

Pastor's Perspectives on "My Vocation Story"

The following series of articles were published in the bulletin from May 1 to June 19, 2022. They are collated here into one article.

***My Vocation Story and Priesthood for the Archdiocese of Detroit**

At this year's Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday morning, Archbishop Vigneron announced a year devoted to praying for vocations to the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Detroit. This year of prayer will begin on Pentecost weekend of June 4/5 and will last until Pentecost 2023. We will add prayers specifically for vocations to the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Detroit to our weekly prayers. This is not to imply that we should pray only for those priestly vocations. All of us who are baptized are invited to see our lives as vocations, as calls from God to witness to God's life and word in what we do. The Church needs vocations to all walks of life, not just to the priesthood or vowed religious life, as important as those are. Rather, this specific focus is in response to a very clear need in our Archdiocese. Without sufficient priests, we cannot have thriving Eucharist-centered communities of faith. Having sufficient numbers of priests does not guarantee this (one must have priests who have a heart for people and for service), but it is impossible without a sufficient number of priests.

Why the concern in this Archdiocese? This year there will be no priests ordained for the Archdiocese, though several have taken a step toward priesthood next year by being ordained as transitional deacons. Over the next ten years the projection is that fewer than four men per year will be ordained for the Archdiocese as priests. Even though during the past ten years that average was about six per year, the number of active priests who died or became senior priests (and so no longer are on active assignment) was nearly double the number ordained. In other words, the numbers tell a very compelling story. We will have significantly fewer priests in ten years than we do now, and even now we are experiencing some significant re-organization of parishes due to the current numbers.

Three initial thoughts given the above: First, it would be wrong to panic, to be discouraged, or to somehow think that ordained priesthood is dying. That is not true. What is true is that ordained priesthood will have to continue to cooperate with groups of ecclesial lay ministers and permanent deacons in a way that will change what is expected of an ordained priest. Parishes will have to have fewer worship times; priests will have to cooperate better with each other in covering sacramental needs; more administrative responsibilities will need to be delegated or even let go of completely. In other words, we will never get back, in the foreseeable future, to the numbers of priests we had in the mid-20th century, when priests were in charge of everything in a parish. Those numbers, viewed historically on a larger scale, were an anomaly due to the great influx of Catholic immigrants into the country from the late-19th to the mid-20th century, the large size of families, the huge esteem given to priests in those immigrant communities, and the opportunity for higher education that entering seminary afforded. But that might be a good thing, overall. The richness of parish priestly life is the involvement in the lives of the people. Something new happens every day, or a new opportunity arises to connect to people. What a richly rewarding life diocesan priesthood is, for those who choose it!

Second, although this is not necessary nor would it happen quickly, the next stage of diocesan priestly ministry, given the reality of the situation, might create the possibility that more bishops would be open to certain married men being ordained to the priesthood. That would be a huge step and would not happen in the short term, but our longer tradition has embraced married men as priests in the past, and our Eastern Church brothers and sisters have never stopped this practice. I know there are many bishops who think that celibacy is the ideal situation for a priest—letting go of attachments to wife, children, home, etc.—but it seems to me that the Holy Spirit might be offering the Church an opportunity to think

through this issue anew. Too many are worried that if we begin thinking in this direction, we will never get anyone to commit to a non-married priesthood. Or, they think of all that will go wrong if we allow married priests—divorces and other public scandals. But it is not as though we celibate priests have not caused our own significant problems and scandals! Moreover, as mentioned above, there is a hugely rewarding consequence to devoting one's life fully to parish ministry. For me, it comes down to the question of whether we trust in the Holy Spirit or whether we want to control that Spirit.

