

The Baptismal Call

Second in a continuing series

Hospitality House worker brings dignity to the dispossessed

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the second in a continuing series of profiles of average Catholics throughout the diocese who demonstrate their faith in many aspects of their daily lives. The series was suggested and coordinated by the Task Force on the Laity of the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and explores the varied ways in which Catholics interpret and carry out the call to ministry of all baptized persons.

By Emily Morrison

Journalism can be at times a difficult business. As with the contrived world of "suspended disbelief" that is the theatrical stage, we sometimes find ourselves standing at a figurative curtained window, peering in, as impassively as we can manage, at the ordinary moments of someone else's life, when suddenly the "fourth wall" drops away, and the "subject" looks back at us, amazed and disconcerted at the unexpected intrusion. What for us may be a matter of paragraph breaks and selected turns of phrase is, in reality, the substance of another person's actual life.

An assignment to interview a young man who finds himself inexplicably called to ministry in the world around him is a case in point. Paul Hetzler didn't ask to be included in our series on the baptismal call, any more than he asked to be called in the first place. His gifts are substantial, yet he doesn't see himself as different from anyone else — and, in fact, if you dig a bit beneath the surface of the newsprint, if you manage to shield your eyes from the dazzling strobe of the photographer's flash, you'll be forced to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that Paul Hetzler really isn't any different from anyone else who is so thoroughly dedicated to whatever he or she feels called in life to be.

If I correctly recollect the words of an account I read once of the life of the French poet Paul Valery, "it was his life," the biographer wrote, "that was surprised." A life so humbly lived sometimes inspires the "word people" among us to poetry, and

after a visit to the French coastal village of Sete, where Valery grew up and was buried, I wrote the following lines:

Like him, we take shapes whole
from the dense bank
behind us:
imperfect stones,
rhythms of brine,
our common adolescence
in a plane of light.

This other Paul, a young American, did not grow up on the sea coast, nor is he a "word person." The "plane of light" in which he spent his adolescence was the equally contemplative ambience of a farm he worked on for six years. The place to which he brings the insights he gained there, the "shapes" of his unusual gifts, is a South Avenue "soup kitchen," a house of hospitality for homeless and jobless men.

During the lunch hour at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality, where Paul Hetzler lives and works, offering food, clothing, shelter and dignity to a roomful of homeless people, he almost visibly flinches as our staff photographer struggles to capture his portrait on film. Afterwards, this tall, intensely private man mounts the stairs to St. Joe's makeshift office for our scheduled interview. He is obviously reluctant to step into the limelight of "publicity," that artificial environment of recognition that contradicts the straightforward terms he has set for his own life, as surely as the sometimes contrived notion of a "house of hospitality" can undermine the dignity of those it is designed to uplift.

Paul Hetzler is acutely aware of each of these contradictions, and points them out to me willingly, if a bit haltingly. His words are carefully chosen, measured by the determined intelligence that parcels them out, eloquent by virtue of the quiet humility and absolute lack of guile that motivates his observations. Duplicity, false pride, and affectation have no place in his assessment of his own place in the world order. His faith resides in his life and the way he unselfconsciously lives it, and not in whatever words he or anyone else can summon to express it.

Hetzler, who grew up in Scottsville, disclaims the notion that his faith life was shaken by any kind of sudden revelation. "A lot of it," he says, "has been attitudes from my upbringing. Other people inspired me; my parents have inspired me. It was a gradual thing. I didn't have a vision."

