

# Rev. William O'Donnell, 73, A Rebel With Many Causes

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The Rev. William J. O'Donnell, a Roman Catholic priest famous in the San Francisco area for having been arrested about 250 times in 30 years in support of often radical causes here and abroad, died on Monday while writing his Sunday homily at St. Joseph the Worker Church here. He was 73.

The cause was a heart attack, his sister, Mary O'Donnell, said.

A burly man with a don't-mess-with-me strut, Father Bill, as he was always called, was a familiar sight at demonstrations, wearing his trademark black leather jacket -- protection, he said, against aggressive policemen -- over his clerical collar.

He joined peace advocates in marching from Jerusalem to Amman, Jordan, and marched from San Francisco to Modesto, Calif., with migrant workers. He demonstrated in Alabama and in South Korea, and in San Salvador confronted soldiers about to conduct a middle-of-the-night interrogation of a labor organizer. Locally, he developed programs for the homeless, and he challenged the Daughters of Charity order of nuns, who he contended were thwarting hospital workers' efforts to organize.

On a hook by the front door of his rectory dangled dozens of white plastic handcuffs Father O'Donnell had acquired over the years.

In fall 2002, he demonstrated against the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, the onetime School of the Americas, at Fort Benning, Ga., where the Army trains Latin American military personnel. Arrested for trespassing, Father O'Donnell accused the judge of "pimping for the Pentagon." He was convicted of trespassing and sentenced to six months in prison.

While in prison, he started a liberation theology group. Released on a Friday, a weakened Father O'Donnell was out demonstrating against war with Iraq the next day, recalled the Rev. George Crespino, pastor of St. Joseph the Worker Church.

An identical twin, William Joseph O'Donnell was one of seven children born to cattle ranchers in Livermore, Calif. In an interview this week, his older brother Edward recalled his having built a haystack in 100-degree heat and declaring, "There has to be something better."

In addition to his sister, Mary, of Berkeley, and his brother Edward, of Lafayette, Calif., survivors include another brother, James, of Moraga, Calif.

At 13, he began to study for the priesthood. He graduated from St. Joseph's College in Menlo Park, Calif., in 1950 and from St. Patrick's Seminary of Menlo Park in 1956 and was ordained in San Francisco.

Ousted from various conservative churches, Father O'Donnell asked to be assigned to the poorest parish. Thirty years ago, he became pastor at St. Joseph the Workman Church, later helping to change its name to St. Joseph the Worker Church.

He attributed his conversion from young conservative to radical activist to his involvement with the labor organizer Cesar Chavez. Before dawn one day in 1970, Father O'Donnell persuaded Teamsters not to unload grapes at Oakland's produce market, an act that Fred Ross Jr., an organizer of the Chavez grape boycott, said in an interview on Thursday was "a dramatic breakthrough" for unionizing grape pickers.

Eight years ago, Father O'Donnell stepped down as pastor of his parish and became senior priest.

Told that Father O'Donnell's cortege would have a police escort, Father Crespín said, "On his last journey he'll be accompanied by police, as was often the case in life."