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## FR. LESLIE A. DARNIEDER: HE GAVE HIS LIFE TO CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Fr. Les Darnieder, former assistant superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, started his first teaching job just a week after being ordained in October 1944 and stayed immersed in Catholic education until his death in 1995.

“He was a teacher at heart,” recalls his brother, Fr. Don Darnieder. “He lived and talked education all the time, even when we would get together for dinner at our sister’s home.”

Fr. Darnieder’s first teaching job was at Immaculate Conception Parish High School in Burlington, where he also served as associate pastor from 1944-56. Archbishop Albert Meyer then sent him to Marquette University for a Master’s Degree in Education. A year later, in 1957, he became the first principal of the new St. Joseph High School in Kenosha.

He spent the next 12 years at St. Joseph’s and developed a lifelong affinity for Catholic education, high schools in particular. He went on to earn his doctoral degree in education at Marquette University and taught there part-time as well.

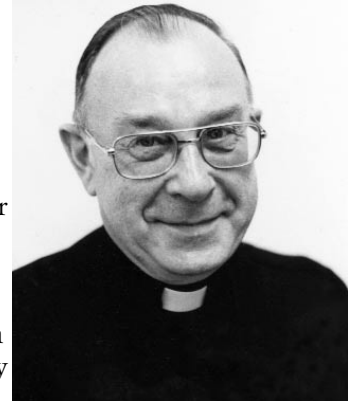
Fr. Darnieder was named assistant superintendent of schools for the archdiocese in 1969. While a member of the central office staff, he made his mark on Catholic schools throughout southeastern Wisconsin.

“Fr. Darnieder came up through the ranks and had a commitment to Catholic education,” says Fr. Steven Avella, associate professor of history at Marquette University. “He was well liked and amiable and he did a remarkable job. He was a ‘go-to’ guy. He knew the diocese very well – better than most.”

Keith Klestinski, a teacher at Marquette University High School and former admissions director there, valued Fr. Darnieder’s work of collecting and analyzing data about schools and students.

“Each year, Fr. Darnieder would prepare an enrollment report which we were very excited to

receive,” Klestinski remembers. “He would really put a lot of work into it. The final report was about 100 pages long and gave us comprehensive information so we could plan our recruitment strategies. He would break it down to how many children were in each grade in each elementary school in this county. He had county data and archdiocesan data – it was just outstanding. He was such a talent in terms of data and research and getting us the things we needed.”



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*– Fr. Steven Avella*

Fr. Darnieder’s work ethic was legendary as well. His brother recalls that Fr. Darnieder was the first one at work every day, arriving at the Cousins Center by 7 a.m., even on Saturdays.

“I had a lot of admiration for him, and for his will,” said Scott Weyda, associate director of Catholic Education and a colleague of Fr. Darnieder for many years. “He was colorful and very enjoyable to work with. He certainly had a good sense of the history of our Catholic schools, especially the parts of the diocese where he served, such as Racine, Kenosha, and Burlington.”

Weyda calls Fr. Darnieder’s expertise with statistics a “gift.” He remembers Fr. Darnieder using baptismal data to project enrollment changes, estimates that were used internally and by people and schools throughout the archdiocese.

“His sense of history was always important because he could recall certain precedents and specific issues to apply to the current situation,” Weyda explains.

During his tenure with the archdiocese, Fr. Darnieder belonged to several local, statewide and national education groups. He made friends all across the country through his involvement with the national Chief Administrators of Catholic Education (CACE) organization.

He was also active in the development of the school choice program in its early stages. Weyda says that Fr. Darnieder was committed to addressing the difficulty that some families had in affording Catholic education for their children.

In 2003, one of the many associations that enjoyed Fr. Darnieder’s longtime participation named an award in his honor. The Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools (WCRIS) established the Rev. Leslie A. Darnieder Award of Merit, which is given for service to WCRIS. The inaugural award went to Jim Silver, superintendent of Catholic Schools for the

Diocese of Madison, who worked with Fr. Darnieder for many years.

“He knew everything there was to know about Catholic education in the state of Wisconsin,” Silver explains. “He had a great memory and could tell you the reason why things were a certain way. He was a man of good humor, and he was easy to work with. He was a good guy and always a good friend.”

Silver says that Fr. Darnieder also was instrumental in the formation of the Wisconsin Association of Nonpublic Schools Accrediting Association (now known as the Wisconsin Religious and Independent Schools Accreditation) and helped create the group’s initial standards.

Weyda says Fr. Darnieder was always an advocate for Catholic education, especially at the high school level. “He always supported folks when they needed to be supported, especially a principal with a situation or a problem. At the same time, he wasn’t at all reticent about telling a principal when he or she messed up or should have done something differently.”

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Weyda also remembers Fr. Darnieder continuing to enjoy golf, despite his increasing health problems – including

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– David Prothero

hip surgery. “He still played golf after that. He had one club with a little ratchet on it with a wrench, and he could adjust it for whatever was called for, so he didn’t need a bag of clubs, just this one club.”

Even after his official retirement in 1992, Fr. Darnieder continued working for the archdiocese and supporting Catholic schools with his efforts. For the archdiocese’s 150th anniversary, Fr. Avella says that a “retired” Fr. Darnieder compiled an “amazing amount of materials” for schools to use. “He helped translate the celebration into activities that could be used at the grade school and high school levels,” Fr. Avella says.

David Prothero, director of Catholic Education for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, says Fr. Darnieder was retired on paper, but not in practice. “After his official retirement, Fr. Les stayed right in his office. He continued to do work, mostly in the areas of statistics and trouble shooting. Fr. Les was incredibly appreciated.”

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](http://www.archmil.org). Your feedback is welcome. Send your comments to Kathleen Hohl at [hohlk@archmil.org](mailto:hohlk@archmil.org) or 414-769-3453.