

Father Joseph Brennan

'Reluctant Rector' Speaks of Past

By JOHN DASH

"I thought he was joking."

But then Auxiliary Bishop Lawrence B. Casey was not known to joke about such matters.

Father Joseph Brennan, scripture scholar and one of the younger members of St. Bernard's Seminary faculty, was being told that Bishop James E. Kearney wanted to appoint him rector of the prestigious institution.

That was back in Holy Week 1966. Father Brennan recently recalled those days.

He says he protested that he has no experience for such a position, but Bishop Casey turned aside the argument with the words, "You can learn." Father Brennan notes, "I do whatever the bishop wants me to do."

The past 11 years have seen enormous changes in the world and awesome challenges to the life of the seminary.

"The biggest challenge," he says, "was to try to find a rule of life that provided for maximum responsibility yet preserve community and order," to provide an atmosphere of "freedom without disintegration," and to make the institution "more compatible with Vatican II."

When Father Brennan opened his office that fall, he was stepping into tall shoes. The preceding December, Msgr. Wilfred T. Craugh, had retired. The man, a strong and stern man, a man who only once took a vacation between the late 30s and 1966, and then had "great qualms," was "terribly guilty and called the seminary every day," that man "had a tremendous devotion to the Church and the Pope, a great respect for, a devotion for the priesthood and always lived it out in his life."

Msgr. Craugh shouldered a "tremendous responsibility to God and to man," and in all his dealings, he bore himself in such a fashion that there would be "nothing to reproach."

A Rector's View

Father Joseph Brennan recently announced his intention to step down from the post of rector of St. Bernard's Seminary, a post he has held for the past 11 years. Beginning this week the Courier-Journal will publish a two-part report on Father Brennan's views of the seminary, past and future. Page 11.

Father Brennan also is Msgr. Craugh's nephew, and is the recipient of his great gift: "a realization of the tremendous investment of time, effort, love and sacrifice that had been put into this institution by previous generations." The place deserved the best you had to give.

He notes, "And I feel we have tried to carry that on. It is an ideal that has strongly influenced my thinking. The way one lives out that ideal may not always be same way. The style differs, but not the substance, he says.

But an order was passing, in the Church, in the world and in the school. A rearrangement in the seminary structure (from six years of study prior to ordination, to four years) automatically created an enormous drop in enrollment at the school.

Right at this point too, a decline in the numbers entering seminaries was beginning to be noticed. And, "Altogether there was an unrest. The students were feeling that something was lacking in their lives and a lot were leaving the seminaries at that time."

"A lot felt that the institutional Church was much too slow, and that there was a need for greater and more radical change. And then too, there was the Vietnam War and the crises between races."

The days were "very unhappy, very unsettled," he says.

Within the student body there was a "pressure to greater involvement in social issues, a great deal of that; pressure to have

courses in social action, and a great trend to eliminate all formal structure."

"There was a tremendous upsurge of suspicion about structure, especially Church authority, an almost constant revolt against any form of authoritarianism," he says.

But, "The Church will survive. We're going to have to adjust. The world is evolving and we can't remain static."

And indeed, those days do seem to be in the past. On the surface, the most evident sign of the easing of tensions is the informality and rapport among students and faculty. Father Brennan is hailed by student and teacher alike as "Joe." The strict code of attire of

former days has been replaced.

"I feel that Jesus moved informally. He cooked breakfast. One of my basic principles is to make people relate with a minimum of barriers between them," he says.

"Our generation," he notes, can learn from the "kids who don't accept a split between the public and the private person. I think that's one of their characteristics, directness, right to the heart."

And now after 11 years Father Brennan is relinquishing the rectorship, to renew his friendship with "my first love" the study of the Scriptures.

Next week: a look to the future.

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