

Retired priests celebrate residence hall's 50 years

Senior clergymen live, work, socialize in Regina Cleri

By Zachary T. Sampson
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The last stop for many of Greater Boston's priests is a wood-paneled rest home in the West End, where white-haired men gather and talk as fervently about baseball as they do about Bibles.

The Regina Cleri residence, celebrating its 50th year this week, provides health care and support for senior priests of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. The residents say Mass every day, retell stories both sacred and personal, and congregate each Thursday for movie night.

"They take us as we are, and they let us live," said the Rev. Leo Lynch, 83. "And live we do."

It is a brotherhood of 56 men who have traded the rectory for what is essentially a private assisted-living facility supported by the archdiocese. On Thursday, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley joined Mayor Martin J. Walsh and the senior priests to celebrate the anniversary of the residence.

Around the dining table and the television, the clergy have made formality all but sacrilegious. Jokes fly liberally around the facility, and rolling peals of laughter collide in every room.

"You can't be thin-skinned here," said Lynch, who has spent 58 years as a priest.

In a conference room with Monsi-

PRIESTS, Page B4



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The Reverends Leo Lynch (left) and Mark Sheehan spoke in the chapel at Regina Cleri, an assisted-living facility for retired priests.

Retired Catholic priests mark

►PRIESTS

Continued from Page B1

gnor Paul J. McManus, who turns 98 years old Friday (he has been a priest for 72), Lynch hardly lasted more than two minutes without a one-liner.

"I saw my first [Red Sox] game in 1924; how many years ago was that?" said McManus, an avid fan who described this year's team as "mezzo mezzo."

"I was going to say 1912," Lynch hooted, his eyes alight.

It's all part of a joie de vivre that the priests say is built equally on wit and compassion.

Even McManus, who has been ordained longer than any other priest in the archdiocese, gets considerable ribbing. Each morning, the Rev. Henry Cunney, 80, with 55 years in the priesthood, will tease the monsignor: "Are you busy today?"

It's a jab laden with irony, for as relaxing as the days may appear at Regina Cleri, the priests say their lives remain full. Some still volunteer at parishes around the metro area, and their activities calendar for June is full of happy "half-

hours" and luncheons. Priests will take a daytime cruise this month around Boston Harbor, visit Kelly's Roast Beef in Revere, and mingle at an ice cream social outside the residence.

"Loneliness is not completely removed, but it fills up a great void," Lynch said.

The home provides a range of health services and is just across the street from Massachusetts General Hospital, but Stephen J. Gust, executive director of Regina Cleri, said the biggest benefit is companionship for priests who might otherwise lack a support group after leaving their parishes.

"They don't have wives, they don't have children, so this becomes their family," Gust said.

"My family, everybody's gone — I have nieces in New York — so if I was alone, I'd be alone," Cunney said.

The archdiocese pays about \$2.5 million each year to keep the home open, said Joseph D'Arrigo, executive director of the Clergy Health and Retirement Trust.

It's a considerable commitment when the Catholic Church is closing and combining parishes across the state, but the archdiocese considers it a priority.

"These are men that have given literally centuries of service in our parishes to our people," O'Malley said in an interview at the celebration. "So the Catholic community is very happy to be able to take care of them in their retirement and make sure that they have the companionship and the support that they need."

The men at Regina Cleri said they feel enormous gratitude toward the many donors who support their home through collections and fundraisers.

It is, they said, a perfect place to spend their last days.

Everyone agrees that the food, cooked by three chefs, is fantastic, especially the fish, which is served on Tuesdays and Fridays because Cardinal Richard Cushing wanted to support local fishermen after he opened the home in 1964.

West End residence hall's 50 years



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

Some 56 priests enjoy the camaraderie of Regina Cleri, where they religiously track the Red Sox and watch movies.

Most of the priests worked when parishes still had personal cooks.

"In the rectory today, you've got to either fend for yourself or find Dunkin' Donuts," Cunney said.

The movies are OK, but they can get a bit repetitive.

"Sometimes it's got to be a little more than 007," said the

Rev. Vincent Daily, 85.

"We've already got the plot down," Cunney added.

(Ask them how many times they've seen "The Sound of Music" and prepare for guffaws.)

But the friendships are unbeatable. Many of the priests have known each other for decades, and several were ordained in the same class in

1959, Daily said.

And there's always the Red Sox, whose games the priests follow religiously.

"Want to know any batting averages?" Cunney asked. "I'm up to date."

Behind it all lies a shared respect for their church. Regina Cleri has a small chapel, where the priests don white robes each morning for 8:30 Mass. They take turns saying the Mass in a room filled with accomplished clergymen.

"The first couple of times, you're kind of gun-shy," Cunney said. "Then you say, 'I'm as good as they are.'"

Though the priests come from different backgrounds and might not always see eye-to-eye, they "struggle shoulder-to-shoulder," said the Rev. Joe Fagan, 73.

"This is where we come to walk each other home," he said.

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