

REMEMBRANCES

TRIBUTE

RICHARD MICHAEL 'RICK' DIERKES | 'He lived for being a priest'

He followed God's calling

By KATE BEEM
Special to The Star

Who: Monsignor Richard Michael "Rick" Dierkes of St. Joseph, former rector of the Cathedral of St. Joseph.

When and how he died: July 27 at the University of Chicago hospital of complications from his 20-year battle with the blood disorder polycythemia vera.

Age: 53.

A calling: Rick Dierkes grew up in Independence with eight brothers and sisters. Childhood friend Dave Lucas remembers Rick laughing.

"He laughed easily and laughed often," Lucas said.

But Dierkes had a serious side, too, Lucas said. As early as the third grade, he told his friend Dave that he was going to be a priest when he grew up.

"He was always, always sure that he was going to follow God's calling," Lucas said.

His mother, Dottie Dierkes, remembers that her children would rush home from Catholic school and play "Mass." They set up a TV tray as an altar and used their mother's red crystal candy dish as a chalice. They smashed up regular bread to use as communion bread.

And Rick was always the priest, his mother said.

He was ordained a priest in 1981 and became Father Rick to churchgoers in these parishes: St. Therese in Parkville, St. John LaLande in



COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

Monsignor Rick Dierkes always knew he'd be a priest, and his pastoral duties were his life's work.

Blue Springs, St. Peter in Kansas City, St. Patrick in St. Joseph and St. Joseph parish in Easton, Mo. His last assignment was rector at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in St. Joseph.

Intensely spiritual: Father Rick spent his years in St. Joseph reaching out to the less fortunate, supporting a food program for the needy and working to establish a cold weather shelter. He also started a ministry for Catholics incarcerated at the nearby state prison.

But he also helped those closer to him. His niece and goddaughter, Tish Birt, said that every year on the anniversary of her baptism, Father Rick sent her a small gift or letter. His thoughtfulness refreshed her spirit and faith, she said.

Father Rick believed everyone had good in them, and

he was always looking for God's hand in every turn of events, said longtime friend the Rev. Mike Roach, pastor of St. Therese in Parkville.

Working until the end:

When he was 30, Father Rick faced his own personal challenge, one that never went away. He was diagnosed with polycythemia vera, a condition in which his body made too many red blood cells.

But Father Rick, who continually asked how he could fulfill God's will, used his disease to become more empathetic to the sick and dying, while embracing life even more. He never slowed down, explaining to friends and family that his pastoral duties were his life's work.

Survivors include: His parents, five brothers, three sisters, aunts and uncles, 22 nieces and nephews, seven great-nieces and great-nephews and many friends and former parishioners.

The last word: At the end of his life, Father Rick was in constant pain. He traveled to the University of Chicago hospital in late spring to undergo a bone marrow transplant. His goal was to get better so he could get back to serving his parishioners, said the Rev. Tom Ludwig, his longtime colleague and pastor of the Our Lady of Guadalupe parish in St. Joseph.

"He lived for being a priest," Ludwig said.

To suggest community members to profile, send e-mail to tributes@kcstar.com.