Third, I truly believe that every Catholic young man should consider the possibility that God is calling him to the priesthood. I think there are four moments in the journey of life, when that call can be heard most clearly. One is in our younger years (6th–8th grade). A young man enjoys serving at the altar, learning about his faith, has a heart for service, finds himself enthralled with reading the Bible, and so forth. It does not mean for sure that he is called to the priesthood, but it warrants at least some reflection, learning about priesthood, maybe going to some vocational events at the seminary, and so on. A second moment is toward the end of high school, where college (and perhaps job) decisions are being made. Much like in the first moment, a number of Catholic teens have a certain ease with faith, prayer and service. Go on a discernment weekend in the seminary. Take time in prayer and directly ask the Lord to show you whether you have a vocation to priesthood. A third moment is at the end of college. Here it can be a natural extension of continued connection to the Church through one's college years, or one might experience a very powerful moment of conversion, where the direction one is going in is called into question and a road toward God and leadership in the Church opens up. A fourth moment can come in the midst of one's early career. You start as a lawyer, a business person, an entrepreneur, a salesman, a teacher, or whatever, and you find yourself dissatisfied, with something tugging at the heart, recognizing that no secular career will really allow you to give all of yourself to something bigger than you. That might be a moment of God's Spirit inviting you to look to the priesthood! Depending on what is going on in the life of your sons at any of these moments, I would hope that all parents and grandparents would encourage their sons or grandsons to be open to a call to the priesthood, if they have a sense that God is calling them to it.

Over the month of May, I will share my own priestly vocation story. I did so early on in my time here and will write about it once again, in the hope that both parents and young men of the parish will see that priesthood is truly, deeply, personally rewarding, that I have no regrets in making that decision forty-two years ago, and that it might encourage one or more to seriously consider entering priestly formation.

I grew up in a very Catholic family—no question about Sunday Mass, being involved in many different ways in the parish, interacting with some of the parish priests in more informal ways, attending Catholic grade school and high school. I do not ever remember thinking seriously about being a priest while growing up. I was focused on the present and what was most immediately in front of me—school, school activities, sports (football, basketball, baseball, summer softball), friends, family, family vacations and the like. Also, I was (still am) a voracious reader and so a good book was enough to turn any day into a good day.

I found that I enjoyed most of what was happening in life, including school, and life went by slowly enough in those years that I never really worried about “what I would be/do” when I grew up; I just took it a year or season at a time. It helped, of course, that there was a lot of stability in family life and that we always had more than enough of whatever we needed. It was a very good, very comfortable, even easy life. It was a great way for a child to grow up. However, not a life that forced me to think too seriously about the bigger questions of life, at least up through high school. These were all just a “given.”

It was the decision for college and the college years that became key to my sense of vocation. My older

brother was at Notre Dame and my older sister enrolled the previous year at St. Mary's college for women next to Notre Dame. It would have been natural for me to go to Notre Dame as well, but I chose to go to the University of Michigan. I just knew I did not want to go to another setting where all the "givens" in life—God, faith, how to live, etc.—were taken for granted.

Looking back, I would say that I had a vague sense that I needed to truly "grow up" and to begin to figure what life was all about from my own perspective. At the time, it was just a sense that I wanted to do something different from my brother and sister, while at the same time being able to connect back to family whenever I wanted. By the grace of God (and I truly believe that), the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor proved to be the setting for me to recognize that I needed a vocation in life that would be big enough to capture all my energy and imagination. More next time.

School studies were never a huge challenge for me, which was both good and bad. It meant that I did well in whatever classes I took but it also meant, for me, that I had no real solid sense of what direction I should take in my studies. I ended up with a major in mathematics almost by default. It was the easiest one for me to complete a major in (during high school I was able to complete a number of college math credits) and I kind of liked the image of one day being a mathematics professor. But other than that superficial sense, I really had no burning desire to commit to a mathematics future. In effect, the intellectual part of going to college, while enjoyable and interesting in addition to math, I took several astronomy and physics courses, a number of history and literature courses, as well as various philosophy courses), ended up secondary to the greater question of just what was life all about?

For the first time, being on my own, the questions and answers were up to me:

- When and where to "go to church"?
- What do I even believe, anyway?
- Whom to hang out with?
- How much to drink and how hard to party (remember, those were the years when the legal drinking age in Michigan was 18 and a certain type of cigarette was easy to indulge in)?
- Whom to date, and when and whom should you have a sexual relationship with?

In other words, a shift from a sheltered to a very unsheltered, uncensored environment. It could easily have proved overwhelming and even destructive of what I would have claimed were core values. But, truly by the grace of God, I found myself gravitating toward a group of people who took faith and prayer seriously, and I became intrigued by their stance in life.

