



## Adrian Van Kaam (1920 - 2007)

Priest, Duquesne University Professor.

Helped the Jewish community in Holland during 1940s.



*“The Rev Adrian Van Kaam, a Catholic priest whose understanding of the dynamics of spirituality was formed as he smuggled food to Jews in-hiding during the Nazi occupation of Holland, died Saturday at the nursing home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, North Side.” November 20, 2007*

Father Van Kaam, 87, a Spiritan, founded the ‘Institute of Formative Spirituality’ at Duquesne University. He emphasized how the soul is shaped and how faith is lived out in daily life. His reputation was worldwide.

“He was a guru after the Second Vatican Council, especially for the renewal that was going on in religious communities,” said the Rev Girard Kohler, who had lived with him.

Born in The Hague, Adrian van Kaam was in seminary when the Nazis invaded in 1940. He started a clandestine discussion group to help laity see what saints and scholars of the past had said about faith in dark times, said Dr Susan Muto, his long-time colleague in Pittsburgh.

In the summer of 1944, believing that liberation was imminent, he went to a retreat in western Holland but became trapped behind Nazi lines after the disastrous Allied Operation ‘Market Garden’. There, he endured the “hunger winter” of 1944-45, when Hollanders had to survive on turnips, potatoes and toxic tulip bulbs. It was this ‘starvation diet’ that permanently ruined his health, Dr Muto said. He hid in a barn, but collected food from farmers to take to Jews and others in hiding. That Christmas, he wrote and produced a clandestine play, “Christmas Night in Ravaged Holland” which recast the nativity story in wartime Europe.

Professor van Kaam believed that “there are no coincidences, only providences,” Dr Muto went on to say. “He believed it was providential, because of his future mission, that he was catapulted out of the ivory tower of seminary into the Dutch hunger winter.”

Ordained in 1946, his health was too poor for the mission field. He taught seminary, and gained a reputation for helping people apply their faith to daily life. With a Belgian mentor, Maria Schouenaars, he founded classes in faith for young adults who had grown up during the war. Striving to make these classes relevant to their working contexts, they met not in churches, but in factories. Given the enormous success of these classes in



spirituality and the relatively large numbers of youth that were being drawn, Msgr Giovanni Battista Montini, a Vatican official who later became Pope Paul VI, requested of the Church that van Kaam be allowed to do this nearly full time.

In 1954, Rev van Kaam answered what he believed was a call to teach faith formation at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. However, upon arrival at the University, he was assigned to replace a deceased psychology professor. When he protested that he had no psychology degree, he was sent to get one, Dr Muto said. He travelled widely during this time, studying under giants such as Carl Rogers and Erik Erikson.

“He was able to critique the field of psychology from within,” gleaned additional insights into human nature but rejecting the field’s anti-religious assumptions, Dr Muto went on to say.

In 1963, Professor Rev van Kaam returned to his roots in spiritual direction after an accrediting agency balked at the courses he was teaching on religion and personality. Forced to move these courses out of the Psychology Department, Duquesne University, supporting van Kaam, created what became the ‘Institute of Formative Spirituality’.

The Institute was soon inundated with sisters and priests seeking to reshape their spirituality in the wake of Vatican II. Later, Protestant clergy seeking training that their own traditions did not provide, would flock to the institute.

In 1980, he suffered a near fatal heart attack. Doctors at Mercy Hospital forbade him to do work of any kind. However, still hospitalized, he begged Dr Muto to smuggle in a notebook and pen, arguing that “I cannot rest if I cannot write.” This largely hospital-based writing produced the work “The Blessing of a Coronary.”

Adrian van Kaam was always seeking ways to bring the spiritual riches of the past ages to people who might never earn an advanced degree. To do so, in 1988 he co-founded the ‘Epiphany Association’ with Dr Susan Muto, and later when Duquesne University closed the ‘Institute of Formative Spirituality’ in 1993, the pair continued at what is now called the ‘Epiphany Academy’, situated in Beechview, Pittsburgh.

He died as the ‘Little Sisters of the Poor’ sang *Salve Regina*, said Dr Muto, who was present, and buried at Queen of Heaven Cemetery in Peters Township, McMurray, Washington County, Pennsylvania.

“We feel he just simply yielded himself completely into the arms of the mystery, which is the mystery of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,” she said.



Adrian van Kaam is survived by two sisters, Lia Schillkens Van Kaam and Bepp Van Gemert, both of the Netherlands.

Source: Adapted from: Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

---

Epiphany Academy of Formative Spirituality:

[www.epiphanyacademyofformativespirituality.org](http://www.epiphanyacademyofformativespirituality.org)

Video interview with Dr Susan Muto:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVRpmH4OwNo>

---