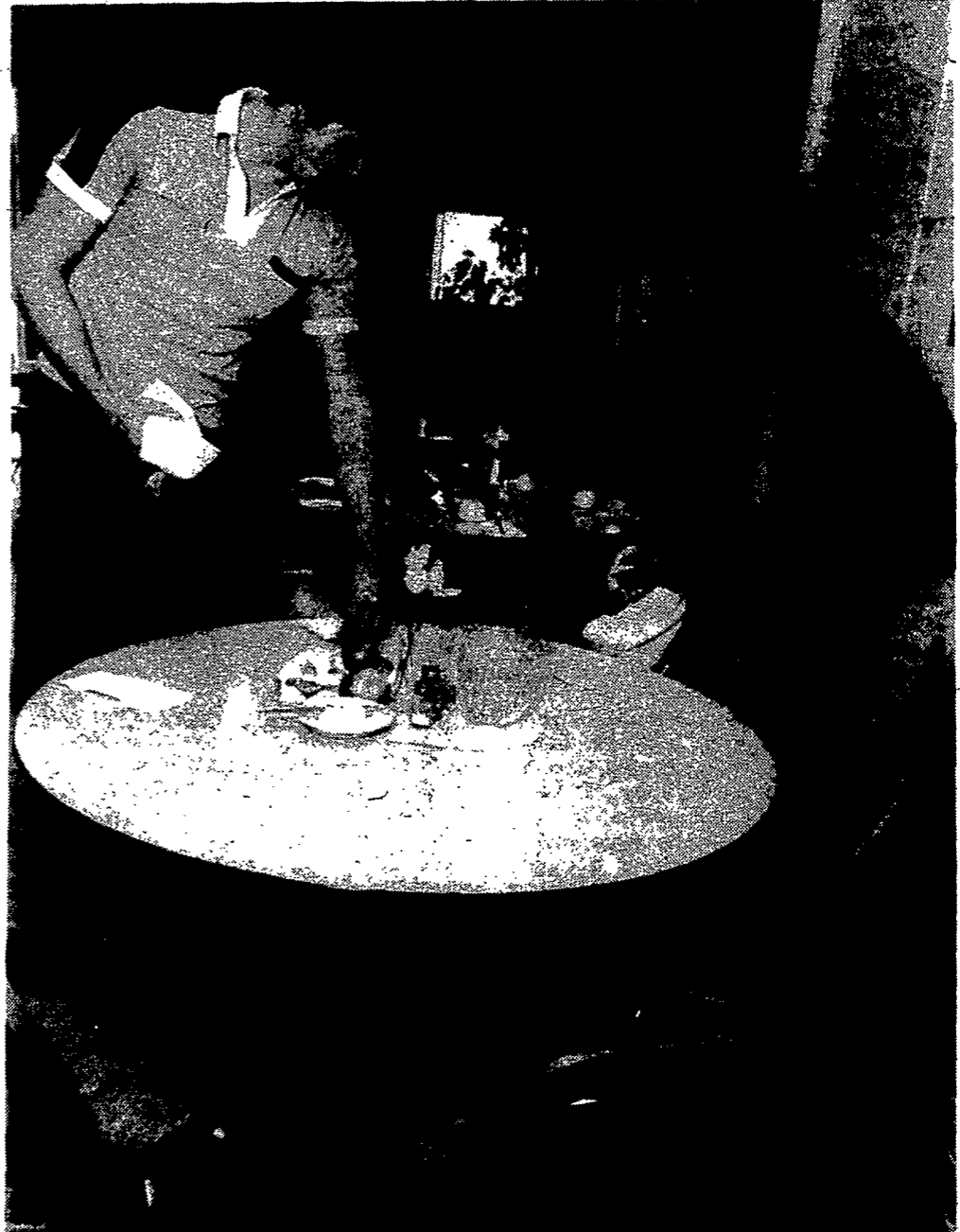
Hetzler originally went to college in the Midwest to study agriculture, a discipline he drifted in and out of until he had a rather jarring experience that served as a subtle turning point in the direction his faith life would ultimately take. During one of his road trips in the Midwest, Hetzler dropped off a hitchhiker in Duluth at a soup kitchen that dispensed, as he expresses with a trace of a smile, "soup, soap and salvation" to its hapless guests. "The people there," he tells me with audible pain in his voice, "were so broken."

Moved and inspired, Hetzler returned to Rochester to volunteer for the Diocesan Community Service Corps, a pilot youth program sponsored by the diocese in St. Patrick's Parish in Seneca Falls. The youth program was eventually discontinued, but Hetzler stayed on in the area to facilitate a daily meal at a non-denominational soup kitchen in Geneva — a job that entailed, among other things, ordering food from a government warehouse in Auburn.

"My biggest responsibility was to promote hospitality in the soup kitchen," Hetzler recalls. "People didn't come as steadily as they do here (at St. Joseph's)," he adds. "I just find it so painful to see guests being patronized by well-meaning people. I tried to afford them dignity in whatever capacity I could serve them. It wasn't always successful. You can't always afford someone dignity in an artificial environment."