The Catholic student parish on campus—St. Mary's—had Masses that were engaging and lively. A weekly late night Sunday Mass allowed students to get their assignments done, even go out for a bit of partying and still have a chance to worship together on a weekly basis. The priests at the time had engaging homilies, especially one whose approach to matters of faith resonated with my own. I could question my faith and explore alternative ways to understand the meaning of the Catholic faith without feeling I was abandoning my faith. Looking back now, he was a relatively young priest who ended up leaving the priesthood after about ten years of being ordained, but he was exactly who I needed to listen to in order to keep engaged in my Catholic faith.

This was also the time of the charismatic renewal; Ann Arbor had a large prayer community that was making a name for itself across the country. It turned out that many of the students involved in the lively liturgies at the student chapel were also participants in that prayer community called the Word of God Community. I ended up becoming intrigued and attended the prayer meetings and became very active in the prayer community. Its spontaneous style of prayer and trust that God's Holy Spirit was present and

active in each person has influenced my own spirituality deeply. Although I never found myself comfortable with its structure and leadership (it ended up becoming very rigid and way too certain that it knew exactly what God wanted for everyone's life), I did find a temporary faith home there, especially with those also connected to the Catholic parish and student dorms. It was within that environment—ongoing college studies were a given but the main focus of my energy connected to a prayer community and the student chapel—that I first seriously considered the question of priesthood. Continued next time.

It was during my college years that I first seriously thought about the priesthood; not just the priesthood, but about the purpose and meaning of life. What direction in life could I commit myself to enthusiastically, whole-heartedly, unreservedly? I knew that I would finish college with a B.A. in mathematics and that degree was a fairly decent one if I wanted to go on to teach or even continue in grad school in other areas. I also knew that I was not “grabbed” by any of these options. So, in my senior year at the University of Michigan, my thoughts turned for the first time in a serious way to the possibility of the priesthood.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to connect many parts of my life up to that point: family background and practice of the faith, priests I admired at the parish growing up, at the high school I attended, or at the university parish; the personal desire to explore the “big” questions of life that philosophy and theology touch on; something that could capture my imagination sufficiently to be able to envision a life-long commitment; the openness to prayer and the Holy Spirit I was experiencing being part of a faith community; the avenue it provided to serve others and to serve God. But how does one decide such a big decision? And what type of priest? The two I was most familiar with were diocesan priests and Jesuits, and though either would lead to the priesthood, they are very different vocations. There were, however, any number of religious orders whose mission and ministry were quite interesting to me.

During my senior year at college, I contacted the vocation director in the Archdiocese of Detroit to begin some type of discernment or decision-making process. It so happened that a new program was just starting up in the Chicago area for men who had completed college, but were not ready to make a decision about priesthood. The Archdiocese was finding that a number of men, even if they had attended college seminary, were not sure about priesthood and did not want to immediately move into graduate level seminary. The Archdiocese of Chicago had set up what they called a “peer ministry” program for just such a situation. Each of us was paired with a priest who was a fulltime college campus minister and who acted as our mentor for the year. We helped with the campus ministry at the college in order to deepen a sense of what is involved in ministry, and we lived in a communal setting to encourage prayer and support. In my case, I lived in a rectory in Chicago Heights with a priest who was responsible for campus ministry at Prairie State College and South Holland Community College.

In many ways, looking back, I am amazed that the experience led me to enter the seminary. The ministry was difficult. Imagine going into two college campuses, which had no campus ministry before and with no personal experience of campus ministry and no obvious credentials, and trying to meet and gather college-aged students together for some type of discussion, prayer, and social interaction. I had very little of what might be termed “success” at initiating many connections. On the ministry side, outwardly, it was a year more of failure than success. Moreover, the priest who was supposed to be my mentor was going through a vocation crisis at that point and was absent for long stretches. He was in a relationship with a woman which would lead him, at the end of the school year, to leave priesthood and get married. Yet, by the end of that year, I was pretty convinced that I should become a priest for the Archdiocese of Detroit. So, I applied to and was accepted into the seminary program for Detroit at St. John's Provincial Seminary

in Plymouth, Michigan. More next time.

