

Mark A. Dittami, O. Carm.  
1912-2000

Mark Dittami delighted in being known as the "Grandfather Priest" in the Carmelites and elsewhere. A newspaper interview published in the Peabody, Massachusetts area around 1965 attests to this. The article was written by the late Charles Smith, a layman who did great public relations work for the Carmelites in the Peabody/Hamilton area, and presents Mark expounding on the added dimension that marriage had given to his priestly life. Having been married, with a daughter, Ursula, and three grandchildren, gave Mark an added insight to his work as a priest, especially in marriage counseling. He rejoiced in the added dimension.

Mark (baptized as "Amadeo John"), the son of the late Alexander and Angela/Angelina (Calesa) Dittami, was born in New York on 13 July 1912. But New York seems to have been only a temporary stopping-off place. It is likely that the Dittami parents, immigrants from Italy, had passed through the examination process at the Ellis Island Immigration Center in New York Harbor on their way to a new life in America.

But before long the Dittami family moved to the Boston area, with its large Italian community, and Mark attended Hervey School, Brooks School, and Hobbs Junior High School -- all in Medford, Massachusetts. Other members of the family included three sisters, Anna, Lucy and Marie, and two brothers, Francis and Mario. (Mario Dittami would later join the PCM Province where he became well-known for parish and fund-raising work.)

A pious young lad who often sought to help others, Mark felt a calling to the priesthood and entered Mt. Carmel Prep Seminary in Niagara Falls, Ontario in 1929. He did well in his high school and later studies at Mt. Carmel College there in 1930-31. He then attended Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., as a member of the Whitefriars Hall Carmelite community.

For whatever reason, Mark left the Carmelites in 1932 to return to Medford and enroll at Tufts University there. In 1934 he graduated with a B.A degree and a major in Latin and a minor in education. He was also active in the Boy Scouts of America.

At this time, the Great Depression of the 1930's made finding any job difficult for recent college graduates. However, Mark did manage to find work as a cost controller with the Perini Construction Company of Boston. And from 1935-41, he was a sales representative for the U.S. Tobacco Company.

With the coming of World War II, Mark enlisted in the U.S. Navy as a gunnery and minesweeping officer. For his service, from 1943-46, Mark received the following medals: Naval Reserve, American Campaign, Asiatic-Pacific Campaign, World War II Victory, China Service, and Asia Occupation Service. When he returned to active duty, 1950-52, in the Korean Conflict, he served as a cryptographic communications officer, and received the National Defense medal.

After World War II, Mark returned briefly to the U.S. Tobacco Company, but found a new role as a very successful sales representative for Brown and Bigelow Advertising Agency from 1947-50 and 1952-61.

It was during this latter period that he also returned to Bridgewater (Massachusetts) State College and received his M.A. degree in education/psychology.

In 1936 Mark married Marietta Ruscitti of Medford, and they had one child, a daughter Ursula who later became Mrs. Robert Leahy of Sandwich, Massachusetts. They are the parents of Mark's three grandchildren: Cathlin, Marietta and Susan Marie. He had been married almost 25 years when his wife died suddenly in 1961 in the midst of plans for the couple's silver wedding anniversary.

After his wife's death, Mark felt drawn to spread himself out among people. He had considered the Papal Volunteers, the Peace Corps, teaching, and for a time, even re-marriage. He also talked things over with a priest friend who suggested he think about the priesthood.

"Finally, I asked the Carmelites to take me in," said Mark. "They did; I was, and am, very grateful."

Since he was then in his middle 50's, it was decided that Mark would spend his novitiate year at the Carmelite Novitiate of the Irish Province, then located at Kinsale, County Cork, Ireland. After a year there, he professed his simple vows on 19 February 1963. He then returned to Whitefriars Hall in Washington, D.C. where he studied theology from 1963-66.

