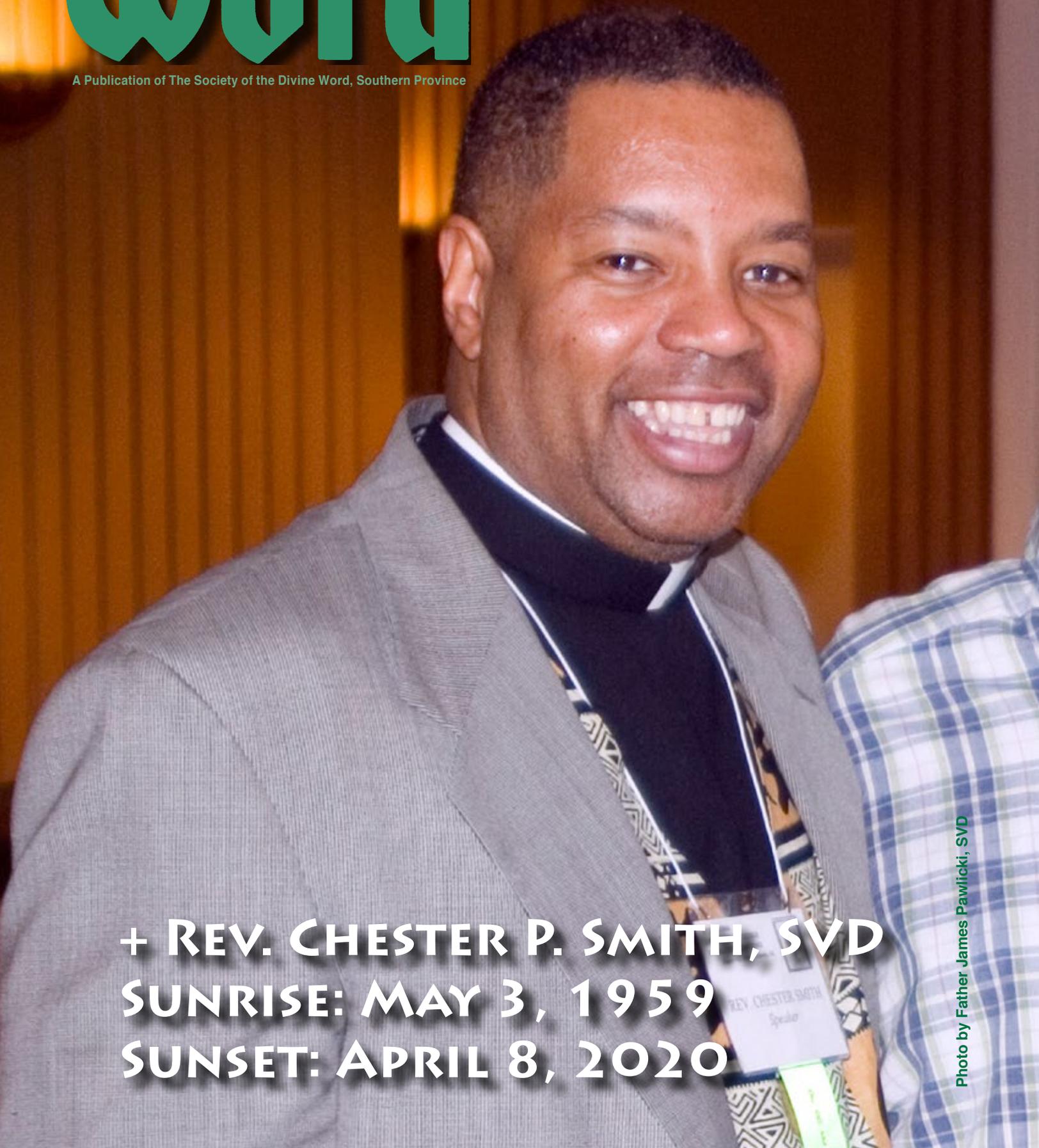


in a
WordTM

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+ REV. CHESTER P. SMITH, SVD
SUNRISE: MAY 3, 1959
SUNSET: APRIL 8, 2020

Photo by Father James Pawlicki, SVD



Novitiate Class of 1982 in Bay Saint Louis, MS



Charles and Chester in Bay Saint Louis - 1987

Dynamic Duo Battles Evil

Brothers rise from ghetto to be ordained America's first black twin priests

The parents of Charles and Chester Smith consider them to be twin blessings. The identical twins, born and brought up in an inner-city housing project in Chicago, were recently ordained as Roman Catholic priests.

"We're definitely the first black twins to become Roman Catholic priests in the United States," says the Rev. Charles Smith.

"Whether we're the first twin priest is hard to say. And frankly, it doesn't really matter that much."

"What's important is that people look toward us as a sign of hope, as a sign that they, too, can overcome grinding poverty and

didn't have much to look forward to when they read out as youth in a special moment, that they did manage to keep the faith.

"Oh, there were times when we almost packed it in," says Chester.

