

## ■ MARIST LIVES

# REV. ELLIS L. DePRIEST, JR., SM

## From a Childhood Ministry to a Life in Liturgy

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Although his surname might suggest that Ellis DePriest was destined for priesthood, his path to religious life was not so direct as his name would imply.

Ellis Louis DePriest, Jr. was born on October 23, 1926 in Jackson, Mississippi to Baptist parents. His mother died when he was young and his father remarried a Catholic woman. Ellis told the story of visiting an aunt who took him to a Catholic Mass. He was captivated by the sacred liturgy. His aunt was disturbed by this and afraid that it would anger Ellis' father who was not so enamored with Catholicism to put it mildly.

After this experience Ellis wanted to become Catholic and eventually a priest even though he was a child at that time. He was an intelligent child who knew how he was going to get to that liturgy that he felt such love for. Although Ellis's Baptist father vehemently opposed his son's plans, at the age of 13 Ellis converted to Catholicism and was baptized in the Catholic church on May 13, 1939. By the age of 14 Ellis was determined to begin studies for the priesthood despite his father's opposition. His pastor, an alumnus of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana contacted the seminary about the matter. Rev. Michael J. Larkin, SM (1893-1988), then rector at Notre Dame, traveled from New Orleans to Alexandria, Louisiana where the DePriest family had moved. Rev. Larkin refused to leave until Ellis's father agreed to allow his son to complete his high school education at St. Mary's Manor, the Marist minor seminary in Langhorne, Pennsylvania. Although he promised not to oppose his son's vocation, Ellis's father declined to pay the requested contribution for his tuition, a decision that may have been driven by finances rather than disapproval. Ellis went

off to the Manor and never returned home till many years later. He lived at the seminary even through summer vacation time

At St. Mary's Manor, Ellis's academic achievements attracted the notice of his classmates, who wrote in the October-November 1942 issue of *The Manorite*: "There's a lad who can start, continue, and finish a deep discussion on education any time of the day or week." By his fourth year, he served as Prefect and when he left St. Mary's Manor in 1946, *The Manorite* noted: "He devoted his spare moments to the organ, and through the years has become quite accomplished in that line." His musical skills may have been understated as his later career will attest. His love for the Liturgy of the Mass continued and he learned to love Gregorian chant, the ancient music of the Catholic Mass.

Ellis DePriest was professed in the Society of Mary on September 8, 1947 and ordained by Bishop Michael Keyes, SM on February 1, 1953. Throughout his career, which included parish work, teaching and official positions with both the Society of Mary and the archdioceses where he served, his two passions were music and liturgy. He earned a master's degree in music from Catholic University of America in Washington, DC in 1956 and in 1971 earned a masters in liturgy from there.

While he was initially drawn to the beauty and majesty of the celebration of the Mass, Fr. DePriest endeavored to make it more accessible to everyone, including himself. As early as 1964 he wrote to his provincial, Very Rev. Charles J. Willis, SM (1911-1996), requesting permission to say the breviary in English, stating, "I feel the vernacular will better increase my devotion to the official prayer of the church."



Ellis holding a palm at the Ruthenian Rite Liturgy

Fr. DePriest was appointed Rector/Superior of Marist Major Seminary in Washington, DC from 1967-1974. He taught Liturgy and music at the Marist Seminary and led the Marist College choir at the nationally televised Midnight Mass on Christmas for some years at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington.

In 1974, Fr. DePriest returned to Louisiana, where he would spend much of the rest of his career and life. He was appointed Rector of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans in 1976. At Notre Dame he taught Liturgy and music.

While Rector of Notre Dame, Archbishop Philip M. Hannan of New Orleans gave

permission for the Byzantine Liturgy to be celebrated at Notre Dame Seminary to educate the seminarians. A monthly Mass for local Byzantine Catholics was also added. In 1978, special faculties to celebrate in the Byzantine rite by the Vatican while also continuing to celebrate in the Roman rite. This was unusual becoming bi-ritual in the two rites. These monthly liturgies gradually became weekly. Through these liturgies Fr. DePriest ended up deeply loved and treasured by a Byzantine community in New Orleans and also close to the heart of their Bishop in Ohio. He maintained his bi-ritual faculties until his last years as his health failed. He became equally enamored of the ancient Byzantine rite as he had of the Roman rite as a child.

For much of his time in New Orleans, he served as the director the Office of Worship for the Archdiocese of New Orleans, while continuing to say Mass for the Ruthenian Byzantine Catholic Community. After a brief illness, Fr. DePriest died on February 6, 2009. Most Rev. Basil Schott, O.F.M., the Metropolitan Archbishop of the Ruthenian rite in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania presided over the elaborate Byzantine wake service for DePriest. The following day a funeral Mass was celebrated by the Society of Mary at Ellis's beloved Holy Name of Mary Church in Algiers/New Orleans where for many years he had been pastor. At the wake service Ellis's brother shared that in those earliest years of fascination with the Catholic liturgy, Ellis used to plan elaborate funerals for birds that had died. They say that people with the happiest lives are those that live out the dreams of their childhood in their adult life. It is no wonder that Ellis DePriest, SM, had such a happy and passionate life.