

LEE, Mark Owen, priest, was born on 28 May 1930 in Detroit, Michigan, one of five boys born to Robert Lee and Helen Miller.

He died on 25 July 2019 at Presentation Manor, Scarborough, Ontario, after a long decline and a hip fracture.

He is buried in the Basilian Fathers' plot in Holy Cross Cemetery, Thornhill, Ontario.

“Owen” Lee, as he came to be known, attended Saint Luke Elementary School in Detroit, and it was there that one of the nuns, a Sister of Charity who sensed his musical interests, suggested he listen to Saturday opera broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera of New York.

The first opera he ever heard, Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, awoke a passion for opera in the eleven-year-old that affected much of his future life.

After graduating from Catholic Central High School, Detroit, in 1947 and having decided earlier that he wanted to be a priest and teacher, he entered St Basil's Novitiate, Rochester, New York, in August of that year and made profession of first vows in August 1948.

He was appointed to undergraduate studies at St Michael's College. As an American citizen in Canada (where high schools at that time had a grade 13), the advanced, or 'honours', course in which he enrolled demanded five years' of study.

In his first year of college, a reading of parts of Homer's *Iliad* impressed him to the extent that he resolved to major in classical literature.

For his first two years, 1948–50, he commuted to class from Holy Rosary Seminary, Tweedsmuir Ave. The next two years, 1950–2, he lived at St Michael's College, and the final year, 1952–3, at St Basil's Seminary.

He was awarded the Honours B.A. in classics from the University of Toronto in 1953.

As a scholastic, Owen first taught at St Michael's College School, 1953–4, while living and studying theology at St Basil's Seminary.

He was then appointed to teach Latin at St Thomas High School, Houston, 1954–5, after which he resumed his theological studies at St Basil's Seminary and took graduate courses in classics at the University of Toronto.

He obtained the Bachelor in Sacred Theology degree from St Michael's College in 1957 and, in the same year, received the M.A. in classics from the University of Toronto.

He was ordained to the priesthood with sixteen other Basilians on 29 June 1957 in St Basil's Church, Toronto, by Cardinal James Charles McGuigan.

After finishing his fourth year of theology, 1957–8, he went directly into doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia, with residence at St Mark's College, earning a Ph.D. in classics in 1960 with a thesis entitled “The Myth of Orpheus and Euridice in Western Literature.”

He was awarded the Scholarship for Summer Study from the American School of Classical Studies in Athens in 1963.

In his distinguished academic career, Father Lee was a professor of Latin and Greek literature in three different universities: the University of St Michael's College, (three different times: 1960–8, 1975–81, and 1983–95); the University of St Thomas, Houston, 1968–72; and Loyola University, Chicago, 1972–5 (the last year of which was spent teaching for the Loyola “year in Rome” program).

For reasons of chronic bronchitis he took a two-year sabbatical, 1981–3, in Oakland, California, residing there in Bishop O'Dowd High School and teaching occasional evening adult education courses at the University of California, Berkeley.

While always advancing his knowledge in his first loves of opera and classical literature, Owen also became an expert in the history of cinema and in popular music.

It was during his sabbatical in Oakland that he received the first invitation from the Metropolitan Opera of New York City to give radio talks and participate in the Opera Quiz during intermissions of its Saturday broadcasts.

For the next fourteen years, 1984–98, he gave thirty-five of the first-intermission presentations in his soft, distinctive, inimitable voice that reached an estimated 8–10 million households.

He was also one of three panellists in eighty-nine of second-intermission Opera Quizzes.

Those appearances made him so well known that CBC-TV produced a special presentation using video clips showing his routine for delivering those talks: finishing a last class at St Michael's, taking the subway and bus to Pearson Airport, arriving at La Guardia in New York, and then rehearsing and appearing on the Met broadcast, and arriving back in Toronto – often doing parish ministry on Sunday morning.

He also appeared on twenty-three of the Canadian Opera quizzes and gave sixteen radio and television appearances for the CBC and other networks.

Father Lee was awarded four honorary doctorates (University of Windsor, University of St Michael's College, the Catholic University of America, and the University of Toronto).

