SPECIAL EDUCATION PIONEER MSGR. ELMER BEHRMANN DIES 
Founded Program for Special Needs Children, First of Its Kind in a Catholic Diocese

ST. LOUIS — Msgr. Elmer H. Behrmann, founder and first executive director of the Department of Special Education of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, has died, on May 8, 2006, at the age of 93. Msgr. Behrmann was widely recognized as a pioneer in the education of children with special needs. His expertise was acknowledged when he was invited to serve as an advisor to President John F. Kennedy on issues relating to persons with mental retardation.

In 1950, Msgr. Behrmann founded the Department of Special Education, the first program of its kind in a Catholic diocese, at a time when persons with mental retardation were considered uneducable. Msgr. Behrmann enlisted the support of then Archbishop Joseph Ritter, maintaining that the education of special needs children was a matter of social justice. The education of special children subsequently became his life’s work, and what Msgr. Behrmann called “the love of [his] life.”

The Department of Special Education was first established in several dedicated classrooms at selected parish schools of the archdiocese. These classrooms would become the launching ground for a program that assisted children with learning disabilities, then a newly recognized condition. Today, there are two schools — Annunziata in Ladue and the Academy at St. Rose Philippine Duchesne in Florissant — as well as classrooms in several parish schools that host this division of the Department’s curriculum.

In 1952, Msgr. Behrmann acquired the building that formerly housed St. Mary’s Orphanage on Emerson Avenue in north St. Louis. There he established a residential education program under the name St. Mary’s Special School for Exceptional Children. The residential program would continue at this location for 46 years, until its closing in 1998.
In 1990, St. Mary’s began a preschool program of early intervention for children with developmental disabilities. Since the closing of the residential program in 1998, St. Mary’s Preschool has continued at 1724 Redman Road in Spanish Lake, on the campus of Trinity High School, and now also at St. Mary’s Preschool–South, 2400 Union Road in Lemay, which opened in 2005. Both programs care for children of all abilities.

“To say simply that Msgr. Behrmann was the founder of the Department of Special Education doesn’t begin to express the extent of his influence and the significance of his work,” said Msgr. Vernon E. Gardin, vicar general of the Archdiocese of St. Louis and current director of the Department of Special Education, with which he has been associated since 1976. “His vision of special education was of such depth and scope that it continues to guide the mission of the Department to this very day, and it will continue to do so for years to come.”

Elmer Henry Behrmann was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on October 31, 1912, the son of Henry Behrmann and Gertrude Stempel Behrmann. He was baptized at St. Henry Catholic Church, a German parish on the city’s south side. Behrmann undertook his studies for the priesthood at St. Louis Preparatory Seminary and Kenrick Seminary, and was ordained on June 11, 1938, at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis. Following ordination, and prior to his founding of the Department of Special Education, he served at Holy Cross Parish, Holy Family Parish, St. Wenceslaus Parish, the Basilica of St. Louis (Old Cathedral), and St. Liborius Parish. He also served as a chaplain in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1946. On three occasions, Behrmann was named in the Papal Honors, by which he was accorded the title “Monsignor”: in 1961 (Chaplain of His Holiness), 1967 (Prelate of Honor), and 2003 (Protonotary Apostolic).

Visitation for Msgr. Behrmann will be from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. on Thursday, May 11, 2006, at Hoffmeister Colonial Mortuary, 6464 Chippewa Avenue, in St. Louis. The Funeral Mass will take place at 10 a.m. on Friday, May 12, 2006, at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis, 4431 Lindell Boulevard, in St. Louis.

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