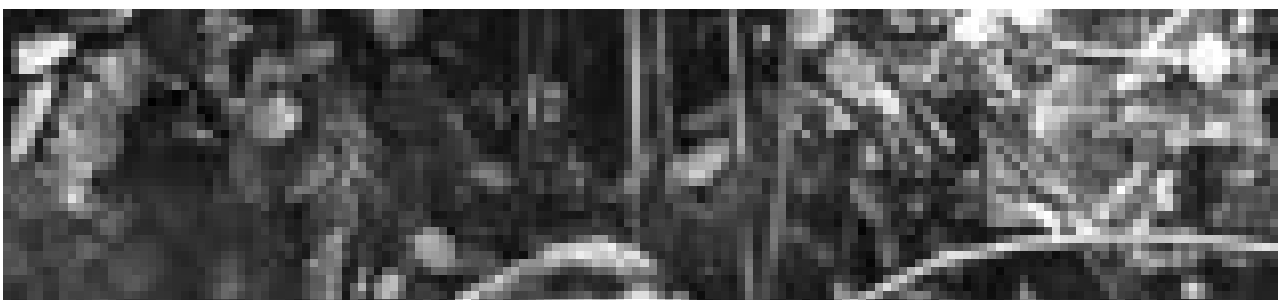


In Memorium: Fr. Joe Stenger, C.Ss.R. was a “Giant” in Denver Province History

[redemptorists.com/in-memorium-fr-joe-stenger-c-ss-r-was-a-giant-in-denver-province-history](https://www.redemptorists.com/in-memorium-fr-joe-stenger-c-ss-r-was-a-giant-in-denver-province-history)

Father Charles
Wehrley







Beloved Fr. Joseph Stenger – a “giant” in the history of the Denver Province who touched countless lives and made significant contributions to the development of the Vice Province of Manaus – died on September 2 at St. Clement Redemptorist Mission Community in Liguori. He was 88, and had recently been placed in hospice care.

Joseph Henry was born to Joseph C. and Elsa Stenger on September 16, 1931 at the family home in Glennonville, a Catholic enclave in the swamplands of the Missouri Bootheel 10 miles north of the Arkansas state line. Life for the Stengers and their 16 children was firmly rooted in their faith and revolved around their family. They worked their small tract of land and sharecropped to support the family. Everyone helped pick cotton, berries and hickory nuts. They stocked their storm cellar with vegetables and kept cows for milk and butter, and chickens for eggs. Their home was filled with love, laughter and music, and they all gathered to pray the rosary every evening.



Newly ordained Fr. Joe Stenger with his parents, Joseph and Elsa.

Young Joe left home to attend St. Louis University High School. He worked at the old Firmin Desloge Hospital, which was operated under the auspices of the Sisters of St. Mary specifically to serve poor African Americans. While he manned the switchboard and chauffeured the nuns on the weekends, Joe wished he was a hospital chaplain. Little wonder he felt a drawn to a religious vocation, as his childhood had taught him valuable lessons about community life and working for the greater good. He discerned a vocation with the Redemptorist missionaries, and five of his sisters joined the Sisters of St. Mary.

He attended the Redemptorist novitiate in DeSoto, MO and made his first profession of vows on August 2, 1952. He professed perpetual vows on September 2, 1955, and was ordained to the priesthood at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Oconomowoc on July 2, 1957.

After completing Tirocinium at St. Alphonsus “Rock” Parish in St. Louis, Fr. Joe was

missioned to serve the poor and abandoned in the Amazon Region of Brazil. He caught a freighter ship out of New Orleans bound for the Amazon in May of 1959. After six months of studying Portuguese and a brief stint at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Belém, he took the name “Padre Pascoal” and was appointed to St. Joseph Parish in Teresina. He lived with a small community of Redemptorists in a typical sparse village home – no running water, no indoor plumbing, and no electricity, which didn’t arrive in Teresina until 1964. They began each day with a 5:00 am Mass at the church, followed by 15 Masses throughout the parish, which covered 20 square miles and included 35,000 people.

Fr. Joe always felt that his role was to walk with the people – not behind them or in front of them, but beside them. Confreres were impressed with his genuine concern for the people, as well as his tireless work ethic and strong leadership skills. Within his first 10 years of ministry he was elected Consultor of the Vice Provincial Council and moved to the Redemptorist community in Manaus.

