

Abbot Raphael De Salvo

June 23rd is the anniversary of the death of Abbot Raphael De Salvo, fifth abbot of our monastery. Louis James De Salvo was born October 7, 1919, to Tony L. and Josephine (Rossi) De Salvo, in Center Ridge, Arkansas. Mrs. De Salvo died in 1934 when Louis was in his final year of elementary education at Catholic Point School in Center Ridge. In the autumn of 1934, Louis came to Subiaco at age 14 to begin his secondary education. At this time, two older cousins of his, Angelo Paladino and Tony Rossi, were seminarians in the abbey clericate.

As a young widower, Tony L. De Salvo knew the importance of strong family bonds, and of raising his children in a loving household. He remarried, and through the years, the couple was blessed with many offspring. Mr. De Salvo and his wife Frances (Paladino) De Salvo retained a close-knit family, with Louis being second oldest of the 19 children.

Louis applied himself in high school, receiving the gold medal for Christian Doctrine in 1935 and 1936, the medal for Latin in 1937, and graduated from the academy in 1938.

Continuing his studies in our college and seminary, Louis De Salvo professed his vows as a member of our monastery on September 14, 1940, receiving the name Raphael. He was ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Albert L. Fletcher at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, Thursday, May 31, 1945.

Following his ordination, Father Raphael studied at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C., earning a doctorate in Sacred Theology in 1948 with the theses: "The Dogmatic Theology of the Intention of the Minister in the Confection of the Sacraments." Later, he studied at St. Louis University and DePaul University in Chicago.

In the autumn of 1948 he began teaching in the abbey's major seminary, and in 1950 he was appointed rector, a position he held until 1963. He also taught in our academy from 1948 to 1960, and served as novice master and formation director from 1960 to 1963.

It was Father Raphael De Salvo whom Abbot Michael Lensing appointed superior of Subiaco's first foreign missionaries. The decrees of Vatican Council II in the 1960s were taken to heart by Abbot Michael as he responded to the concerns of Pope John XXIII regarding the spiritual welfare of the Third World, especially the pontiff's plea that religious orders share their manpower with the less fortunate. As a result, Abbot Michael was in contact with Bishop Godfrey Okoye of the diocese of Port Harcourt, Nigeria, West Africa, assuring the bishop of Subiaco's desire to begin a Benedictine foundation under his authority.

Bishop Okoye assigned to the monks the care of Ascension High School near the village of El-eme, outside the city of Port Harcourt. These missionaries soon made plans for the construction of a separate building to be known as St. Mukasa Priory.

Unfortunately for Prior Raphael and the five monks under his care, the location of the priory proved to be in the wrong locale of this African nation. Eastern Nigeria seceded from the rest of the Federal Union on May 30, 1967. This new nation took the ancient and patriotic name of Biafra.



St. Mukasa Priory was now located in Biafra, and it was near the scene of bombing and other threats to the nearby Shell Oil refineries.

The Biafran government ordered the closing of all schools, releasing students and teachers for military and civil defense. In the village of Eleme, the school buildings were taken over by the military, resulting in a refugee camp. More and more troops arrived at the priory because it was on the main road from which the invasion of Port Harcourt was expected.

With the havoc of the war spreading, inhibiting all missionary work, the monks began to exit the country by whatever means were available. In the dark of night, Prior Raphael left by floating down a river in a small boat guided by native Ibos who led him to safety. After the war, the Nigerian government neither allowed Father Raphael nor any Subiaco monk to re-enter the country, thus bringing to a close Subiaco Abbey's mission endeavors in Nigeria.

Father Raphael was then commissioned administrator of St. Joseph Church in Paris, Arkansas, where he served until his appointment as Prior of Subiaco Abbey on August 20, 1968. When Abbot Michael Lensing resigned as Abbot due to failing health, Father Raphael was elected the fifth Abbot of Subiaco Abbey on October 30, 1974. On December 11, the Most Rev. Andrew J. McDonald of the diocese of Little Rock blessed his abbacy, and for the next 15 years he served the community as monastic superior.

During these years, Abbot Raphael endowed Subiaco Abbey with a "legacy of gentle graciousness." Shortly after his election, plans were finalized for the centennial observance of the founding of the abbey in 1878. Under his leadership, Subiaco was blessed with two time-honored monuments: "one in stone and one in words." Centenary Hall was built as a center for the performing arts, and the writing of an extensive history of Subiaco was commissioned by him. The book, A Place Called Subiaco by Father Hugh Assenmacher, clearly and delightfully portrays the spirit of Subiaco in Benedictine life, fidelity, and work.

With interests and concerns for the universal Church as well, Abbot Raphael encouraged and approved monks' participation in many diocesan programs such as Scripture study, continuing education, priests' senate, Cursillo, Marriage Encounter and similar activities. He himself served as retreat master locally and nationally.

Inspired by his own years as a foreign missionary, Abbot Raphael established a continued program of financial aid for Third World missions and seminarians. He also helped individual missionaries on several continents, and he worked untiringly toward the development of Santa Familia Monastery in Belize, Central America, which had been founded by the abbey in 1971 to replace the Nigerian mission.

