

MARIST LIVES

REV. JOSEPH BUCKLEY, SM

Defender of Religious Liberty

by Susan J. Illis, Archivist, Archives of the Society of Mary, US Province

At Joseph Buckley's funeral Mass, Rev. Vincent O'Connell, SM, told a story: When Joseph was in grade school, the teacher asked all the boys in his class to raise their hands if they wanted to be a priest. Joseph Buckley did not. The sister asked, "Joseph, didn't you tell me you wanted to be a priest?" "No," said young Joseph, "I told you I wanted to be a bishop."

While Rev. Joseph Buckley, SM, never realized his boyhood dream of becoming a bishop, his life and career nonetheless had enormous influence on many other priests and Catholics.

Born on September 3, 1905 in St. Paul, Minnesota, Joseph Buckley was raised in Wheeling, West Virginia by great-aunts following the death of his mother in 1910. He worshipped at the Marist church, St. Michael's, where Rev. August Bellwald, SM, encouraged his interest in religious life. Joseph's father, James, was initially resistant to his 14-year-old son's determination to attend Marist Seminary in Washington, DC, in part due to concerns that their already infrequent visits would become even less regular.

However, the elder Buckley acquiesced and soon received glowing reports of his son's academic achievements and leadership skills. Joseph Buckley professed as a Marist on September 12, 1925 and was ordained in Rome on April 4, 1931. While in Rome, he earned his S.T.D. (Doctorate in Spiritual Theology) at the University of St. Thomas Aquinas. His residence in Europe also afforded him the opportunity to travel and improve his Italian, French and German language skills, which would prove beneficial in his future.

While he taught at Marist College (Washington, DC) and Notre Dame Seminary (New Orleans, Louisiana) for much of his career, Fr. Buckley's legacy is defined by two periods of his life: his time as military chaplain during World War II and his participation in Vatican II as superior general.

Buckley cut short his six-month term of spiritual renewal when the United States entered World War II, choosing to volunteer as a chaplain in the Army. Commissioned a first lieutenant, he served in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania

and Camp Howze, Texas before becoming chaplain of the 865th Engineer Aviation Battalion. This service took him to the same region where Marists had missioned for over a century - New Guinea and the Philippines.

When he arrived in the combat zone of Finschhafen, New Guinea, he discovered there were no facilities available for either religious services or recreation, so he secured native materials and built a chapel. He continued building chapels to serve his battalion in their different locations. After the war, a serviceman joked, "You'd think he renamed us into the 865th Engineer Chapel Construction Battalion. We've built them all over the Pacific." In Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea, Buckley, as the sole chaplain, provided religious services for both the army and the navy. And when they were stationed at the Lahug Airport in Philippines, in addition to providing religious services, he converted a small house into a recreation center that was crucial to maintaining morale among the infantrymen.



Chaplain Buckley conducting mass at Prince of Peace Chapel, Mindanao, Philippine Islands.



Very Rev. Joseph Buckley, SM, with Pope John XXIII

Another chapel on Mindanao was under construction as the war ended. Dedicated on September 3, 1945 - the day after V-J Day and coincidentally Buckley's 40th birthday - the Prince of Peace Chapel bore the inscription: "His name shall be called...God...the Prince of Peace. His empire shall be multiplied and there shall be no end of peace." Fr. Buckley was awarded a Bronze Star for "exceptionally meritorious services in the performance of duties pertaining to religion, morale, and recreation beyond the requirements of ordinary duty."

Upon his return to the United States, Fr. Buckley taught at Notre Dame Seminary (New Orleans, Louisiana) and was the founding pastor of St. Pius X in Bedford, Ohio, where he also helped establish St. Peter Chanel High School. In 1959, he was appointed provincial of the Washington Province of the Society of Mary. As provincial, he attended the 1961 General Chapter, which elected him Superior General, a position he held for eight years. In early 1959, Pope John XXIII had announced his intention to call an Ecumenical Council to bring the Church up to date. Two weeks before the Second Vatican Council was set to open in October 1962, Pope John called to the Council the superior generals of religious congregations with more than 1000 priest members. Thus, Buckley became a full voting and speaking member of the Council.

Fr. Buckley later recalled that of the sixteen Constitutions, Decrees and Declarations issued by the Council, the most significant to him was the Declaration on Religious Liberty. Buckley led a group of American bishops and others in defending the declaration that individuals have the freedom to follow their own religious convictions. Buckley later said, "In speaking out for freedom of conscience, Vatican II recognized the dignity of the individual man; also his responsibility and accountability."

After completing his term as superior general in 1969, Fr. Buckley returned to the United States to serve a second term as provincial of the Washington Province. He returned to Notre Dame Seminary in 1971, where he lived the last decade of his life. Rev. Joseph Buckley, SM, died on September 11, 1981 after suffering a series of strokes.