

A LIFE IN HARMONY

Bro. Don Champagne's Journey of Music, Ministry and Mission

At 88, Bro. Don Champagne, SVD, has learned that you never really know where God will take you in life, but if you let the Holy Spirit work through you, the journey is sure to be a memorable one. Looking back, he acknowledges the challenges but treasures the friendships he forged and the deeply fulfilling ministries he embraced along the way.

EARLY LIFE

Growing up in Milwaukee, Bro. Don attended a Catholic elementary school where he was impressed by the dedication of the religious women who worked there. "It was their dedication that inspired me," he said.

In eighth grade, a Maryknoll priest visited the school and introduced him to missionary life. Around the same time, family friends spoke about their son, a brother novice with Divine Word Missionaries in Techny, Illinois. Intrigued, Don agreed to visit.

At the time, Techny was home to 450 people, including clerical novices, professed brothers, theologians, philosophers, and religious sisters.

"The brothers ran everything. They were carpenters, plumbers, electricians, painters, auto mechanics, tailors... They seemed to be so happy. They had a sense of humor about them. When I came back, I told my parents, I want to go there," Bro. Don recalls.

FORMATION & EDUCATION

In 1951, he enrolled at the high school seminary for brothers. Mornings were dedicated to academics, afternoons to apprenticeship training. Bro. Don was

assigned to the house office and quickly adapted to clerical duties. His efficiency led to a position in the Mission Office, where he worked for a decade managing tasks and handling mailings for fundraising efforts.

During this time, he continued a passion for music. Already proficient in piano, he advanced to the reed organ, the two-manual organ, and eventually the four-manual organ in Techny's main chapel. He professed vows as an SVD Brother in 1958.

In 1961, Bro. Don was assigned to the new high school seminary in Perrysburg, Ohio, where he managed the business office and served as the community's organist. Despite no formal bookkeeping training, he embraced the role. He later traveled to Rome for a tertianship, a period of reflection and discernment. Returning in 1970 at the age of 36, he enrolled at Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, to complete his undergraduate requirements.

Through a music connection at Clarke College, then an all-women's institution, he took additional courses. Often the only male student in class, the women became more than classmates — they became friends. Over the years, he sang at several of their weddings and remains in touch with them today.



MINISTRY WORK

In 1976, Bro. Don returned to Perrysburg, where he developed a four-year music program for seminarians while continuing as organist. He also served as formation director until the school closed.

He spent about five years at St. John's High School in Toledo, where he developed a male choral program. In 1983, he returned to Epworth to teach music and serve as Director of the Year Abroad program at Divine Word College. "That work built up my confidence as a musician," he said.

In 1991, Bro. Don was assigned to serve as Music Minister at Miramar, an SVD retreat center in Duxbury, Massachusetts. For 32 years, he planned music for Masses, as well as morning and evening prayer.

He was appointed and elected Director and Rector of the retreat center from 2005–2011 and re-elected Rector in 2017.

During his time at Miramar, he felt called to serve people living with HIV/AIDS. After learning about the Amaryllis Foundation, he volunteered at the Robins Nest, a supportive center, where he answered phones, performed clerical work, and offered companionship through a buddy program. "I just felt that God was calling me to this," he said.

He became close with a family whose three sons had hemophilia and contracted HIV through blood transfusions. By the time he learned their story, one had passed away. He bonded with another, but months later, he too died of AIDS. Their mother asked Bro. Don to sing at the funeral.

Years later, the third brother's wife requested the same support buddy his late brother had. Bro. Don visited him regularly for five years, including daily visits in his final days. After his passing, the family again turned to Bro. Don for music and support at the funeral.

Bro. Don later created a retreat program at Miramar for people living with HIV/AIDS, offering time and space to focus on their well-being. For his service, he received the Amaryllis Foundation's Angel of the Year distinction and the Archdiocese of Boston's Cheverus Award in 2015.

He also regularly visited local nursing homes, where he was known for bringing muffins and sharing cheerful conversations with residents.

HEALTHY LIFE

Though never an athlete, Bro. Don maintained an active lifestyle. He jogged six miles daily for decades until knee issues led him to switch to walking. Until recently, he walked five to six miles every morning at 2:30 a.m.

In January 2024, he moved back to Divine Word College. Despite a diagnosis of multiple myeloma 16 years ago, his health remains stable. While knee problems and Dupuytren's contracture limit his mobility and piano playing, his spirit is strong. He still sings, serves as a conversation partner for international students learning English, and sets an example for young men discerning religious life.

Reflecting on 67 years of religious vows, Bro. Don is grateful for the support of the Society of the Divine Word. He hopes young people continue to consider religious life, embracing its adventure and unpredictability.



"Be open, and let the Spirit work through you – but that's with any vocation," Bro. Don said. "You just don't know where God's going to take you or what He's going to put in front of you."