

# A Special Mission

AFTER MORE THAN A HALF CENTURY OF SERVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF CINCINNATI, FR. PAUL HUBER, SJ, TAKES HIS MINISTRY TO THE HILLS OF MICHIGAN

by George Kearney

*Some people—most of them young, healthy, and vibrant—believe that homes for the aged are little more than warehouses for people waiting to die. These young people are often turned off by the smell of “old folks homes” and the furniture that always seems to have that same plasticky look and feel. The young—accustomed to the perpetual motion of their lives—are scared by the seemingly sedentary lives of the millions of elderly people currently living in retirement homes.*

*Fr. Paul Huber, SJ, who was recently missioned to Colombiere Center, the Province’s retirement home in Clarkston, MI, is proof that these characterizations are unfair. Neither age nor a retirement home can stop him from serving.*

*Fr. Huber, like all the Jesuits at Colombiere, has a special mission.*

LIFE AT Colombiere for Fr. Huber is certainly a big change from his previous job serving as an associate pastor at St. Xavier Church in Cincinnati. But, even with the move north from Cincinnati, Fr. Huber’s life’s work hasn’t changed a bit.

A native of Bellevue, KY, Fr. Huber entered the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus in August, 1931, after graduating from St. Xavier High School and studying for a year at Xavier University. He completed the regular course of studies and was ordained for priestly ministry in 1945. From 1946 to 1951, he taught at University of Detroit High School.

In 1951 he was assigned to St. Francis Xavier Church in Cincinnati, OH. And he remained there until January of this year, when he was assigned to Colombiere. St. Xavier is the oldest Catholic church in Cincinnati and for the last ten years Fr. Huber has been one of the oldest priests serving in the archdiocese of Cincinnati. But the desire to serve that motivated Fr. Huber to enter the Jesuits as a young man did not



dim with age. A soft-spoken and slightly built man, Fr. Paul had this to say about his many years of work at St. Francis Xavier: “In general, my work was directed at helping people be better Catholics, bringing Holy Communion to the sick, and helping



Jesuits from the Province gathered in Cincinnati to celebrate the conclusion of Fr. Huber’s career at St. Francis Xavier.



Fr. Huber leaves the altar at St. Xavier Church after celebrating his last Mass. In the 53 years he spent at the Cincinnati parish, he celebrated more than 13,000 masses.

Justice Center and celebrating Mass for the inmates there. He regularly took Communion to neighborhood shut-ins. When the parish set up a group for young adults to discuss their fears in the wake of the September 11 attacks, Fr. Huber joined. He was actively involved in Cincinnati's right-to-life movement and was director of the archdiocesan Apostleship for Prayer.

"The great thing about life," Fr. Huber told the *Cincinnati Post* late in 2004, "is that it makes it possible for you to do a lot of good for a lot of people." Roughly a month later, on January 31, 2005, he said his last Sunday Mass at the Cincinnati church. He celebrated the liturgy as he always did: humbly and quietly. Then he made his way down the aisle and into the sacristy where he hung up his alb for the last time.

Days later he left the bustling streets surrounding St. Xavier in downtown Cincinnati for Colombiere Center and the snow-covered rolling hills in Clarkston, MI. Colombiere was originally built as a college for Jesuit scholastics. When the number of Jesuits in the Society dropped considerably in the late 60s and early 70s, it became clear there weren't enough men in formation to justify keeping Colombiere's doors open. In 1981, five retired Jesuits moved into

Colombiere. A decade later, Jesuit friends and benefactors of the Chicago and Detroit Jesuit Provinces generously donated \$25 million to the "Promises Kept" Capital Campaign. The funds were used to expand and upgrade the entire facility into a high-quality healthcare center for aged Jesuits.

**F**or Fr. Huber, life at Colombiere is much slower. Gone are the city buses and trucks that used to rumble past the front doors of St. Xavier Church. Gone, too, are the pews packed with worshippers. They've been replaced by

a handful of frail, white-haired Jesuits who make their way down to the chapel each day to participate in the celebration of the liturgy. But, Fr. Huber says, those Jesuits are one of the best things about Colombiere.

"Coming to Colombiere isn't like going to a rest home where there's a lot of people foreign to you, a lot of people you've never met," Fr. Huber says. "It's just a new community. And just as in almost any Jesuit community, there are people you've known over the years. For example, one of the oldest men here, Stephen Meder, he and I were together in the novitiate. We're old friends. And it's nice to see friends. It's a change, but it's nice to know you're still in a Jesuit community. This is just a new assignment."

An assignment?

It's true. Jesuits are assigned to Colombiere. They don't "retire" to Colombiere. They continue to do whatever they can to support the Society of Jesus. In fact, every Jesuit at Colombiere is assigned the special mission of praying for the Church, the Society of Jesus, and other needs. While Fr. Huber no longer stands behind the altar at St. Xavier and no longer visits prisons and parishes, there's no doubt he's doing as much praying now as he was then.

"The idea is, no matter where you are and what you do, you can pray for other people," Fr. Huber says from his small bedroom at Colombiere. "When you come up here, you don't have as much to do as when you were back in a ministry full-time, so you can be more thoughtful about praying for other people and writing them a letter to let them know we're praying for them. I could do that at home, too, in Cincinnati. But my health doesn't permit me to be there anymore. So this is the thing I keep doing. I can concentrate on it here. It has become the focus of my work."

The location may be different, but the work remains the same. Serving others. Caring for others. Helping them "be better Catholics." Helping them find God in all things. Doing good. It is, indeed, a special mission. ■

people celebrate their religion."

Over the course of his 53-year career at St. Xavier he said roughly 13,000 Masses and listened to thousands more confessions. He helped build the parish's prison ministry, often visiting the Hamilton County



Fr. Huber (right) is assigned to the Colombiere Jesuit Community where he's pictured with Stephen Meder, SJ (center) and Joseph Schell, SJ. Fr. Huber and Fr. Meder were novices together in the 1930s.