

Father Camillus Cooney

Father Camillus Cooney died on January 6, 2010. He was born Raymond Cooney on June 10, 1931, in Tyler, Texas. He was educated in his hometown at Douglas Elementary and Roberts Junior High, and he graduated from Tyler High School in 1948. As a youngster he became familiar with the abbey when attending summer camp at Subiaco.

Following the completion of one year's study at Tyler Junior College in 1949, he entered the monastery, professing his vows as a monk on September 14, 1952, receiving the name Camillus. He was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Albert L. Fletcher at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock on May 26, 1956.

After ordination Father Camillus was on the faculty and administration of Subiaco Academy. He also studied at St. Louis University and the University of Notre Dame where he earned an M.A. in English in 1959.

From 1960-63 he was on the faculty of Laneri High School in Fort Worth, Texas, and during the latter year assisted with classes at Our Lady of Victory Academy in the same city. Making full use of his tenure in Fort Worth, Father Camillus did post-graduate studies in English at Texas Christian University .

A Third World apostolate awaited Father Camillus during the summer of 1963 when he was selected by Abbot Michael as one of the six monk-missioners to be assigned 7,000 miles from Subiaco on the continent of Africa. Under primitive conditions the small band of pioneer Benedictines began the building of Subiaco Abbey's first foreign daughter-house to be known as St. Mukasa Monastery, located near the mouth of the Niger River in Eleme, Nigeria, West Africa. As part of their apostolate, the founding monks accepted responsibility for Ascension High School where Father Camillus served as principal and faculty member.

When the missionaries first arrived in Nigeria the country was considered the model of the newly independent nations of Africa. However, as the months and years passed, great unrest occurred among the tribes, especially between the Hausa and Ibos. By mid-1967, with anarchy and bloodshed rampant, Eastern Nigeria declared itself the independent Republic of Biafra. With this act of secession from the union of Nigeria, federal forces marched into Biafra turning the conflict into a full-fledged civil war. The Ibos faced complete annihilation at the hands of the federal troops.

Because St. Mukasa Monastery was located in the newly seceded territory of Biafra, its future was in doubt. Two of the monks had to return to Subiaco because of their health, and two more were on vacation at Subiaco.

This left Father Camillus and one other monk in charge of the facilities. Soon all schools were closed in the country including Ascension High School. Father Camillus and his companion-priest remained at the monastery, taking care of the parish missions, the monastery and school buildings. As the war escalated, the natives in the missions fled to the jungle for safety. Nigerian forces bombed heavily in the area and Biafran troops were eager to take complete control of the school and monastic buildings for their wartime needs.



With the deprivation of monastic life, as well as the death of all its apostolates, the two missionaries made plans to leave their beleaguered monastery. They received a last-minute notice in the middle of the night of available passage out of the country on an old American cargo plane. An Irish missionary friend immediately drove the two monks post-haste under cover of darkness through the tight security roadblocks to the blacked-out airfield of Port Harcourt on Holy Thursday, April 11, 1968.

Without the benefit of lighted runways at the airport, the mercenary cargo plane took off, heading southwest across the Atlantic. The Holy Week odyssey proved redemptive for the two missionaries who arrived safely at Subiaco Abbey on Easter Sunday afternoon.

Following his missionary years, Father Camillus launched into a 22-year commitment in the field of education at Subiaco Academy. He served as an assistant dean of men for four years in addition to full-time teaching. Teaching grammar, writing, prose and poetry, especially the poems of e. e. cummings, he chaired the academy English department for several years. He also spent a decade as faculty sponsor of the academy yearbook PAX.

In the academy he established a Christophers group ("Christoforce") among the students for doing charitable works for needy persons in the area. In 1984 he was appointed almoner of Subiaco Abbey, initiating and carrying out monastic works of charity to those in need.

In 1990 he took a year's sabbatical and upon his return in 1991 he was appointed associate pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Muenster, Texas. Returning to the abbey in 1993 he helped out as needed with short parish assignments, working with the development office, and lending a helping hand where assistance was needed.

He was a Good Samaritan, driving confreres for doctors' appointments as well as empathizing with the needs of the sick and the terminally ill.

In his latter years he spent time in a little hermitage east of the monastery compound where he enjoyed the peace and quiet of the countryside, communing with the natural beauty of God's creation.

Because of declining health, Father Camillus moved into the Abbey Health Center in August 2008, where he was residing at the time of his death. Strengthened by the sacraments and the prayers of his confreres, Father Camillus died on the afternoon of Wednesday, January 6, 2010, at Johnson Regional Medical Center in Clarksville, Arkansas.

At the time of his death, Father Camillus was 78 years old. He had been a professed monk for 57 years and a priest for 53 years. He is buried in our cemetery.