

Father John Catoir, president and founder of St. Jude Media Ministry and former director of The Christophers, dies April 7 in Cary, NC

Father John Catoir, JCD, a retired priest of the Diocese of Paterson, N.J., passed away April 7, 2022, in Cary, North Carolina, after 62 years as a priest, at age 90.

Since March 22 he had been in hospice care and in overall declining health, according to Patricia Martin, executive director of St. Jude Media Ministry. A Funeral Mass for Father Catoir was offered April 11 at St. Michael the Archangel Church in Cary, followed by Burial at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church Cemetery in Newton Grove, N.C. He had resided in North Carolina --with longtime friend, Ashley Rose Olbrich, serving as caregiver and President of his Ministry.

“He spent his entire life in service to God and others, but his greatest legacy is being a ‘messenger of joy’ to a world so in need,” Martin said April 8. “He would invite us all to now carry that light forward — to be joyful in the knowledge of God’s love.”

The priest would often recall a 1980 meeting with St. John Paul II, who he said asked him to become “a messenger of joy.” He worked his entire remaining life to fulfill that mission.

In 1995, Father Catoir founded St. Jude Media Ministry to provide “uplifting messages of joy to those most in need through all forms of media.” He started doing radio spots and today has expanded to a worldwide outreach via video and social media. His online Christmas and Easter prayer marathons have reached more than 4 million viewers across the globe, according to his website.

Father Catoir served as president of three organizations: National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, 1975-77; Association of Catholic TV and Radio Syndicators, 1983-85; and what was then called the Catholic Press Association, 1988-90.

In 1993, he received the CPA’s St. Francis de Sales Award for outstanding contributions to Catholic journalism. Named for the patron saint of writers and journalists, the award recognizes “outstanding contributions to Catholic journalism” and is the highest honor given by the association, now called the Catholic Media Association.

In an April 8 statement, Rob DeFrancesco, CMA’s executive director, said: “I am grateful to God for Father John Catoir, who dedicated his life to inviting people to come to know and love Jesus Christ through Catholic media. His joy and enthusiasm for sharing the good news is an inspiration for members of the Catholic Media Association.”

Among its annual journalism awards, the CMA presents one named for the late priest: the Father John Catoir Social Media Evangelization Award. Father Catoir was awarded the Daniel J. Kane Award for Religious Communication by the University of Dayton, Ohio, in 1993 and the Catholic Actors Guild gave him their St. Genesius Award for his outstanding spiritual service to the entertainment industry in 1990.

He was a prolific author – writing more than 25 books including the bestsellers “Joy,” “A Simple Guide to Happiness.” “Enjoy The Lord,” “Enjoy Your Precious Life,” and “God Delights in You: An Introduction to Gospel Spirituality,” and his final book, written at age 90 with the help of longtime assistant, Marie Hantak, “The Best Articles of Fr. John T. Catoir, JCD.”

For 50 years he wrote a weekly nationally-syndicated column for Catholic News Service which was utilized by numerous Catholic publications and Diocesan Newspapers. His final article was published in The Beacon, Paterson, N.J. on November 14, 2019.

Born and raised in New York City, the son of John Thomas “Jack” Catoir and Catherine Mary “Kitty” Caslin, he was preceded in death by both parents, and by his sister, Catherine Mary Catoir Benjamin. He is survived by his niece, Dionne Benjamin-Smith, husband Jolyon smith, and nephew, John Benjamin, and spouse, Archie Symonette, and many extended family.

In his youth he was very athletic --participating in Track and Field and holding the High Jump Record at Jesuit High School. He loved boating and other outdoor activities with his father and at age of 16 received the rank of Eagle Scouts from the Boy Scouts. Catoir attended Fordham University School of Business, graduating in 1953. While there, he worked at the campus radio station and as a Page for NBC-TV in New York for The Tonight Show (Steve Allen), Show of Shows (Sid Ceasar), and the Milton Berle Show. He later invited them to be guests on his own TV show.

During the Korean War, Catoir served two years in the U.S. Army as an MP, and later served as an Assistant to the Chaplain, Major George Phillips, where his vocation was realized. “I loved being close to the Altar and soon began thinking seriously about becoming a priest. By 1955 I knew I wanted to be a priest for the rest of my life. Long after I was ordained, my Aunt Letitia told me that my grandmother, Anna Horan, had prayed all her life for one of her children to be born on Sept. 8 (Mary’s Birthday) and to become a priest,” Fr. Catoir. (From his Golden Jubilee Book, 2010)

He entered Immaculate Conception Seminary in Darlington, N.J., at age 25, studying for the Diocese of Paterson, New Jersey. During this second year of seminary, his beloved Mother passed away after a seven year illness, but Catoir persevered in his studies and the spiritual direction of Fr. James McCoy. Fr. Catoir was Ordained by Bishop McNulty on May 28, 1960. Catoir was then sent to Catholic University of America in Washington, where he earned his Doctorate in Canon Law in 1964. He was later awarded doctorates from four universities.

