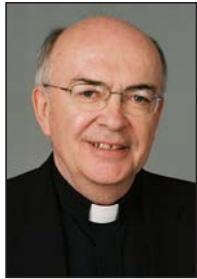


# Jesuit Father Thomas Widner, former archdiocesan priest and editor of *The Criterion*, dies at age 76

By Sean Gallagher

Jesuit Father Thomas Widner, director of spiritual formation at Bishop Simon Bruté College Seminary in Indianapolis



Fr. Thomas Widner, S.J.

and formerly an archdiocesan priest, died on Aug. 13 at St. Vincent Hospital in Indianapolis. He was 76.

The Mass of Christian Burial was celebrated on Aug. 20 at St. Andrew the Apostle Church in Indianapolis.

Jesuit Father Bradley Schaeffer, a provincial assistant of the Jesuits USA Midwest Province, was the principal celebrant of the Mass. Burial followed at Calvary Cemetery in Indianapolis.

Ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis in 1969, Father Widner served in parishes in central and southern Indiana until he entered the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in 1985. He also served as editor of *The Criterion* from 1975-84.

The son of a former editor of the *Indianapolis Star*, he was the last priest to serve as editor of the archdiocesan weekly newspaper. As a Jesuit, he went on to serve as editor-in-chief of *The New World*, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Chicago, and as an assistant editor and writer for *America*, a national magazine published by the Jesuits.

Retired Father Jeffrey Godecker, an ordination classmate of Father Widner, said his friend was “a teacher at heart” who sought to share the Gospel with others through his ministry in journalism.

“It was about communicating the Gospel and Catholic values,” Father Godecker said. “I think he took to that pretty well. He was very loyal to the Church.

“Tom [also] enjoyed getting to know people. He was a man who made connections.”

He did so through parish ministry, especially at St. Andrew the Apostle Parish in Indianapolis, which he served as co-pastor from 1972-75.

Father Widner was also known for making connections with others and helping people make a greater connection with God in spiritual direction and retreats.

That aspect of his ministry will be his lasting legacy in Indianapolis, where he spent the last 14 years of his ministry, said Jesuit Father William Verbryke, president of Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis. He noted how Father Widner led many of the faculty and staff of Brebeuf Jesuit in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola while serving as the high school’s vice president for mission and identity from 2004-10.

“I’m still hearing from people today how him having gone through the *Exercises* with them was very life-giving and life-changing for them,” Father Verbryke said.

This work of leading people to a deeper relationship with God became more focused when Father Widner became director of spiritual formation at Bishop Bruté, a role in which he served as the principal spiritual director of dozens of college seminarians from the archdiocese and other dioceses across the Midwest.

“He was an excellent spiritual director and did a wonderful job with our guys,” said Father Robert Robeson, Bishop Bruté’s rector from its founding in 2004 until 2016. “He was sort of a grandfatherly figure to a lot of our guys. He always made himself available to the guys. He really loved them and cared for the souls of the guys.”

Father Robeson, who now serves as pastor of Holy Name of Jesus Parish in Beech Grove, said that Father Widner’s experience as both an archdiocesan priest and as a Jesuit with the order’s focus on spiritual discernment was a good combination for him in his ministry at Bishop Bruté, helping

college-age young men grow spiritually and in human maturity at the same time.

“His understanding of the spiritual life allowed him to understand how the spiritual formation and human formation were integrated,” said Father Robeson, noting that Father Widner helped the seminarians “to recognize that every moment of their lives and the struggles they were having on a human level were profoundly spiritual.

“For me, that was one of the greatest gifts he brought to the seminary.”

Father Joseph Moriarty, Bishop Bruté’s current rector, said that the many graduates and current seminarians of the seminary who gathered to pray at Father Widner’s bedside in his final days were a testament to the profound effect that he had on their lives.

“He was a pastor to them, like a shepherd, a mentor and a friend,” said Father Moriarty.

Thomas Charles Widner was born on April 27, 1942, in Indianapolis to Frank and Marie Widner. He grew up as a member of the former St. Bernadette Parish in Indianapolis.

A graduate of Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School in Indianapolis, Father Widner earned a bachelor’s degree in English in 1964 at Marian University in Indianapolis before becoming an archdiocesan seminarian.

He received priestly formation at the former St. Mary’s Seminary in St. Mary, Ky., and at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis.

Archbishop Paul C. Schulte ordained him a priest on May 24, 1969, at SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Indianapolis. That same year, Father Widner earned a master’s degree in English from the University of Notre Dame in northern Indiana.

His first pastoral assignment in the archdiocese was to the former Latin School, an archdiocesan high school seminary in Indianapolis, where he served as an English teacher, and

as associate pastor of Our Lady of the Greenwood Parish in Greenwood from 1969-72.

Father Widner ministered as co-pastor of St. Andrew the Apostle Parish in Indianapolis from 1972-75 before serving as editor of *The Criterion* from 1975-84.

During that time, he also served as administrator of the former St. Rose of Lima Parish in Knightstown from 1979-80. He later ministered as associate pastor of St. Barnabas Parish in Indianapolis and as administrator of Holy Trinity Parish in Edinburgh from 1984-85.

In the Society of Jesus, Father Widner served on the editorial staff of *America* from 1987-91, as the associate director of the Spiritual Renewal Center in Hammond, Ind., from 1991-92, and then as editor-in-chief of *The New World* in Chicago.

From 1995-97 he was a publications assistant at *Company Magazine* and director of communications of the office of the then-Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus. He then served for two years in retreat ministry at the Jesuit Spiritual Center in Milford, Ohio, before ministering as secretary for communications for the USA Jesuit Conference from 1999-2004 and as superior of the Jesuits’ Leonard Neale House in Washington.

Father Widner returned to Indianapolis in 2004, serving as vice president of mission and identity at Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School until 2010, when he became director of spiritual formation at Bishop Simon Bruté College Seminary, a position he held until his death.

He is survived by brothers Daniel Widner of Mechanicsville, Va.; James Widner of Dayton, Ohio; John Widner of Edinboro, Pa.; Michael Widner of Blairsville, Ga.; and Robert Widner of Indianapolis.

Memorial gifts may be sent to The Midwest Jesuits, P.O. Box 6713, Carol Stream, IL, 60197-6713, or at [jesuitsmidwest.org/FrWidnerMemorials](http://jesuitsmidwest.org/FrWidnerMemorials). †