He was also aware that charity begins at home, and was compassionate and hospitable towards the needs in Logan County. For two terms he served as a board member of the Paris Chamber of Commerce, and for 15 years he was on the Board of Directors of the Western Arkansas Planning and Development, an organization which arranges for loans to cities and towns to enhance the quality of life in each area.

Abbot Raphael's kindness was most evident here in the monastery itself as he administered to community members' needs on a one-to-one basis. Among his major concerns was care of the sick. In addition to the daily services of a nurse, the staff was increased to give full-time care to the individual needs of the sick and elderly.

As Supreme Counsellor of the Subiaco Alumni Association, he stressed the importance of Subiaco's ties with its former students. By setting up a stronger development program he moved toward establishing a firm financial basis for the abbey and its works. Under his leadership, much renovation was undertaken in the abbey/academy complex. He said that he maintained his equilibrium in his demanding roles by "striving to be faithful to the ordinary religious duties of a monk and priest, especially the Divine Office and daily Mass."

Abbot Raphael served as President of the Swiss-American Congregation of Benedictine Monasteries from 1978 to 1984. He always enjoyed travel, and during these years of service to monastics on several continents, he learned to appreciate the cultures he encountered. Good-naturedly, he could laugh at his own social blunders. In recounting his trip to Singapore, Abbot Raphael said that he took rolls of illegal pictures before anyone advised him that this was forbidden. He, of course, kept the pictures.

He was always at ease in all situations, ready with jokes and friendly banter, and he enjoyed himself wherever he was and people enjoyed his company, too. Nevertheless, such an active service on behalf of others, slowly took its toll, and Abbot Raphael suffered a heart attack in 1987. Unable to regain full strength again, he remained in office even though this was done with a continual feeling of tiredness and weakness. Therefore, during the autumn of 1989, he offered his resignation as Abbot at age 70, with the hope of continuing to serve the community in a less-demanding capacity.

Like his predecessor, he chose at the time of resignation to set aside the title of abbot and resumed his original rank in the community as Father Raphael. After a sabbatical he was appointed to serve in the Subiaco deanery. From 1990 to 1999 he was pastor of St. Ignatius Church, Scranton, and its mission parish of St. Meinrad in Prairie View. Famous for his love of hot peppers and pepper sauce, he was featured in an article in the Southwest Times Record entitled: "The Pepperhead Priest of Scranton."

In the early 1990s, Father Raphael represented the Abbey at the 100th anniversary of the City of Subiaco, Perth, Western Australia. The theme of this event was: "Subiaco on three continents." Along with him were the mayors of Subiaco, Australia, and Subiaco, Italy.

In 1999 he was appointed pastor of St. Scholastica Church, Shoal Creek. Throughout his life, Father Raphael was able to help people deepen their faith or return to full practice of their religion. On the occasion of his 60th anniversary of monastic profession, the Knights of Columbus and parishioners in Scranton, Prairie View, and Shoal Creek presented him a jubilee gift of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land which Father Raphael took in May 2000.

Though he was bedfast on the occasion of his 60th sacerdotal jubilee in 2005, he nevertheless rose from his sickbed to celebrate the jubilee Mass for his parishioners in Shoal Creek, and then a few weeks later for the parishioners of his home parish in Center Ridge. Reminiscing at this time, Father Raphael said that among his earliest memories was going to Sunday Mass in a horse-drawn buggy, and of working with his father on the farm and in the vineyards. A traumatic memory was the loss of his mother when he was a teenager. And he lovingly recalled his dad as a very hard-working man, who seemed to know how to do everything, and he expected his children to share in the work of supporting the large family.

Father Raphael continued to battle major health problems resulting in hospitalization. Time after time, however, he recovered after convalescing in the abbey Health Center, and was soon back to his pastoral ministry. But age, complicated with illness, caused Father Raphael to relinquish his pastorate at Shoal Creek in early 2007. His health continued to deteriorate, and he was soon bedridden in the abbey Health Center where he died of apparent heart failure at 1:48 p.m. on Saturday, June 23, 2007.

Father Raphael died one week before the priestly ordination of his nephew, Deacon Thomas J. Hart, who presided at the Wake service in the abbey church at 7:00 p.m. on Monday, June 25, 2007. The church was over-flowing with children and adults of all ages who knew Father Raphael as a teacher, pastor, spiritual director, and beloved friend.

Abbot Jerome Kodell was celebrant and homilist of the Mass of Christian Burial for Father Raphael at 10:00 a. m. on Tuesday, June 26, 2007. He was assisted by Deacon Thomas J. Hart, with many diocesan and religious clergy concelebrating. In his homily, Abbot Jerome said that each person present was affected differently by Father Raphael's death be it family, monastic community, nurses, former students, parishioners, or friends from various generations. "Because Father Raphael exemplified the love of God in his priestly role as another Christ," he said, "we can all say with the

disciples on the road to Emmaus: 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way?'" Rev. Msgr. J. Gaston Hebert, Diocesan Administrator, gave the Absolution, and Abbot Jerome performed the final obsequies.

At the time of his death, Abbot Raphael was 87 years old. He had been a professed monk for 66 years and a priest for 62 years. He had been Abbot for 15 years: from 1974 to 1989. He is buried in our cemetery.