Fr. Catoir served his diocese in several capacities – Director of the Marriage Tribunal, President of the Interracial Council, and later as pastor of Our Lady of Victories Church in Paterson. He was a great advocate for social justice and drove a group of fellow priests to Selma, Alabama – marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in support of voting rights.

He led the Paterson Diocesan Synod in 1970 under Bishop Lawrence Casey and, then served as Judicial Vicar, Director of Communications, and Director of the Clergy. He became nationally known for his work in marriage legislation and church personnel administration. As President of the National Association of Church Personnel Administration, he was an advocate of pastors utilizing separate Business Managers to handle the daily business role, allowing pastor more dedicated time for the spiritual needs of the people.

In 1973, Fr. Catoir took a trip with his father to Russia, where he secretly offered Mass on the lawn next to the Kremlin Wall – offering it for world peace.

The Christophers invited Fr. Catoir in 1978 to serve as Executive Director and Chairman of the Board (1978-1995), a New York-based organization that uses print and broadcast media to further the Judeo-Christian concept of service to God and humanity. In that capacity, he hosted the nationally syndicated television series “Christopher Close-Up,” for more than 17 years following Fr. James Keller’s initiative to “light one candle in the darkness.” The weekly program was seen on 60 commercial stations and 400 cable systems worldwide. He interviewed countless celebrities and religious leaders – from James Cagney, Tony Bennett, Fred Rogers and Bob Newhart to Cardinal John O’Connor and Fr. Henri Nouwen.

“Mother Teresa asked me to give a nine-day retreat for her novices (Sisters of Charity in New York). She said to me, “Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls..a joyful heart is the inevitable result of heart burning with love,” Fr. John Catoir. (Golden Jubilee Book)

In 1995, he left The Christophers when a health diagnosis required him to keep a slower pace. He became Director of Communications for the Diocese of Paterson and was later asked to become Executive Director of Eva’s Village in 1997– New Jersey’s largest comprehensive poverty programs and one of the largest emergency shelters in the nation. They specialized in drug and alcohol rehabilitation as well as other programs. He was impressed by the work of Abraham Low, designing self-help programs for people suffering from mental illness and addiction.

Yearning to work as a “Messenger of Joy” he founded St. Jude’s Media Ministry in 1995 which began as a small radio ministry producing :30 second radio “spots” which aired late at night. Longtime friend, Josephine Isenbergh, helped purchase airtime on stations all over the country. Many spots are still aired to this day. “Catoir received hundreds of letters from people in prison or hospitals, truckers, and many who were in crisis during those dark hours. These messages provided hope,” Martin said.

In 2010, the Ministry expanded to include the MessengerofJoy.com website and daily blog was created with the help of Marc de Vinck, whose family knew Fr. Catoir as an “Uncle” spending Sundays, holidays and vacations at the home of his parents, Catherine and Jose de Vinck.

In 2012, Fr. Catoir invited Patricia Martin, Martin Media in Richardson, to produce a video documentary on his message and life story. “During four days of intense videotaping at Avila Retreat Center in New Jersey, we captured hours of his testimony and vision,” Martin said. “the entire film crew—many non-Catholic--were enthralled by this dynamic and charismatic priest and his simple way of explaining complicated Church teachings.”

After the completion of the documentary, Martin worked with Fr. Catoir to continue expanding the Ministry and in 2012 they designed a new website --www.johncatoir.com to act as a library of his inspirational content. Martin encouraged Fr. Catoir to try utilizing Social Media and to give Twitter a try.

“In only one year he had tweeted 17,000 messages to followers!” Martin said. “We then added Facebook and began utilizing small video clips, his audio spots, articles and Prayer Marathons to spread his messages of joy. The results were amazing. So very many lives were touched and changed. He then added a Fr. John Catoir YouTube Channel to reach an even broader audience worldwide.”

“We are living in difficult times. Mental health, positive thinking and faith are more critical than ever,” Fr. Catoir said in an interview in 2020, the year he celebrated 60 years as a priest. “To seek quiet time with joy-centered content is one way of overcoming our daily stresses. I would invite everyone to become messengers of joy!”

“His legacy is really that message of joy,” Martin said. “Fr. Catoir, in his 2012 documentary mentioned to me that he had a heart condition, knee replacements, had fought cancer, and had all the aches and pains of aging – yet he was still joyful knowing that God loved him and he knew God still had a job for him to do,” Martin said. “He passed away peacefully at age 90 after the recitation of the Holy Rosary at his bedside surrounded by loved ones —a life well spent, a job well-done.”

(NOTE: Please visit his website www.johncatoir.com for additional information and an entire library of uplifting messages available in all forms of media. Or view over 130 videos on his YouTube Channel.)

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[Patricia Martin is President of Martin Media in Richardson, Texas, and Executive Director of St. Jude Media Ministry. Thanks to Ashley Olbrich, President, St. Jude Media Ministry; Catholic News Service, National Catholic Reporter, the Diocese of Paterson, The Beacon Newspaper, and the family of Fr. John Catoir for assistance in writing this article. daisy8tx@yahoo.com]