mission priest in Recife, Brazil.