Among other honours were the Opera Canada Educator “Ruby” Award (2001), the Wagner Society of Washington Award (2001), the creation of “The Father Owen Lee Scholarship Fund” at the University of Toronto (privately endowed), and the Christian Culture Series Gold Medal from Assumption University of Windsor (1993).

The citation for the Outstanding Teacher Award (Humanities) at the University of Toronto (1994) read: Father Lee is described as a spellbinder in the classroom. His outstanding communication skills have made the world of ancient Greece and Rome familiar, comprehensive, and memorable to thousands of undergraduate students.”

In December 2014 the revival of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at the Metropolitan Opera was privately endowed “In honor of Father Owen Lee.”

In his *A Book of Hours: Music, Literature, and Life. A Memoir*, Owen recalls his year in Rome: how on weekends he used his year-long ‘Eurailpass’ to attend over sixty opera performances throughout Europe.

In his lifetime he attended performances of over 900 different operas – some of them several times.

Father Lee was in much demand for academic lectures in which, like his radio broadcasts, he always blended operatic themes with classical literature and theology.

In Toronto he gave the Robson Classical Lectures in 1995, in which he dealt with Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Wagner’s *Parsifal*, and Goethe’s *Faust*. Those lectures formed his book *The Olive-Tree Bed and Other Quests*.

In 1998 one of the three Larkin-Stuart Lectures for Trinity College was followed by an impromptu, lengthy exchange between Father Lee and the celebrated Canadian tenor Jon Vickers. Those lectures were published as *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art* (1999) that was translated into French and published in Paris in 2001.

Father Lee was an associate editor of *The New Saint Basil’s Hymnal* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Ralph Jusko Publications, 1958) for which he composed the texts for four of its hymns and adapted or translated verses of fifteen of its hymns from Latin to English.

He published eighteen other books on the classics, grand opera, and movies, as well as many articles on those and other interests (see the Bibliography below).

Two of the books – *First Intermission* and *A Season of Opera* – contain the texts of the talks for the Saturday Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts that contain his interpretations of the operas’ plots and characters.

Owen’s love of music extended to many other genres. He took great delight in Broadway musicals that he saw as a form of grand opera accessible to a general audience. Probably first among his many favourites was Rogers and Hammerstein’s *Carousel*, from which on countless occasions he played the songs by ear on the piano.

He knew, played, and sang the popular songs of the 1930s through the 1950s. He could tell anyone the top ten songs on the radio broadcast “Hit Parade” for the week in which they were born.

Father Lee spent the first fifteen years of his retirement from teaching in residence with the Basilian Fathers of the University of St Michael’s College, where he continued his life-long practices of listening, reading, and writing.

In 2010, while suffering from the effects of a case of shingles that he had waited too long to have diagnosed, he fell and broke a leg in three places.

The leg was badly set, and he was confined to a wheelchair in Anglin House, the Basilian retirement facility for infirm confreres.

In November 2018 he moved with the other confreres to a new facility, Presentation Manor, in the Toronto suburb of Scarborough.

Following a decline in his general health, a broken hip sent him to hospital; but, with the onset of infection and in a painful, inoperable condition, he died in palliative care at Presentation Manor in the early morning of 25 July.

Near the end of his memoir, *A Book of Hours* (2004, p. 283), Father Lee summed up one important facet of his life's work: "... at the overcrowded, underfunded university some students still want to know about the languages and literatures of Greece and Rome, about poetry and music, about Catholicism, about the long traditions of all of these, about the Golden Bough and the Holy Grail and the inscrutable love of God – and those are what I, despite my insufficiencies, busied myself with until I reached these emeritus days'."

Tributes from many confreres were recorded in *The Basilian Newsletter* (August 2019). Among them Bill Irwin, CSB, remarked, "For all the knowledge and the fun there was no one who took being a Catholic priest more seriously than Owen. For me the day of his death will be the day the music died."

SOURCES: GABF.

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- *R "Outstanding Teachers Honoured." Fast News: Faculty of Arts and Science, University of Toronto* (April 1994) 1. *The Globe and Mail*, (25 July 1986).
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