During the year in Chicago, I had a growing sense, deep down at the gut level, that it felt right to pursue a vocation to priesthood. I went on a discernment weekend at the local Augustinian community and continued to mull over the idea of the Jesuit order verse the diocesan priesthood. In the course of the year one thing became abundantly clear—I did not find any energy in thinking about joining a religious order community, where the focus is on living together in community and being committed to a religious order’s specific mission. It was also very clear to me that my living situation was not meant to be my community, rather the people I interacted with, ministered with and to, they were my community. That was a huge discernment for me. It meant, if I were to choose priesthood, a religious order was not my path, rather the diocesan priesthood. Since I was a Detroit area native, that meant the Archdiocese of Detroit.

At that time, the process of formation required a college degree with a minor in philosophy and some pre-requisites in sociology, psychology and theology. For some reason, no pre-requisites were needed in math (smile). I had pursued a fairly wide range of studies in college and so I was lacking only a sociology course and one more philosophy course. I left Chicago at the end of the school year (May, 1976) and enrolled for the fall semester at St. John’s Provincial Seminary in Plymouth, Michigan. I took a summer sociology course and was allowed to make up the philosophy credits by taking a reading course on the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas with Sacred Heart College Seminary’s best known philosophy professor at the time, Fr. Paul Berg. I also received a reading list for my first course in graduate theology which included about twelve difficult books the professor expected us to either have read or be reading by the time we started on the first day! Most of my classmates hated it—too much reading. I loved it.

The seminary program at that time was three and a half years long, during which time we took over 100 credits in graduate level theology, Scripture, church history, field education and pastoral counseling. We were also able to register at the University of Detroit and take some extra courses in religious studies so that at the end of the process we were able to have both a Masters in Divinity degree (the basic seminary, clergy degree) and a Masters in Religious Studies. Community life consisted of morning and evening prayer and daily Mass as well as shared meals, but we were given a lot of freedom to be involved in parishes or other activities during our time in seminary. There was a conscious effort to make the seminary more “real life”-oriented, with lay men and women involved in all courses, even the core theological and liturgical ones. The seminary was focused on preparing us for working in parishes, as co-workers of men and women who were as competent and qualified as we were. The emphasis on priesthood was not as “men set apart for priesthood” but as “servant leaders in collaboration with others.”

This model was ideal for me, since I had not come from a college seminary program and had no interest in monastic or religious communal life. Also, at least in my mind, it better reflected the vision opened up by the Second Vatican Council and the renewal envisioned by the Archdiocese of Detroit in its 1969 Synod. It was an attempt to recognize that seminary formation based on a monastic model—as it had been for over four hundred years—had to be re-shaped. But the type of formation I received was short-lived. During the time of Pope John Paul II’s leadership there was a worry that priesthood was losing its distinctive character and so a more regimented, semi-monastic model was re-instituted, emphasizing the distinctiveness of priesthood over those who are not ordained; allowing seminarians to interact with lay students, but reserving the Masters of Divinity degree and core theological and liturgical courses to seminarians alone. There are strengths and weaknesses in any model, but I am grateful to have been formed in the manner that was current in my time in the seminary. Everything about it both strengthened

my vocation and prepared me for the real life of a priest in the parish. More next time.

Before any ordination (deacon, priest, bishop) the candidate takes a retreat, both as a way to prepare for the ordination and as a final discernment confirming the step one is about to take. In my deacon retreat I can remember struggling a bit with the permanence of the decision to be ordained. Yes, people can leave priesthood, if necessary. But one does not enter into ordination (or marriage or any life-defining commitment) with a sense of “trying it out for awhile”. If I were to get ordained, I wanted to be in this for the duration. Or else, why do it? I remember a windy, cold night prior to ordination as a deacon where I took a walk outside in a snowstorm and felt a bit overwhelmed by the permanence of the decision and the perceived obligations that came with that. I plopped myself down on the ground, protected by some bushes, pulled the winter parka over my face, and wondered aloud (to God) just how I would be able to do this.

