Father Bob Maguire, charity campaigner and Catholic priest, dies aged 88

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Father Bob Maguire dies age 88

Social justice campaigner and "people's priest" Father Bob Maguire has died aged 88.

The media personality and Roman Catholic priest dedicated his life to standing up for the poor and marginalised and clashed with church hierarchy over his forced retirement.

The Father Bob Maguire Foundation confirmed he died this morning at Cabrini Hospital in Melbourne.

In a statement, Maguire's family said the preceding months had been difficult as the 88-year-old's health declined.

"His physical and mental health had been deteriorating for some time but his preference was always to help others rather than consider his own situation," the statement said.

"Father Bob was not just a much loved family member but was loved by all Australians for what he stood for."

The family said in its statement that Maguire's passion had always been helping those in the community who often went ignored.

"Despite his high profile in the media, he was always on the job, especially for the disadvantaged families and individuals for whom he had great love and compassion," the statement said.

"He wanted nobody to be left behind and always saw and believed in the good in people, but he knew that there were many whom he referred to as the unloved and unlovely. These were his real passion."

Father Bob Maguire was known for his social justice work, providing food relief and educational support through his Melbourne-based charity. *(AAP: Julian Smith)*

Known universally as Father Bob, Maguire's faith and social justice work was balanced with a wicked sense of humour.

He was described by his own charity foundation as part Billy Connolly, part Mother Theresa, part angry Old Testament prophet.

Robert John Maguire was born in Thornbury, in Melbourne's inner-north in 1934 to Scottish immigrant parents, and experienced the fragility of life at a young age, losing two sisters and both parents by the time he was 16.

He entered the seminary at Werribee in 1953 and was struck by the conservative nature of some of the church's methods, later referring to the seminary as "the cemetery" in his trademark larrikin way.

He was ordained as a priest in 1960 at the age of 25.

Maguire joined the Army Reserve in 1965 and during the Vietnam War was head of the army's Character Training Unit for young officers.

Forced retirement led to clash with church

Father Bob was forced to retire in 2012 after reaching the mandatory retirement age set down by the Catholic Church. *(AAP: David Crosling)*

Maguire was parish priest of Sts Peter and Paul's Catholic Church in South Melbourne for close to 40 years from 1973 — leaving only after a clash with Catholic Church hierarchy over its mandate that priests retire at 75.

"I am of a mind not to resign and I'll write a letter saying that," he told the ABC in 2009.

"They'll say there's a retirement village — in other words, don't be afraid, come to us and we will look after you.

"Then you end up dishonourably discharged and going into a retirement village. Now that's not what I signed up for."

He eventually reached a compromise that allowed him to remain a priest until he was 77, retiring in 2012 after 50 years of service to the church.

Delivering his final mass in January 2012, he told crowds of people crammed into the church that his forced retirement would not stop him from working to improve the lives of those less fortunate.

"I can't take the church with me, and I don't have another church to go to, [but] I'm still Bob Maguire the Catholic priest and I'm still Father Bob the citizen," he said.

Priest became a popular media performer

Father Bob Maguire came to greater fame through his numerous media appearances on television and radio. *(ABC News)*

Maguire reached audiences outside his congregation as co-host of the SBS television show Speaking in Tongues with John Safran.

He was also a regular guest on Safran's triple j radio show, introducing himself to a younger and more diverse audience.

Despite achieving cult status with his media appearances, Maguire was wary of the trappings of celebrity culture.

"That celebrity caper we're going through right now, that's been a pain in the neck," he said at his last mass in 2012.

"Jesus was a celebrity, they crucified him. He really wasn't a celebrity, he was really someone who just told it as he saw it."

After his retirement from the church, Maguire continued to work with his charity foundation, which delivers hundreds of free meals each week and operates an outreach program to those in need.

Last week, the Father Bob Maguire Foundation announced its namesake had stepped down as chairman following a legal guardianship ruling following a decline in health.

Maguire was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1989 for his service to homeless youth and was named Victorian of the Year in 2011.