"There were days when the drug dealers and petty thieves and muggers, operating in the open and preying on innocent people, were almost too much."

"And we'd sit there and say: 'It's so easy to slip into crime, just walk into all the evils of our society.'"

"We saw so many wrongs fall into the trap of prostitution, so many boys become drug dealers or wannabe rappers—or flash someone on the street for a measly five dollars."

one of the reasons was that we had each other for support.

"When one of us was feeling down, the other would uplift him—with God's help, of course."

According to their parents, the twins were always a very mischievous pair even when they were youngsters. When the other boys in the block went out playing basketball, Charles and Chester would be reading or doing their homework.

"We were always trying to outdo each other," Charles says with a laugh.

"We were in the same class throughout school and the cooperation was friendly but fierce."

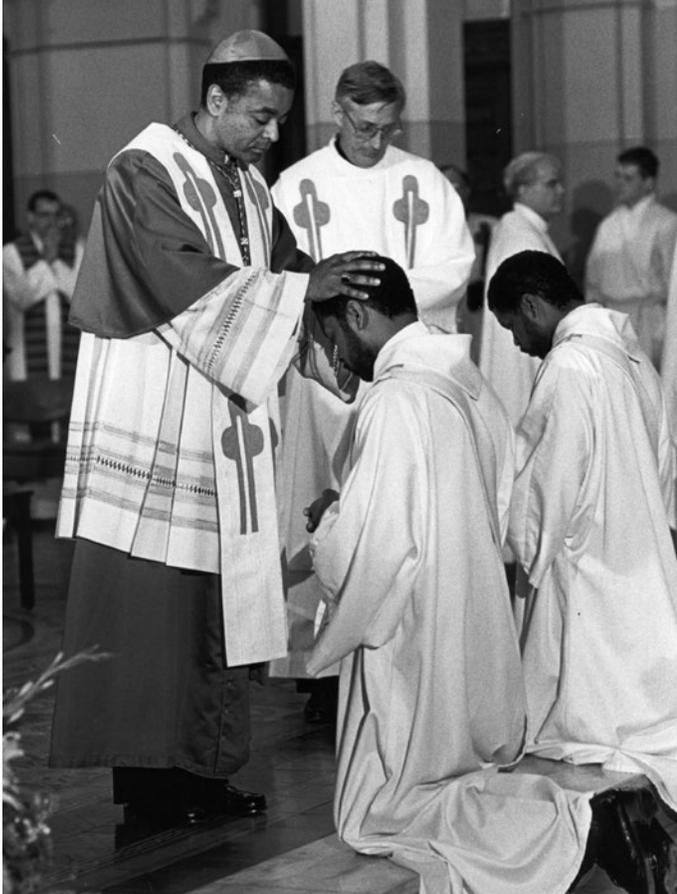
"When we finally graduated from high school, we

Charles and Chester Smith say they want to be an example to other blacks.

"We'd always been in- | becoming priests. | as priests at the ordina-



The Smith Brothers were ordained by Bishop Terry Steib, SVD (at that time Auxiliary Bishop in St. Louis, Mo) on April 16, 1988 in Techy, Illinois before a standing room only crowd. The joy of that day was felt by all. Ordained with the twins were Tim Donnelly and Joseph Dao Vu.



Bishop Wilton Gregory laying on of hands at 1988 Ordination



Photos by:
Fr. James Pawlicki, SVD

Father Chester Smith SVD, half of the first set of African-American twins to become Catholic priests, died suddenly on April 8, 2020 at age 60.

Father Smith grew up in Chicago's inner city and rose to become an international leader in African-American ministry and youth outreach.

Inspired by his mother and a parish priest at Our Lady of the Gardens Church on Chicago's far south side, his interest in a life of service began early.

"Father Chester often spoke of the encouragement he received from Father [Edward] Delaney to become a priest 'because your people need you,'" said his identical twin brother Father Charles Smith SVD. "Father Delaney's comments were the foundation of his ministry, encouraging Black men and women to be leaders in their communities, parishes, and churches."

Born five minutes after his brother in 1959, Chester was the second of Charles A. and Mae Ruth (nee Forte) Smith's four children. As teenagers, the brothers attended Divine Word Seminary High School in East Troy, Wis., and then Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, where Chester earned a bachelor's degree in sociology.

In 1982, the Smith twins professed religious vows in the Society of the Divine Word at Bay St. Louis, Miss., site of the first Catholic seminary for African-American students. And in 1988, they made history when they were ordained by Most Rev. J. Terry Steib SVD and became the first pair of African-American twins to become priests in the United States.

Father Chester Smith once said that he finally and fully committed to the idea of becoming a priest when he was a seminarian, working in the Watts section of Los Angeles. "He was devoted to uplifting the economically powerless and transforming the system in order to help people—regardless of ethnicity, race or religion—to help them realize their full potential as human beings," said Father Mark Weber SVD, a past provincial superior who now serves St. Anselm, one of Chicago's historical African-American parishes.