No dramatic epiphany ensued. Just a cold rear end from sitting on the ground too long (!), but also a sense that I was missing the basic point. I had no real doubt that I should be ordained. It felt right; it made rational sense; it would be good for me to be ordained; I would be good for the people of God, if I were ordained. Yes, it was a life-long commitment with various requirements attached (like a promise of obedience to the bishop and a promise of celibacy) and my decision needed to embrace that aspect, but all I could do at the moment—at any moment really—was make the best present decision and deal with the consequences. And, so I did. I was ordained a deacon on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (December 8) in 1979 and then ordained a priest on June 21, 1980.

One thing I learned from that pre-ordination experience is the importance of making the decision daily to be a priest. Yes, I made a life-long commitment nearly forty-two years ago. But that lifelong commitment needs to be re-affirmed every day, doesn't it? That's true of marriage. It is true of our baptism and our identity as Christians. All mark us permanently in some way, but they can only be lived one moment, one day at a time. It helps me approach each liturgy as though it is the first and only one I will be celebrating. It helps me remember that this funeral, this visit to the sick, this priestly prayer or act of service is unique to the moment. I often joke with close friends that I have yet to decide what I really want to be when I grow up, because I am deciding each day. In the meantime, each day, it seems right and good for me to be a priest, within the context of having already committed the rest of my life to being a priest.

My first assignment (St. William, Walled Lake) was a one-year only assignment, which was true of all newly ordained deacons in my class. The idea was that we could “learn the ropes” and ease into parish ministry without worrying about any mistakes made, since we would be re-assigned after one year! We could spend the whole year as a deacon and then be ordained priest and re-assigned. Or, we could spend six months as a deacon; be ordained a priest; then six months as a priest in that same assignment. I chose the latter, figuring it would be best to have a chance to “practice” being a priest, before being assigned on a longer term basis somewhere.

My first full assignment was to St. Christopher Parish in Detroit. Knowing it would be for at least three and possibly four years, and being the first full one, you throw yourself into it completely. Get involved in everything possible. Attend all meetings of groups. Get to know the children and school families. Meet parishioners in their homes. And so on. But then a call came from Bishop Gumbleton, when I was only eleven months into the assignment and really enjoying it, that I needed to leave St. Christopher and become the full-time chaplain at Bishop Borgess High School. It was like a punch in the gut. Wait a minute. I thought I had time to develop relationships here at the parish for a few more years. I did not

ask to be a high school chaplain and I loved the variety of people and ages at the parish. But that's diocesan priesthood—ordained not for one parish alone but for the needs of the Church of the whole archdiocese. Of course, I am always one who believes true wisdom comes from discernment only if one is honest with oneself and others who are trying to make decisions. I told the bishop I thought it was a mistake to assign me full-time as a high school chaplain; that it would be better to be half associate pastor at the parish and half chaplain. We ended up settling on 3/4 chaplain and 1/4 associate pastor (which really meant full-time chaplain and full-time associate pastor!). I continued to learn much about parish ministry from my pastors (Fr. Ed Ritter and then Fr. Terry Kerner) and found myself stretched outside my usual comfort zone (that's a good thing) in dealing with the students and faculty at the high school.

In my third year at the high school (fourth at the parish) I wanted to pursue some more theological studies. It was always a passion of mine and I thought I could be an asset as a theology teacher/professor. So, I contacted Archbishop Szoka and asked about the possibility of being sent for further studies. He said that would be fine but that I should go and study canon law. I thought and prayed about it and knew that would not be a good fit for me. I said that, if I were to go study, it would only make sense to do so in theology. He said that it was either canon law or nothing. I said "Then nothing it is." Disappointed somewhat, but I knew in my gut that canon law was not right for me. And I was quite happy in parish ministry. A month later I got a call from the Archbishop's secretary saying that they were sending me for further studies in theology, starting that fall.

I enrolled at K.U. Leuven (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium), lived at the American College there, and took courses toward a licentiate in sacred theology. It is a degree sort of between a masters and a doctorate. What those two years did for me was to solidify my whole outlook on life and allowed me the time to develop a very strong and deep theological understanding of the Church, of Christ, of God. Every homily I give and every article I write in some way reflects an aspect of that time in Belgium. I spent one summer living with a family in a small town in Germany, in order to re-acquaint myself with the German language (so I could use it for reading in theology). I was able to fill in for a few weeks for the local parish priest, celebrating Mass in German, giving homilies (which I first would give to the children of the house to see if they made sense), and hearing confessions. The experience stretched me to the limit at times, but it was so worthwhile.