The Redemptorists had three houses on the banks of the mighty Amazon River, spaced about 100 miles apart. Each was equipped with a school and a boat so that each location served as a base of operation. Fr. Joe actually built a boat himself. He said it took about nine months – as long as it takes a woman to have a baby, and about as difficult. As a member of the leadership council, his primary responsibility was to visit 156 communities in the interior of the Amazon jungle once a year. He and a confrere traveled as a team, visiting two places in the morning and two places in the afternoon. They accepted the warm hospitality of the people and ate meals with them, then went back to the boat to sleep before heading out the next day. Everywhere they arrived, people were waiting to receive the sacraments.



The Redemptorist missionaries also provided leadership training so that the people could practice their faith in the absence of the clergy. Fr. Joe always maintained that the Church is the people – not a building. He once performed 11 marriages in a single ceremony outside under a tree.

Fr. Joe served at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Belém before he was elected Vice Provincial Superior. He served three consecutive terms, from 1975 to 1984. He was more interested in accompanying the people than completing administrative paperwork, so he delegated those responsibilities to his Provincial Vicar. Serving as Vice Provincial Superior, he ministered to the people at Our Lady of Aparecida Parish in Manaus, St. Ann Parish in Coari, and Nazareth Parish in Manacapuru. He also served as Vicar General of the Prelacy of Coari, and director of Radio Coari during those years.

He remained in Manacapuru when his term at the helm of the Vice Province of Manus ended, ministering to a parish that covered 5,000 square miles. Two years later, a partnership between the Redemptorists and the Sisters of Mary in Manacapuru was

announced. Fr. Joe's own sisters, Sr. Mary and Sr. Jovita, were veteran missionaries who had just spent 10 years in northeastern Brazil treating illnesses and educating nearly 600 healthcare workers throughout the local diocese.

Conditions were vastly different in the hot, humid Amazon jungle, where malaria skin diseases and leprosy were issues. The Sisters planned to accompany the Redemptorists to observe existing healthcare structures and expand those efforts through an education program, encouraging people to take responsibility for their own healthcare.

Fr. Joe returned to Manaus as pastor of Our Lady of Aparecida Parish in 2001. During his 42 years of service, he touched countless lives and contributed greatly to the development of the Vice Province of Manaus. He was 72 when he returned to the USA in 2003.



Fr. Joe joined the community at St. Alphonsus Parish in Minneapolis, where he quickly learned Spanish and started ministering to the growing Hispanic community. He had always considered caring for the sick and suffering paramount, and at long last he began training to become a hospital chaplain. He was always available— day or night, even in the snowy, frigid winter months. He always had a smile on his face and is remembered

for singing Portuguese songs as he walked down the hallways to lift the spirits of everyone in the hospitals and nursing homes he visited. He was so well known for his compassionate care that he presided at many funerals.

Although he retired in 2007, the community was delighted that he remained in Minneapolis until 2015. Fr. Joe transferred to Liguori Mission House, but health issues necessitated his move to St. Clement's within the year. He was warmly welcomed, and appreciated as a joyful, positive presence in community. Fr. Joe is widely respected and admired as a true Son of St. Alphonsus. May he rest in the eternal peace of the Redeemer.



Early this year before the coronavirus hit the country with a vengeance, Brazilian friends from the St. Louis area – Suzy McBride (second from right) and Augusta (right), a sister of Ariosvaldo, who played music at St. Clement Masses – visited long-time friends. (photo by Suzy McBride)



Rev. Joseph Henry Stenger, CSsR

Funeral Services

Friday: September 11, 2020

St. Clement Redemptorist Chapel

Private & Livestream: <https://www.facebook.com/andy.patin9>

03:00pm – Rosary

07:00pm – Vigil

Saturday: September 12, 2020

St. Joseph Catholic Church

6020 Old Antonia Rd – Imperial, MO 63052

09:00am – Visitation

10:00am – Mass of Resurrection

By Fr. Joe's nephew: Rev. Michael Murphy

(Burial to follow after Mass at Liguori Cemetery)

Livestream: <https://www.facebook.com/andy.patin9>

**Eternal rest grant unto Fr. Joe, O Lord.
And let the perpetual light shine upon him.
May he rest in peace. Amen**