

Rev. Dr. Kenneth Semon: Lived up to St. Francis' example

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By Andrew Oxford

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The rector of the Church of the Holy Faith, a certified skiing instructor and former professor of English literature with a penchant for quoting Shakespeare, had a long, colorful journey through human spirituality that ended abruptly Thursday.

The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Semon, 70, died Thursday of injuries sustained in a bicycling accident two days earlier. He had struck a hazard while riding near his home off Caja del Rio Road west of Santa Fe and never regained consciousness, according to a statement from the church.

Bishop Michael Vono remembered Semon as living with a passion.

“He loved God, the church and people, and he loved celebrating Mass and serving the needs of the poor,” Vono said.

Though Semon had a strong academic pedigree and was interested in ancient Greek as well as Aramaic, friends remember him as dismissing any pretense of being an intellectual. Instead, colleagues describe him as living up to the example of the parish's patron saint, Francis of Assisi, by ministering to the homeless and advocating for the poor.

“Father Ken was a man of contemplation. But also a man of action, as his work for the homeless showed,” said the Rev. Jim Gordon, acting rector at the Church of the Holy Faith.

Semon was one of about 40 religious and community leaders who worked together to establish the Interfaith Community Shelter after several dozen deaths from hypothermia during two particularly brutal winters.

Even with a busy schedule of teaching, Semon regularly worked shifts at the facility, the Very Rev. Peggy Patterson recalls.

“It made a big impact on the congregation to see someone with such discipline and dedication,” she said.

Born into a Jewish family in Milwaukee, Wis., and a convert to Christianity in his early 30s, Semon graduated from the University of Wisconsin and got a Ph.D. from the University of Washington before working as an assistant professor of English literature at the University of Kentucky. Semon said he had been attending an Episcopal church in Lexington for a few years when he met a bishop who would change his life.

The bishop wanted Semon to become a priest.

“I told the bishop all the reasons why I couldn’t and shouldn’t and wouldn’t,” he later recounted.

But he left with a list of seminaries and would leave only a few months later to attend Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Chicago.

Semon served as rector for parishes in Sturgis, Mich., El Paso, St. Louis and Paradise Valley, Ariz. He also served as a curate in Lake Forest, Ill., and was an assisting priest in Vail, Colo.

Semon and his wife, Caroline, planned on retiring to Taos when he joined Church of the Holy Faith as priest-in-charge in 2007 during a period of upheaval. The vestry went on to unanimously elect him rector.

After nine years leading the church, Semon once again had plans to retire. He intended to step down from the church later this year and move to England to be closer to family.

Along with his wife, Semon is survived by his daughter Jennifer Muller of Bristol, England; daughter Kathryn Johnston of Chicago; son Jeffrey Semon of San Jose, Calif.; brother Mark Semon of Lavina, Mont.; stepson Scott Maynard of Frankfort, Ky., and several grandchildren.

A Mass of the Resurrection is planned at 10 a.m. Wednesday, Aug. 10, in the Church of the Holy Faith.

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