I had been given permission to spend four years away from the diocese in order to get the doctorate, but as my licentiate was coming to a conclusion, I made a decision to end studies at the licentiate level. I felt that committing to a doctorate was committing to entering the academic arena nearly exclusively, and I did not want to do that. The licentiate essentially certifies you as capable of teaching authentic Catholic theology at any level. This was especially true at Leuven, which insisted you become competent in biblical studies, church history, moral theology and dogmatic theology. And for me that was sufficient.

Back in ministry in Detroit I was assigned to Orchard Lake's SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, which trained Polish-born seminarians for ministry in the United States. I taught there for four years, teaching moral and systematic theology. But I asked to live not on the campus but at a parish, and so lived in the rectory at Our Lady of Refuge with the pastor (Fr. Bill Murphy). You can see from what I have written above, that one of the recurrent themes throughout my diocesan priesthood is that I both desire and need and have found community at the parish level. Each time that happens it strongly reaffirms the commitment I made to diocesan priesthood. In that sense, every parish has had a role in strengthening my vocation as a priest, including, of course, St. Regis Parish. More next time.

In the fourth year at Orchard Lake, the diocese decided to close St. John's Seminary in Plymouth, consolidating both college and graduate schools at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit. I was asked to be part of the seminary faculty at Sacred Heart. In planning the transition, the "powers that be" insisted that seminarians be taught theology differently than lay students. It was a decision I again had to bring to prayer and discernment. Saying yes to that arrangement would guarantee me a long-term assignment in teaching theology, which I truly loved doing. Not accepting that arrangement would mean possibly no more ability to teach at the graduate level. Diocesan priests spend their lives interacting with lay pastoral staff. It is an asset to learn moral and systematic theology alongside those not preparing for priesthood. It would hurt formation to priesthood, I believed, to isolate seminarians in their theology classes. The end result: I would not be joining the faculty of the new seminary, rather going back into full-time parish ministry, this time as a first-time pastor, at (continued on page 4)

Christ the Good Shepherd Parish, Lincoln Park. Over the years I still found some outlets to teach formal theology--Orchard Lake, Marygrove College, Assumption University, and Siena Heights University. But my heart and life would remain connected to full-time parish ministry—something I have never regretted.

Christ the Good Shepherd Parish was a lot of work, but a joy. It so happened that day one of showing up, the parish had no money in the bank and a number of bills due. The first few months were spent deciding which bills to pay and which to put off till we had money. The previous pastor had taken the bookkeeper and housekeeper and maintenance man to his new parish and so there was a lot of hiring to be done immediately. The associate pastor was on a six-week sabbatical in Poland. I had to figure out how to cover the six weekend Masses without him. I was also informed that there were a number of crises at Aquinas Catholic High School, which, by the way, "you are responsible for solving, even though we never told you that before you accepted the job! "

Looking back, I am not sure how I survived that first year of being a pastor, but at thirty-six years of age, I was game. What parishes have going for them are the people of all ages, backgrounds, and walks of life. Bringing them together in prayer and worship, consulting their wisdom when important decisions have to be made, being open with them about what needs to be done, showing love and care to them—they always seem to come through. The parish members of Christ the Good Shepherd came through with flying colors, including—eventually—expanding parish staff, building a gathering area, an office area, and eventually an Activities Center with a cafeteria, full kitchen and gymnasium, renovating the church interior, developing parish commissions and a pastoral council, closing and selling Aquinas High School, reducing the number of Masses on a weekend from six to three and going from a two-priest parish to a one-priest parish, and much more. I am forever grateful for all the people of Christ the Good Shepherd. I was truly blessed in this my first assignment as a pastor.

Around year eleven at Christ the Good Shepherd, I went through a time of discernment and came to the conclusion that it would be good to make myself available for another assignment. That year there were only four openings for pastors. None seemed to fit my set of skills and interests. I began to wonder about whether I had discerned properly about moving, but I applied to be pastor of one of them. Just before the assignment was finalized, all hell broke loose in the Catholic Church in America, as the priest abuse scandal came into the open. Here in the Archdiocese of Detroit a number of pastors were removed from their parishes for past abuse. Four openings became twenty and I was asked if any of the new openings looked like one I would want to pastor. I asked for, after some prayer and discernment, and was assigned to SS. John and Paul in Washington Township, replacing someone who had been removed for abusing minors. Although that first year was quite challenging—the whole abuse scandal, people and staff a bit wary of a priest they did not know, a reigning in of expectations of building a new church, and more. The people of SS. John and Paul were a wonderful community.