This past January, after Hetzler had served out his year in Geneva, he returned to Rochester, where he has lived and worked ever since at St. Joseph's House. This fall he enrolled in a liberal arts program at Nazareth College, where he is considering majoring in social work. Although he claims he came into his St. Joe's ministry by a circuitous route, he acknowledges the influence of his father's having volunteered there previously for the night shelter program the house operates during the winter months.

"After the Finger Lakes job, it was just like a geometric progression of insights," explains Hetzler, who doesn't have any clearly formulated job plans at the moment.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Paul Hetzler, left, and Marty Larch reset tables for the second lunch shift at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on South Avenue.

"I'll probably be thinking about what I'll be doing for the rest of my life ... I don't see a great light. I just see a dim haze, and I keep rubbing my eyes. I feel like the Lord is guiding me, but it's no bright revelation."

Although he hasn't entirely ruled out the possibility of pursuing ordained ministry, Hetzler sees great value in retaining his present degree of mobility, in remaining able to bring his faith further into established institutions. "The house of hospitality is, just by its nature, ministerial," he observes, "whereas social work, by its nature, isn't necessarily ministerial. The ministry is whatever the person brings to it."

"I'd like to have a job in which I deal with people, and have a chance to affirm their value," he continues. "I think that the way the economy is set up, people's self-worth is reflected only in their value as a producer. People that are jobless because of their circumstances are marginalized, made to feel very low-down, degraded," he adds. "Christ said people are made in God's image, that they have value by virtue of their humanity. These people need to be told this, because they get a different message from most of society."

Hetzler feels compelled to live out his life in accordance with the gospel, an admittedly idealistic goal he realizes many people, including some of his fellow Christians, see as foolish. No fundamentalist, Hetzler is loath to come across as moralistic or "preachy," a fear I feel certain is unfounded, after talking with him and experiencing his profound humility as an almost palpable thing between us in the small upstairs office.

"I guess I've developed an attitude of trying to look at things in perspective, in terms of what matters eternally," he offers simply. "I guess I see the rest of my life as a short time, and what I do with the rest of my life shouldn't have short-term consequences. I see the Lord's work as being permanent, and anything I could build here in this earth would be insignificant compared to working for God. Even though you don't see the tangible results of ministry, I think it will be continued by someone else after I die. The way you deal with people has a ripple effect, an impact on everyone they deal with."

"I see people as being the most important things on earth," he adds. "For good or bad,

you have to be really careful the way you treat people. That goes for personal policy as well as political policy, which is only an extension of ourselves. If we give sanction for the 'contras' to murder civilians, how are we going to account for that with the Lord? There's a bit of Christ dying with each person who dies. You can't separate politics from life. That's like Sunday religion. I'm not part of a political party; I'm just out to see that justice gets done. I'm responsible for what happens everywhere in the world, because I see that Jesus is pretty international."

Hetzler's quietly effective form of ministry is decidedly not of the proselytizing variety, nor is it sanctimonious and self-congratulatory. "My awareness of issues, my feelings about ministry, come out of grace," he insists. "I don't do anything to deserve them. They're just moments of grace ... In some ways, I've been given more than others; I've been given more insights than other people have, but not because I'm any special case. I have ideals that are pretty lofty, but God knows I make plenty of mistakes. The way I'm doing things isn't necessarily right for everybody."

The call to ministry, as Hetzler observes, is not the province of a privileged few. "Since I have had so many connections with people living lives of ministry, one thing I've observed is the way people put them on a pedestal," he tells me. "They're just people living a life of faith. They're not better than anyone; they're still sinners. Ordained ministers probably have the worst time with that type of thing."

"Everyone has a place. People who work as welders shouldn't feel frustrated because they weren't called to be priests. The Lord calls everyone. If one is a Christian, he's called by his baptism. Anything is ministry. People can minister wherever they are."

Hetzler's moments of grace remain, like Valery's "plane of light," the infrequent yet perfectly formed crystals in a field of imperfect stones. The path his life will take is, in all likelihood, paved with as many stumbling stones as anyone else's.

As for picking himself back up again and forging on along the road less traveled by, however, Paul Hetzler's gift of faith will undoubtedly make all the difference.



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