



April 27, 2006

Msgr. Leo Ringwald served with simplicity of faith, trust and love

By Dr. Joan Zurhellen

Diocesan Archivist

As the Diocese of Memphis continues to celebrate its 35th anniversary, The West Tennessee Catholic looks at Msgr. Leo Ringwald, first Chancellor of the diocese.

A few days after his ordination and installation, Bishop Carroll T. Dozier called a meeting of priests of the new Diocese of Memphis. One of the items discussed was the need for a Chancellor. He asked the priests for suggestions concerning who might make a good Chancellor. Father Milton Guthrie, who had served as Associate under Msgr. Leo Ringwald and who admired his intellect and wide knowledge, submitted Ringwald's name. A few other names were also suggested, and the Bishop chose to ask the priests to vote on their choice.

A few days later, Msgr. Ringwald who had been retired for about 18 months was called to the Chancery and asked to assume the role of Chancellor and to share the role of Vicar General with Msgr. Merlin Kearny who had been the Vicar General for west Tennessee when this part of the state was still in the Diocese of Nashville and had been renamed to that position by Bishop Dozier. Msgr. Ringwald agreed to come out of retirement and accepted the positions with the understanding that he could retire at his own discretion. He served as the Diocese of Memphis' first Chancellor for six years.

Msgr. Ringwald had been a hardworking priest who had served in many different posts for 38 years of active ministry before he retired for the first time in 1969. A Madison, Indiana native he was born on January 20, 1904, attended public schools in Madison and entered Xavier University in Cincinnati to study medicine. A change of plans in 1925 sent him to St. Gregory Seminary in Cincinnati where he majored in philosophy. After graduation from St. Gregory, in 1927, he attended St. Mary Seminary in Baltimore obtaining degrees in Theology and Canon Law.

He was ordained at the Cathedral in Nashville on June 14, 1931 by Bishop Alphonse J. Smith. Ringwald's first assignment was as associate pastor at St. Brigid and Little Flower when Father James Whitfield was pastor of those parishes.

In 1933, he returned to Nashville as a teacher of physical sciences and later as librarian at Father Ryan High School. He was also Chaplain at St. Cecilia Academy. During his years at Father Ryan, he helped to co-found the Mid-South Conference of the Catholic Library Association. While in Nashville he also worked in some of the Missions in the area near the city. In 1937 he was appointed Pastor in Murfreesboro having responsibilities for the Murfreesboro and Lebanon Missions and for Castle Heights Military Academy.

In 1939, he became pastor in Gallatin and served as Chaplain at St. Thomas Hospital. A little later he served as associate pastor at St. Mary, Nashville. After less than a year at St. Mary, he was appointed pastor of St. Joseph, Nashville, and then in 1943 was sent to Lawrenceburg as Pastor of Sacred Heart Church there. During his years in Lawrenceburg he also served as Synodal Judge, Parish Priest Consultor, Defender of the Marriage Bond for the Nashville Marriage Tribunal, and Diocesan Moderator for Catholic Rural Life.

In 1948 he returned to Memphis where he remained for the rest of his life. He served in the active priesthood for 21 years after his return to Memphis, first as pastor at Blessed Sacrament Church. In 1951 he was appointed pastor of the newly organized St. Michael Parish which he helped to establish and where he remained as pastor for 18 years. He was appointed domestic prelate, with the title of Monsignor by Pope John XXIII in 1959. Ten years later, in July, 1969, he

Ringwald, Leo H 1904 - 1994

retired. After retirement he lived in Memphis with a widowed sister and because of the shortage of priests in the Diocese, he often helped out in various parishes.

As the first diocesan Chancellor, Ringwald oversaw the implementation of steps and actions the Bishop wanted undertaken, and he served as intermediary between the Bishop and various groups within the diocese and in the community. Although his original intent had been to serve in the capacity of Chancellor for only two or three years, he actually continued to serve the diocese until 1977 when he retired for a second time.

Several years after that second retirement during the year in which the diocese was celebrating its tenth anniversary, he was asked by a reporter about his years as Chancellor and his feelings about the Diocese, Bishop Dozier's leadership, and the latter's policies. He indicated general admiration and respect for Bishop Dozier and his stands on many issues such as peace, conscientious objections, women's rights, and integration which disturbed some persons in the diocese. He noted that while he knew some actions would cause problems, he never counseled the Bishop to take other actions, that, indeed, the Bishop had never asked him about such issues, and that he largely agreed with what the Bishop had done. He identified the Day of Reconciliation as the diocese's finest moment in its early years and indicated that he had agreed with the Bishop's actions and policies at least 90 percent of the time. When asked what he might have done differently, he indicated that he thought greater effort to find priests for the mission areas of the diocese were needed and that he might have chosen to go a little slower on developing helping program when the debt inherited from Nashville was so great. Overall he thought that the diocese had made good progress under Bishop Dozier and that the diocese had a very bright future.

After retiring as Chancellor he continued for many years to be active in clerical affairs in the city, and he was fortunate to celebrate several important priestly anniversaries at St. Michael Church. His fiftieth anniversary as a priest was celebrated there on June 15, 1981, with two silver jubilarians, Father Joseph Fisher and Father William Davis concelebrating and Bishop Dozier serving as homilist. His good friend Father Fisher once aptly described Msgr. Ringwald saying "Msgr. Ringwald is a man who meets the complexities of today with the simplicity of faith, trust and love. He commands no one—yet leads everyone. He is poor in spirit—He trusts that his is the Kingdom of Heaven , as promised."

His sixtieth priestly anniversary was also celebrated at St. Michael Church with Bishop Buechlein presiding and Bishop Francis Shea, one time Memphian and ordinary of the Indiana Diocese in which Msgr. Ringwald's birthplace was located, as special guest. As part of the sixtieth anniversary celebrations, Bishop Buechlein presented Msgr. Ringwald with a framed Apostolic Blessing from Pope John Paul II.

Three years later on November 14, 1994, Msgr. Ringwald died. He was 90 years old. His funeral Mass, like so many of the other important occasions in his life was held at St. Michael's. This time Bishop J. Terry Steib, S.V.D. was the presider. Msgr. Ringwald had lived a long and eventful life in the service of his dioceses, his faith, his Church, and his God. His feelings about death and life were beautifully summed up in a reflection he had written some thirty years before his death:

"Long ago I made a resolution that I would willingly accept the kind of death that God would permit to befall me. I now renew that resolution when I have reached the age which is maximum for most priests, and again thank Our Lord for granting me a sharing of His Priesthood for the past 32 years. The priest has Our Lord for a spouse and death will mean a closer union with the Beloved. Death, therefore, for the priest is a welcome blessing, and whenever it may come to me, I shall thank God for this blessing, too."

Ringwald, Leo H 1904 - 1994

