

**Fr. M. Owen Lee:**

## **Music scholar with a passion for opera dies at 89**

BY [CATHOLIC REGISTER STAFF](#)

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Fr. M. Owen Lee, a Basilian educator with a passion for opera that led to 23 years as a knowledgeable commentator on Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera in New York, died July 25 at Presentation Manor in Toronto. He was 89.

A scholar by training, Fr. Lee taught classics for many years and was under contract with the University of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto from 1960 to 1995.

But it was his love for and knowledge of the operatic world for which Fr. Lee would best be known. It was in 1983 that Fr. Lee was first invited to participate on the live broadcasts from the Met. His commentaries would be broadcast during the first intermission of the live Saturday matinees and he would then participate in the quiz segment, where a panel of three experts would field questions, in the second intermission. His last appearance on the Met broadcasts was in March 2006.

Fr. Lee's passion for music began at age nine when his father bought him a piano and he began to learn the popular songs of the era. Two short years later he was introduced to opera, the Metropolitan Opera's broadcast of Wagner's

“Tannhauser,” and from there he was hooked, eagerly listening to the live broadcasts.

It was in 1947 that the Detroit-born Fr. Lee began his journey with the Basilian Fathers, entering the Basilian noviciate in Rochester, N.Y.

The Basilians knew they would need a Classics teacher in Toronto, and his passion for opera gave him the knowledge of Latin that would make him a perfect fit for the position.

Fr. Lee’s operatic expertise went beyond merely commenting on the broadcasts. Many of the 22 books he authored were dedicated to opera, and he touched on other topics like popular music, film and the classics. His book *Wagner’s Ring* has sold thousands of copies and is regarded as the best introduction to this cycle of operas.

Fr. Lee academic career would also take him to Houston, Chicago and Rome. He was awarded four honorary degrees as well as the University of Toronto’s Outstanding Teacher Award.

Fr. Lee was born in Detroit May 28, 1930, the second of five boys to Robert L. Lee and Helen Miller. He received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Toronto, as well as a degree in sacred theology from St. Michael’s in 1957. His academic career began in 1960 as a lecturer at St. Michael’s. He is survived by two brothers, nine nieces and nephews.