

THE HARMONICA, AN ECUMENICAL INSTRUMENT

As Wil Upson OMI lay dying on Sept. 5, he asked "Please make sure that Larry Bonniwell gets the larger harmonica, and the lady who directs the Harmonicats, the other one." I agreed, and he insisted "Please do this." It forcibly struck me that those harmonicas represented the marvelous ministry Wil did uniting social justice, ecumenism and evangelism.

Wil Upson was born Oct. 24, 1929, in Sleepy Eye, MN. Although he himself never suffered from alcoholism, there was alcoholism in his immediate family. Ordained to the priesthood in the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate on May 31, 1956, his first parish assignment was as associate pastor in St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, International Falls, MN in 1962. When his superior, Chester Kozel OMI asked him to attend the Hazelden Institute and prepare to be an alcoholic counselor, Wil wondered where the money was coming from, since the Oblates had no money for such programs. After completing the course, he asked Father Kozel, who smiled and replied that Lutheran Social Services had paid for the course. For the rest of his life, Wil enjoyed teasing and being teased by Lutherans over this.

Within a week of his becoming pastor of St. Louis Parish, Fond du Lac, MN, in 1967, leaders of the Episcopal Church there asked him to start a halfway house for 14 alcoholic men. For the next seven years, he was director that rehabilitation center, Blandine House. An extended care facility for alcoholics and drug addicts, an off-shoot of Blandine House, today bears his name, The Upson House.

As Jim Deegan OMI remarked in his thorough homily at Wil's Mass of Christian Burial on Sept. 9, Wil helped Native Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics and Hmong especially during his 60 years of ministry. Anyone of course was the recipient of his being Christ's Good Shepherd, but the Oblates assigned him to places where these groups were in the majority. At St. Mary's Church in downtown St. Paul, which he pastored from 1976-85, he noticed that the stained glass windows were in urgent need of repair. Many Hmong refugees were attending the church, and some of them had great talent as craftsmen. So he let out the contract to a group of Hmong men, only to be hauled into court because no women were employed. He enjoyed telling about the hearing judge, who let the lawyer against Wil make his case, and then asked Wil for his input. Wil stood up and said that he would have loved to employ women, but that the arsenic and other chemicals used in repairing stained glass windows would mess up their reproductive systems. The judge immediately threw the case out, and lectured the lawyer.

In 1992 he was assigned to reduced ministry at St. Casimir's Parish, St. Paul, MN. Every Wednesday evening until two weeks before his death, he played the harmonica at the Gospel Mission as part of his extensive service to alcoholics. Many Baptists are involved with this organization, continuing Wil's friendship over the years with Evangelical Christians.

The last speaker at the funeral Mass was Wil's harmonica mentor and confidant for over 30 years. He told how Wil asked him in the early days what his religious sympathies were. The mentor joked to the congregation: "I told Father Wil that I leaned towards atheism, but hadn't become one because there aren't any holidays." That illustrated for me the fact that Wil wanted all to know Christ, and didn't hesitate to bring up the subject of religion.

About two months before he died, a Lutheran pastor whose son Wil had helped to maintain many years of sobriety, threw a party at which Wil and his harmonica were guests of honor. At the funeral Mass, the mentor took out his harmonica, and played what he told us symbolized Wil's life, the song "Love makes the world go round."

For Wil, God gave him the harmonica and ministry to alcoholics as his way of uniting Christians for justice and witness. Has God given you a ministry, perhaps using something which at first doesn't seem to be to your likes or fit the standard form? Look again, as Wil Upson did; you may find God calling you in a very creative, unusual but most effective way of ministry.