During his priesthood, Father Smith was an associate pastor at St. Anselm and St. Elizabeth parishes in Chicago, as well as St. Nicholas in St. Louis. He founded Ambassadors of the Word, a peer group ministry program that fosters youth rites of passage and cross-cultural experiences. And he and his brother developed Boyhood to Manhood, a parish-based program to help young Black men realize their value, get in touch with their spirituality and train future Church leaders.

As a founding member of the Bowman Francis Ministry Team, Father Chester Smith designed and implemented retreats, leadership programs, and revivals that celebrate African and African-American culture within the context of the Catholic Church. For two decades, he organized the National Black Catholic Men's Conference, which annually

draws multiple generations of African-American men for workshops and liturgies.

As part of his legacy, Father Smith also co-authored two books: "Boyhood to Manhood," a rite of passage manual for African-American boys, and "My Family, Our Family," a manual for family Kwanzaa celebration.

From 2006 to 2010, he served as president of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.

In addition to degrees from Divine Word College and Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago, Father Smith pursued French studies at the University of Montreal in Montreal, Canada, and Rites of Passage Training at the Institute of Black Studies in Milwaukee, Wis.

"Father Chester's ministry of liberation led him to travel throughout the United States, Europe, Canada, and the Caribbean," his brother said. "He wanted to feed people who were hungry for the Word and the truth about life, especially from a spiritual point of view. His missions, revivals, workshops, retreats, and motivational speaking filled that need."

Along with his twin brother, Father Smith is survived by a sister Marcheta; brother, Kermit; and godchildren.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the family held a private gravesite service. He was laid to rest at St. Mary Catholic Cemetery in Evergreen Park, Ill next to his mother. A memorial service may be planned for a later date.

Memorial donations in the name of Father Smith can be made to Bowman Francis Ministry, c/o Society of the Divine Word Chicago Province, P.O. Box 6038, Techy, IL 60082-6038.



*Charles and Chester Smith celebrate Mass at St. Anselm's Church in Chicago, IL on the occasion of their 25th anniversary to the priesthood.
(Photo by Brother Dan Holman, SVD)*

in a word or two



CNS photo/Robert Duncan

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Pope Francis has accepted the resignation of Bishop Edward K. Braxton of Belleville, Illinois, and has appointed Father Michael G. McGovern, a pastor in the Archdiocese of Chicago, as his successor.

Bishop Braxton, who has headed the Belleville Diocese since 2005, turned 75 last June, the age at which bishops are required to turn in their resignation to the pope. Bishop-designate McGovern, who was ordained to the priesthood May 21, 1994, by Chicago Cardinal Joseph L. Bernardin, is currently pastor of St. Raphael the Archangel Church in Old Mill Creek, Illinois.

The appointment was announced April 3 in Washington by Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States.

WASHINGTON - One year ahead of the 2020 national elections, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is launching a year-long initiative that invites Catholics to model civility, love for neighbor, and respectful dialogue. *Civilize It: Dignity Beyond the Debate* . . . will ask Catholics to pledge civility, clarity, and compassion in their families, communities, and parishes, and call on others to do the same.

The initiative, which many dioceses are launching in parishes this weekend (November 2-3), is built on the recognition that every person—even those with whom we disagree—is a beloved child of God who possesses inherent dignity. Supporting materials for the initiative include ideas to help Catholics and others of good will to engage in and model respect and compassion, as well as resource materials to assist in the effort. *Civilize It* is the invitation to imitate the example of Jesus in our daily lives, including in our encounters with one another through civil dialogue.

Bishop Frank J. Dewane, of Venice, and chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development emphasized the importance of *Civilize It* in the context of the current divisive climate:

“Conversation in the public square is all too often filled with personal attacks and words that assume the worst about those with whom we disagree. We are in need of healing in our families, communities, and country. **Civilize It: Dignity Beyond the Debate is a call for Catholics to honor the human dignity of each person they encounter, whether it is online, at the dinner table, or in the pews next to them. I invite all Catholics to participate in Civilize It. In doing so, they can bear witness to a better way, approach conversations with civility, clarity, and compassion, and invite others to do the same.**”

Civilize It builds on a similar effort implemented in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati in previous election years. It is being offered in concert with a wider ecumenical effort, *Golden Rule 2020*. . . , which invites all Christians to model our shared values of dignity and civility and pursue dialogue instead of division.

Together with the USCCB, dioceses around the country are being called to utilize *Civilize It* to help Catholics put our faith in action by honoring human dignity through civil conversation this upcoming election year. Resource materials supporting the initiative include: a pledge to civility. . . that can be taken by individuals and communities; resources for prayer and reflection including a pastoral aid . . . and prayer for civility. . . ; tips for civil dialogue; and more. More information on the initiative as well as promotional materials, resources, and other tools may be found on CivilizeIt.org. . .



This is an illustration for “Civilize It: Dignity Beyond the Debate,” an initiative launched by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to promote civility and respectful dialogue during this presidential election year. (CNS illustration/courtesy U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida and Arkansas.

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