

ALTAR SERVER ANSWERS GOD'S CALL FOR MORE THAN 80 YEARS

Don Dauksts shines his shoes every Sunday morning. He smiles through 87-year-old eyes. "I got special brushes," he said.

Sure enough, his footwear is the shiniest pair in the whole place, which in this case means Our Lady of Aglona, a Catholic church on Grand Rapids' West Side that serves as a second home to the Latvian faithful in the area.

It's here — in an aging brick edifice across from St. Mary Catholic Church where you might never find friendlier people — where Don humbly plays out a special role usually reserved for kids eight decades his junior. Don is an altar server, and perhaps one of the oldest and longest-serving altar servers in the world.

"I've asked the other guys, 'Who wants to do it?'" he says in broken English. Then he shrugs and waves his arms to demonstrate there aren't any other takers at the little church that counts perhaps 50 among its regular attendees. "So I'm used to it," he says. "I just enjoy myself."



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on began his ministry on the altar when he was a boy of seven, serving alongside his twin brother at a small country church in his Latvian homeland. Back then, long before the days of Vatican II, servers were required to learn all the prayers and responses in Latin.

At the age of 10 or so, he recalls having a hand in building a church in the old country, and how “I used a horse and buggy to pull stones” for the church’s construction.

He served at Latvia’s Basilica of Our Lady of Aglona as a youngster. In his early 20s, he continued in his devotion alongside Catholic military chaplains, prelates and bishops visiting troops and Latvians who had fled an advancing Soviet empire during World War II; friends and neighbors who found themselves in camps for displaced persons.

Closer to home, he’s continued to serve Mass for local priests since coming to this country more than a half-century ago, including the last 28 consecutive years for the West Side Latvian church, part of a long legacy that commands a deep measure of respect.

His wife, Anna, also from Latvia, emphasizes that 70 and 80 years ago, “It was a big honor” for a household to count an altar boy among its children. “Moms wanted their sons to be servers,” she says. Her eyes twinkle. “But you had to behave in church.”

Don and Anna attended the same grade school, though they were eight years apart in age. “She was naughty,” Don says of his wife. “She’s naughty now, too.”

In the next moment, though, he’s all business. Father Eugene Golas stands at the ready for Mass to begin, and as the final few take their seats, Don moves to the left side of the altar, ready to assist just like virtually every Sunday that he’s assisted priests over the last 80 years.

“So long ago, it used to be two and two,” he says, referring to the total number of four boys who graced the altar back in days of old. “Now,” he says, “just me.”

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A humble man serves a humble church

On this chilly October morning, 44 men and women take their places on everything from wooden benches to folding chairs. Only three are under the age of 30. Most are 60 and over, but with little exception, they all speak Latvian, and that’s the language in which Mass in this humble church is said, every Sunday and almost always at 10 a.m.

The faithful include Don’s extended family, wife Anna among them. She emigrated to the United States in 1940, one of many Latvians sponsored by Americans who expected the foreigners they took in to work for them in exchange for the price of a ticket overseas.

Don ended up in England, then Canada. The couple



>> Dauksts lights the altar candle before a recent Mass at Our Lady of Aglona.



>> Dauksts prepares the cruet and manuterge, the towel used by the priest during the washing of the hands, during a recent Mass at Our Lady of Aglona.



>> Dauksts offers the cruet and manuterge to Father Eugene Golas.

80 years of altar serving and counting

Don Dauksts might not be the oldest-ever altar server to step up and assist at Mass. But with 80 years under his belt – or, in this case, a cincture – he certainly qualifies as one of the longest-serving altar servers in modern history.

A review of anecdotal literature available on the Internet reveals that at least two gentlemen have laid claim to being altar servers for more than 80 years – Philip Battey and Peter Staley, both of the United Kingdom.

That leaves plenty of room for Don Dauksts to reign at least among the top altar servers in the U.S., both in terms of the oldest and longest-serving.

In December 2002, Patrick Marshall



died in Wales, England, claiming to have served Masses from the age of 6 until his death at 92 – reflecting a service of 86 years. An online article from the BBC News cites Peter Staley for having served 82 years, and how he received an apostolic blessing and decorated scroll from Pope John Paul II for his lengthy service. That same story refers to the previous holder of the world record for the longest-serving altar boy having died in 1999, after serving some 81 years.

In June 2005, Philip Battey was recognized in the Manchester Evening News for serving Masses for 83 years. A former Royal Air Force medic, he reportedly served 10 different rectors and parish priests at St. Charles Catholic Church in England. He also served Masses in schoolrooms, barracks and remote areas of Africa, where he was stationed as a nursing orderly.

Regardless if Don Dauksts is the longest serving in the U.S., or among the longest serving in the world, he is simply a man with a mission – to serve his community, his fellow Latvians, our priests – and the Lord.

To learn more about the ministry of altar serving, visit usccb.org/liturgy/q%26a/mass/altar.shtml.

eventually reunited in the U.S., and were married in 1955. They have four children – John; Lucia; Monika, and Vanda.

Both Don and Anna worked during most of their adult lives – she at Keebler Co. Bakery, and Don at General Motors. She labored days, he nights. “We’d meet more or less in the driveway,” Anna recalls. “That way, the kids always had someone to come home to.”

