



## The Tobacco Priest: The Story of Reverend John Uyen

Outreach to the community can be done in a number of ways, but the way in which Reverend John Uyen performed his outreach is striking: his work with tobacco farmers and workers is still remembered to this day. However, Reverend Uyen did many more things, all of which illustrate his compassion and concern for his community.



John Uyen was born on October 29, 1907, to John Uyen and Wilhelmina Steenaert in Nymegan, Holland. He came to Canada at an early age, attending St. Martin's Separate School in London as a child, before moving on to De LaSalle Academy, and then the University of Western Ontario and St. Peter's Seminary. He was ordained June 10, 1933 at St. Peter's Cathedral, by Bishop John T. Kidd.

From 1933-1935 he was assistant pastor at Our Lady Help of Christians Parish, Wallaceburg, before becoming administrator at St. John Brebeuf and Companions in Delhi from 1935-1939. He would go on to become pastor at the same parish from 1939-1958. It was in Delhi where he began the work he is most known for, starting with building a church in Delhi, as well as helping to build a national parish for the Hungarian community in Courtland.

Perhaps his two biggest causes were his support for the tobacco farmers, and giving food and lodging for transient workers in Delhi; the two causes were closely linked, as the workers often harvested tobacco in the fields. This concern for both employees and employers showed Reverend Uyen's generous spirit. His work with tobacco farmers was so influential that he was called the 'Tobacco Priest,' and, alongside his usual duties, he wrote a column in the *Canadian Tobacco Grower* magazine, as well as posthumously winning the Tobacco Recognition Award in 1995.

His humanitarian spirit was proven time and time again during his ministry, such as when a hailstorm wiped out ten percent of the local tobacco crop; rising to the challenge,

Reverend Uyen fed people through his ‘soup kitchen,’ which fed people three meals a day. His work was recognized when he was named Monsignor, Domestic Prelate, in 1962.

From 1958-1967, he was pastor at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Chatham. In January of 1964, the church caught fire, destroying the interior. He renovated it and altered it to suit the changes brought forth by the Second Vatican Council. He later redecorated the rectory in 1966.

By June of 1967, he asked for a less demanding assignment, and was appointed pastor at Sacred Heart Parish in Langton. Unfortunately, his tenure there did not last long: he died suddenly in November of 1968. He was remembered fondly by both Catholics and Protestants alike, and known for being a “great humanitarian.”

*Tiffany Champagne, M.L.I.S.  
Volunteer Archivist  
August 31, 2015*