My fourteen years there went by quickly. We developed a family faith formation program we named G.R.A.C.E. (Growing and Responding As Catholics Everyday), which brought hundreds of the parish together for a monthly meal and faith formation aimed at all age levels. The shared leadership nights three times a year that we have here are a borrowing from what we developed at SS. John and Paul. The parish buildings—church, modular Activities Center, offices and gym/community hall—will never win awards for beauty or elegance, but the community of parishioners, its ability to come together, its volunteer spirit (endless number of projects done by the parish members themselves rather than contracting it out), its mix of old and young, wealthy, middle class and poor, all were a tremendous blessing of which to be part.

As I neared the end of my twelve years at SS. John and Paul (generally pastors are assigned in six year blocks, renewable), I tried to discern the remainder of my priesthood. What was the best way to serve the Archdiocese? I knew I could stay very comfortable at SS. John and Paul for the remainder of my active priesthood, and that was tempting. We had accomplished a lot together, the staff was cohesive, and things were pretty well-oiled. But, I also had made a personal decision many years ago not to overstay any one place. I am a firm supporter of “term limits” for pastors. If you are doing well, then go bring those gifts to other communities. If you or the community has struggled, then let new leadership come to that community. As we were in the beginning of a large fund-raising and building project, I felt it best to see that project through, and so stayed an extra two years. As we were completing that project, my parents had just moved to a senior center in Dearborn. In praying about the best fit for my priesthood during the final active years, I wanted to be somewhat close geographically to them, in a parish that needed good administrative skills, and ideally, (continued on page 5)

one with a school. What opened up that year that fit the criteria? Only one place, St. Regis, when the Archbishop pulled Msgr. Kosanke to oversee the renewal/renovation of St. Anne’s/Holy Trinity in Detroit. And so, here I have been for these six years.

Taking a broad overview of these forty-two years of priesthood, a few things are constant. The joy of finding community not so much in whom I have lived with, but in the people of the communities I have served. The creative tension between the teaching aspect of my ministry and the pastoral aspect, with the pastoral always taking precedence and guiding my discernment. The challenge of being stretched in different ways in each of the assignments I was given. The value of being honest with oneself and others who are involved in making decisions. Trusting the discernment which results, even if it does not lead at first to what one was expecting, and the true blessing that comes from saying yes to any authentic discernment. A few concluding thoughts next time.

Looking back over all the years of priesthood, I know I would do it all again in a heartbeat. Not because it has been easy and without challenges—quite the opposite, rather there is such a huge payback in being a parish priest. By and large people allow you to intersect their lives at key moments and form an intimacy with them that is extraordinary. One gets to interact on a regular basis and at a pretty deep level with people of all ages and all backgrounds. If one has an ancillary gift to share—I would consider teaching to be mine—there are ways to fit it into parish ministry. And Eucharist, the gathering that is central to our Catholic lives, which for me is a gift beyond measure, brings us all together anew, every week.

So, parents, if you wonder whether your son should consider being a priest, especially a diocesan priest, the answer is overwhelmingly yes. The challenges along the way, including the life of celibacy, are far outweighed by how the presence of God surprises you, supports you, and encourages you as a priest. If your son is called in that direction, you do not need to be anxious about him but can be overjoyed for him.

There will be many steps in the process when he will have to discern if priesthood is what God is asking of him, so that when one says yes and is ordained, one can feel very confident of the call, and he will experience tremendous blessings in being a priest.

To the men whom God might be calling to priesthood, as you can see from the above, that decision is not made once and done. We can discern only one step at a time. Is the Lord calling you to take that first step? To contact the vocation director of the diocese or a religious order? To go on a discernment weekend? To let someone know that you would be willing to consider being a priest? Take that step and let the discernment process begin.

Fr. Buersmeyer