In choosing West Michigan as their home – they reside on Perry Street in Wyoming – the Dauksts family joined many other Latvians who relocated here during the 1950s. They looked to the Diocese of Grand Rapids for a spiritual base, and in 1951, Bishop Francis J. Haas appointed Father Stanislaus Matiss responsible for attending to the needs of the ever-growing Latvian faithful here.

They first assembled in the basement of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, and later moved to a church the diocese had purchased at 348 Mt. Vernon NW. Little did anyone know, though, that it was directly in the path of the S-curve that would become a part of the emerging US-131 through Grand Rapids. By 1961, Our Lady of Aglona was re-established at its present location, 507 Broadway Avenue NW.

The Grand Rapids apostolate pays homage to Our Lady of Aglona, the patroness of Latvia. Throughout all of Latvia, in fact, Catholics have long honored Christ’s Blessed Mother in various incarnations. In the capital city of Riga, the cathedral is dedicated to Our Lady Assumed into Heaven.

Because so many of the current members at Our Lady of Aglona here are getting on in years, they’ve abandoned the main sanctuary on the upper floor in favor of Masses on the ground floor, where fewer steps are necessary. The location doubles as a kitchen and serving

area, with Masses prayed on the north side, a makeshift altar set up before that hodgepodge of chairs and benches. To watch and listen to the Latvians respond in their native tongue is to bear witness to devotion through the ages. Though Father Golas isn’t fluent himself, he knows enough to speak some of the prayers and a song or two, and presents the rest in English – a harmonious blend of two tongues, one heart.

His white-haired altar boy doesn’t don a cossack and surplice, but stands vigil in a blue pinstripe suit. Don’s presence is a subtle one.



>> Dauksts and his daughter Monika look over the family’s Mass books that have been in the pews at Our Lady of Aglona, a Latvian Catholic church in downtown Grand Rapids, for decades.



“**And there at the priest’s side is the diminutive Don Dauksts, who at 87 is more than seven years older than the clergyman he serves, incapable to the end of denying a calling he’s been hearing since he was a little boy.**”

He bows his head three times during the confiteor, and of course twice during the consecration of bread and wine to body and blood.

He’s pressed into action during the offertory, when duty calls for him to assist in the pouring of water and wine into the priest’s chalice. Father Golas handles Communion in solo fashion, but then calls again on Don to help tidy up after Mass and take his vestments into a small side sacristy.

During today’s homily, Father Golas focuses on how “God is calling us...again and again,” and that “It’s easy to be attached to what we want,” but “how do we respond” to a supplication from our maker.

“The call of the Lord is always there,” Father Golas reminds. “Do we respond generously? Do we follow him?”

And there at the priest’s side is the diminutive Don Dauksts, who, at 87, is more than seven years older than the clergyman he serves, incapable to the end of denying a calling he’s been hearing since he was a little boy.

Don says he’ll continue to serve as long as he’s healthy. His vision is an immediate concern, since being diagnosed recently with acute macular degeneration in both eyes. He also struggles with sore legs, something for which he rises once or twice a night to treat.

But it likely will take a major setback to keep this devoted gentleman from serving his small but vibrant Latvian community.

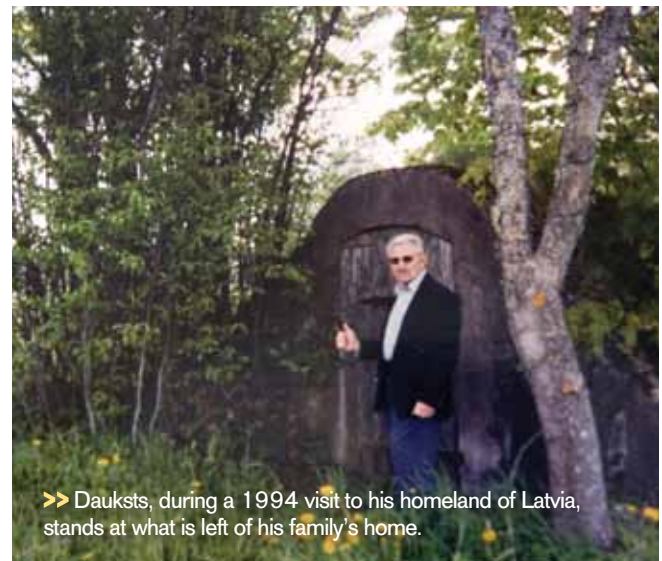
“It’s awesome that he’s so committed,” says Rachel Zoet, 24, who is engaged to Don’s grandson, Druvis Gerrits, 21.

Says Druvis of his grandfather, “I definitely think it doesn’t matter how old you are. It matters how passionate you are, and he’s a man who’s definitely passionate.”

And that’s largely true of perhaps everything in Don’s life – right down to his shoes – something wife Anna has taken a long interest in just about as much as her beloved husband.

“A man with dirty shoes – we learned a long time ago you don’t take that one for a husband,” she says. “My sister’s the same way – we look for a man with the shiny shoes.” ☺

* This story acknowledges as sources a historical sketch of the history of Our Lady of Aglona Church authored by the Rev. Dennis Morrow, as well as a narrative on Don Dauksts prepared by daughter Monika.



“Dauksts, during a 1994 visit to his homeland of Latvia, stands at what is left of his family’s home.”

“Tom Rademacher served 31 years as reporter and columnist for *The Grand Rapids Press*. This is his second cover story for *Faith Magazine*. You can reach him online at: rademachertom@gmail.com”