In Memoriam:
Father Edmund F. McCaffrey (1933–2016)
Patrick W. Baker

A loyal son of Holy Mother Church and a priest in her service for fifty-seven years as monk, Benedictine abbot, ordinary, professor, college president, pastor, retreat master, and pilgrimage director, Father (formerly Abbot) Edmund F. McCaffrey humbly remained true to the Church as she navigated through tumultuous changes internally and in society since his ordination in 1959. Abbot Edmund (as many still called him, even after his incardination into the Diocese of Charleston, South Carolina) was a founding lifetime member of the Society of Catholic Social Scientists.

As a student of political science at Franciscan University of Steubenville, I was blessed to take two summer courses he guest-taught. That summer I had the privilege of traveling with him on what would be my first of four pilgrimages to Fatima, which he led for over three decades. I have never met a priest more devoted to our Blessed Mother than Abbot. For him, “Mary is the answer”—for world peace; for the end of the scourge of abortion (and its root, contraception); for chastity; for priestly vocations; for U.S. elections and matters of state, and so on. He would say, “Always take it to our Lady,” and he would pray.

Abbot Edmund’s affable character and delightful sense of humor endeared him to all who were privileged to know him. While he was ever a Catholic gentleman with the graciousness and charm of his Southern heritage, he was never one to neglect, in the name of good manners, to stand strongly for the truths of the faith. He was ever a faithful defender and friend of the unborn and their mothers. As the spiritual director of the apostolate Eternal Life, he, along with the late Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J., untiringly promoted the Church’s teachings on true chaste love and the dignity of human life from conception to natural death.

As prelate during the early 1970s, he spoke up courageously on matters addressing war and peace. While many advocated unilateral disarmament during the Cold War, his was a voice of wisdom and prudence that quickly gained him the respect of the U.S. Bishops’ Conference.

Abbot Edmund, despite the high office that put him into contact with heads of state, would walk just as easily with the poor and disenfranchised for whom he had a tremendous care and love. Abbot Edmund had a tender heart for all of God’s “little people” and sought to heal the deep, invidious divisions of race, class, age, and sex.
His greatest gift to the Church in America was the legacy of holy priestly, religious, and matrimonial vocations that he helped to inspire, foster, and develop, both by his priestly example and the formation he provided to many young persons in the collegiate community—as co-founder of the Institute on Religious Life, through his hundreds of retreats and talks in parishes, convents, seminaries, and on EWTN, as well as in his role as pastor of families in three parishes in the Diocese of Charleston. There, countless souls received the pastoral care of a true “Curé D’Ars.” He served as founding pastor of St. Michael’s Church in Murrells Inlet, and later, pastor of Divine Redeemer Church in Hanahan and Holy Family Church in Hilton Head Island. One of his favorite exhortations to both young and old was that, “We must be saints.” He would ask, “What are you going to be?” “Saints!” was the refrain.

A beautiful letter penned by St. Teresa of Calcutta to the Holy Abbot’s mother Ruby states, “Thank you for giving your son to Holy Mother Church.” We indeed have our Lord and our Blessed Mother to thank for the gift of this “Priest for all Seasons,” Abbot Edmund. May he rest in peace.