

FOOTPRINTS
LEO SERAMUR
IN HIS

FR. LEO SERAMUR:
A MIGRANT MISSIONARY

Comfortable in just about any setting, but always on the move, Fr. Leo Seramur is an Indiana native who has enjoyed a steady stream of travels during his 59 years as a priest for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

Fr. Seramur helped establish a Catholic high school for boys in Memphis, taught Latin, English and Religion at Saint Francis Minor Seminary in Milwaukee, served as one of the first papal volunteers in South America, worked as pastor at two parishes in the diocese, and assisted the bishop in Gallup, N.M.

But the list doesn't stop there. While Fr. Seramur officially retired in 1989, he still continues to minister wherever there is a need. Even at the age of 80 he was willing to help at the Archdiocese's sister parish in the Dominican Republic.

Known by friends and colleagues as adaptive, engaged and ready to serve, Fr. Seramur is a self-proclaimed "vagabond." Yet wherever he ministers, his goal is always the same, "I try to do the best I can," Fr. Seramur, now 85, says.

"He's just a fine man, eager to do anything," says Sr. Fran Cunningham, director of the Office for World Mission. "His whole sense of Mission sets him apart. He has a sense of openness to people of other cultures," she says.

While he trusts that the Holy Spirit guided him to his vocation, Fr. Seramur has fond memories of an energetic assistant pastor at his childhood parish in Anderson, Indiana. That priest may have never known the impact he had on Fr. Seramur's future vocation, in fact Fr. Seramur's own parents were completely surprised by his plans.

After graduating from high school, Fr. Seramur made the unexpected announcement to his mother: he was entering the seminary.

Travels began early in Fr. Seramur's priesthood. Directly after his 1945 ordina-

tion in Milwaukee, Fr. Seramur says Archbishop Moses Kiley approached him and asked, "How would you like to go south for the winter?"

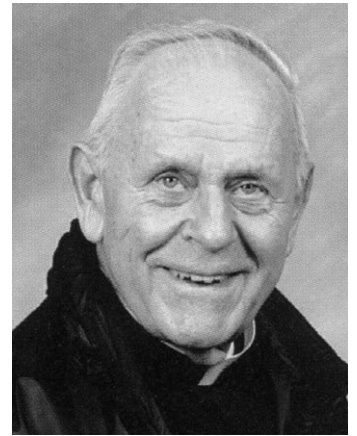
Fr. Seramur accepted and was loaned out to the Archdiocese of Nashville for three years to help convert a co-ed high school in Memphis into the Catholic High School for Boys. He taught English, Latin and Social Studies to the boys who were at first resentful about losing girls in the classroom, but later appreciative of the all-male atmosphere.

Fr. Seramur made a lasting impression on the young men he helped form for the priesthood.

Returning to Milwaukee with teaching experience, and also having completed graduate work in English at Marquette University, Fr. Seramur spent the next 17 years as a professor of English, Latin, Speech and Religion at Saint Francis Minor Seminary, and later at DeSales Prep.

Fr. Seramur made a lasting impression on the young men he helped form for the priesthood. Former student Fr. Joseph Hornacek, now vicar for clergy, says he is a "compassionate, pastoral, spiritual man who lives an example of simplicity" and exhibits a "heroic dedication to the priesthood."

Fr. Gerald Hauser, a friend of Fr. Seramur's for nearly 70 years, first met him at Saint Francis Seminary. At the seminary Fr. Seramur was class president, a talented basketball player, and "involved in just about everything."



The friends' common love for travel brought them to Cuba in 1949 where Fr. Seramur and Fr. Hauser happened to meet Ernest Hemingway at a local restaurant. The author, who was there writing *Old Man and the Sea*, pulled out a \$5 bill and signed it for the young priests. Soon after, the friends spent it. While Fr. Hauser regrets having given up the souvenir, he explains that five dollars was a considerable gift back then, especially when living on \$40 a month.

"Fr. Seramur's interests kept propelling him to different things; he liked testing everything," Fr. Hauser says.

One of his interests was piqued following the Vatican II Council when Pope John XXIII made a plea on behalf of South American bishops for missionary help. Fr. Seramur mentioned to Archbishop William Cousins that he would be willing to serve there, and about five years later the bishop granted his request.

The bishop of Asunción in Paraguay contacted the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and requested help with a struggling parish just outside of the Latin American capital. Fr. Seramur left the States in 1965, stopping first in Bolivia for a crash course in Spanish before arriving at San Pedro y San Pablo, the Archdiocese's first mission parish in Latin America.

Over 5,000 miles from Milwaukee, Fr. Seramur seemed to have traveled back in time. The parish was a small chapel that could hold about 150 people. There were no pews or chairs, no windows, no lighting, and no flooring. The people lived in tents and shacks and no one had running water.

"The people were lovely," says Fr. Seramur who recalls their simple life and understanding nature. After working as a missionary for two years, Fr.

Seramur made arrangements to fly back to Milwaukee for his parents' golden jubilee. Upon his return, Archbishop Cousins had another assignment for Fr. Seramur, as pastor in North Fond du Lac. Consequently his service in Paraguay came to an end.

Fr. Ken Derfus took over for Fr. Seramur in Paraguay, fostering a community where "we assisted them in doing what they did." Fr. Derfus says their goal was to empower the Paraguayans to take care of themselves. They improved their schools and clinics and hired local teachers and dentists.

Then in 1974, Bishop Jerome Hastrich, an alumnus of Saint Francis Seminary, and then-bishop of the Archdiocese of Gallup, N.M., requested help from Fr. Seramur. He was released by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to do mission work in and around Gallup. This was Fr. Seramur's last assignment as an active priest, serving as Bishop Hastrich's unofficial secretary and assisting at several parishes in the area.

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– Sr. Fran Cunningham

Fr. Seramur retired in 1989 and eventually returned to Milwaukee to live at Meyer Hall, a facility for retired priests next to Saint Francis Seminary. Yet Fr. Seramur remains relentless in his ministry.

Five years ago Archbishop Rembert Weakland paid Fr. Seramur a visit at Meyer Hall. According to Fr. Seramur,

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– Fr. Gerald Hauser

the archbishop inquired whether he would like to "brush up on his Spanish." Then 80 years old, Fr. Seramur said he was willing to go. In the winter of 1999 he volunteered to temporarily substitute for Fr. Ken Clapp at La Sagrada Familia in the Dominican Republic.

Even though the plan was for Fr. Seramur to stay longer, he served for about one month at the mission in the town of Sabana Yegua. Still, Fr. Seramur left his mark. Making a special effort to have the parishioners feel welcome, he was the driving force behind painting the red, blue and white Dominican flag on the doors of the parish center.

Today Fr. Seramur continues to help out wherever there is a need. On a regular basis he drives to St. Anthony's on 9th and Mitchell Streets to celebrate noon Mass at the south side parish serving Hispanic and Southeast Asian communities.

For Fr. Seramur working as a missionary has been an "enriching" experience. If given the opportunity to return to Paraguay today, he "might make a visit there," he says.

So many men have dedicated their lives in service to God and His people in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee that we cannot adequately recognize all their good works. Still, we want to share with you stories of some men whose contribution, sacrifice, vision and commitment may otherwise go unnoticed or underappreciated. Through this series, *IN HIS FOOTSTEPS*, we profile some of those clergy who have enriched us as Catholics and have helped shape our faith community and our world. *IN HIS FOOTSTEPS* installments also are available at www.archmil.org. Your feedback is welcome. Send your comments to Kathleen Hohl at hohlk@archmil.org or 414-769-3453.