Thursday, 26 August 1965 was an especially joyful day for the Dittami family in the main chapel of the Carmelite Junior Seminary of Our Lady of the Brown Scapular in Hamilton, Massachusetts. It was the day that Ursula's father would become Fr. Mark in a spiritual sense. Bishop Nevin Hayes, O. Carm., the newly-consecrated Prelate of Sicuani, Peru and a former CJS teacher, was the ordaining bishop. Ursula and Robert Leahy and their children were present, along with Fr. Mario Dittami, O. Carm., Mark's younger brother who was then pastor of St. Clara's Church in Chicago. It was a more than festive day for the PCM Province and the Dittami family.

Following the completion of his theology studies at Whitefriars Hall, Mark was assigned to the staff at the St. Therese Chapel in the North Shore Shopping Center in Peabody, Massachusetts, a Carmelite outreach program to bring Christ to the marketplace. He quickly earned a reputation as a kind and affable priest who welcomed all to his Masses and his office in time of need. He also became well-known for his marriage counseling work, especially after word got out among the ordinary people that this priest, himself married for almost 25 years, really understood the problems and complexities of marriage. Mark delighted in relating the story of one husband who simply refused to attend marriage counseling with his wife - till he found out that the priest had been married.

Mark participated well in all the aspects of the Peabody Shopping Center apostolate until June of 1970 when he was assigned as director of the recently-established St. Therese Chapel in the Bergen Mall Shopping Center located in Paramus, New Jersey.

"We have Masses and confessions every day of the week," Mark said in an interview with the Carmelite News Service, "and we hope to offer the people who come to the mall a quiet place where they can get away for a moment of prayer, a spiritual respite in the midst of their lives of working and shopping."

With over 60 stores in the shopping center, Mark quickly understood there was a large potential audience for St. Therese Chapel.

"The chapel will be a place of prayer," he continued, "a place for all to come and enjoy the things of the spirit. The Bergen County Clergy Associations' ecumenical task force is interested in what we are doing and will meet with us shortly to discuss what we can do together."

"Bringing Christ to the marketplace isn't a new idea," Mark concluded, "it just needs constant renewing."

In 1979 Mark was re-assigned to the staff at Peabody where he renewed his excellent work in marriage counseling and the other aspects of the shopping center apostolate. He welcomed all with his ready smile and affable nature. He also kept close ties with his growing family who enjoyed his visits

Mark remained at the nearby Our Lady of the Scapular Priory until his declining health necessitated his moving to the nursing facility of Marian Manor in Taunton, Massachusetts on 6 February 1995. Here he remained as active as possible, and enjoyed frequent visits from his family and the Carmelites in Peabody. It was here, too, on Saturday, 12 February, at about 10:30 AM, that he died peacefully in the midst of the Dittami family and his fellow Carmelites. He was 87 years old.

A wake was held at the Corpus Christi Parish Center in Sandwich, Massachusetts on 16 February from 3:00 - 7:00 PM, with a wake service at 6:30 PM. A second wake was also held at St. Margaret's Church in Beverly Farms, Massachusetts on Thursday, 17 February, from 10:00 - 11:30 AM.

Since Mark had assisted at St. Margaret's for some 15 years, it was decided that this would be the appropriate place for the Mass of Christian Burial on 17 February, at noon. Fr. Charles Countie, O. Carm., prior of Our Lady of the Scapular Community in Peabody, was the principal celebrant and homilist. He was joined by the Carmelite Community of Frs. Alan Crowley, Kilian Healy, Peter Thomas Sherry, Lambert Zulkie, and Brother Damien Chong.

Presiding at the Requiem Mass was Auxiliary bishop Francis Xavier Irwin, area bishop for the Archdiocese of Boston. On a personal note, Bishop Irwin pointed out that his father and Mark's father had been friends for many years.

Mark's final resting place is at Oak Grove Cemetery in Medford, Massachusetts, next to his late wife.

*Kevin Shanley, O. Carm.  
St. Simon Stock Priory  
Darien, Illinois*