

Former diaconate director dies Jan. 23 in Benton

written by Malea Hargett |



BENTON — Deacon John Duke, the former diaconate director and member of Our Lady of Fatima Church in Benton, died Jan. 23. He was 84.

Duke, who oversaw the diaconate office from 1998 to 2005, led the formation class of 22 deacons from 1999 until their ordination in 2002.

“It is a great feeling to know we were a part of 22 people’s spiritual formation,” he told Arkansas Catholic in 2005.

In addition to forming the new deacons, he also maintained contact with the 83 active and retired deacons. At his parish, he assisted during Mass, preached homilies, taught RCIA, visited the sick and conducted sacramental services.

“Last May I thought I could go (on working) 10 years. Now if I make it 10 years, it’s going to be struggle. ... I’m 75 and alive. Thank goodness for that,” he said in 2005.

Duke was born to the late John and Dorothy Duke in Mobile, Ala., on Nov. 9, 1929. He served in the Navy during the Korean War and graduated from Springhill College in Mobile. He worked for Alcoa for 42 years, transferring from Mobile to the Bauxite plant in 1960. After retirement, he was ordained a deacon in 1986.

For the past 27 years he dedicated his ministry to serving alcoholics, addicts, troubled marriages, families in crisis and counseling those with financial difficulties. He was a chaplain for the Saline County Ministerial Alliance, delivering death announcements, grieving with suffering families and taking care of the transient and homeless.

In 2012 the Saline Memorial Health Foundation honored Duke with its "Heart of Saline" honor. Duke served two terms on the Saline Memorial Hospital board of directors and five years as a chaplain for the Saline County Sheriff's Department.

Duke said he liked to remember the "touches of heaven" in his life, including marrying his wife Nettie 63 years ago.

"Other spiritual touches from heaven that have occurred during my life were: an audience with Pope Pius XII while in the service during the Korean War; a trip to the Holy Land, Rome and Assisi, where I had the privilege of serving as deacon in each place; journeying with Bishop Andrew J. McDonald to Rome, Lourdes and France including an audience with Pope John Paul II," he once wrote.

Duke and wife have seven children. The loss of their son Bobby when he was only 24 years old led Duke on the path to becoming a deacon.

Other survivors include four sons, John Duke, Mike Duke, Mark Duke and Vincent Duke; two daughters, Darlene Brown and Marie Duke; 11 grandchildren; and eight great-grandchildren.

The rosary and visitation was held Jan 26. A Mass of Christian Burial was held Jan. 27 at Our Lady of Fatima Church in Benton.