

Diocese blessed with seven men entering first theology

By Teresa A. Parsons

In this age of declining vocations to the priesthood, the Diocese of Rochester has reason to celebrate. This fall, seven men will begin theological studies as first-year seminarians.

That marks a vast improvement over last year, when no one entered first theology.

Despite this year's good news, Father Thomas J. Valenti, diocesan vocations director, doesn't foresee this class as an indication of a turnaround for religious vocations.

"I'm not going to raise people's hopes that this would continue," he said. "I think we're going to continue to fluctuate ... I think we have to realize the reality of the situation — that we've been blessed this year."

The blessing extends to variety as well as quantity. In age, the seminarians range from 22 to 35. They include a pastoral outreach worker and father, a former engineering student, an electronics technician, a speech pathologist and the son of a Palmyra dairy farmer.

Seminarians face four years of theological study and one year of service as transitional deacons before ordination. This fall, four of the new seminarians will study at Catholic University of America's Theological College. One will study at the University of Louvain's American College in Leuven, Belgium, and two others will embark on special programs combining theological study with ministry.

For most, the call to priesthood has been a gradual growth toward certainty rather than a flash of inspiration.

Dual vocation

At 35, Victor Bartolotta Jr. is the oldest of the seminarians as well as the only parent. Currently, he divides his time between neighborhood outreach work at Our Lady of Mount Carmel and caring for his four-year-old daughter, Lynn.

Bartolotta "has been on this track before." At 13, he entered Divine Word Seminary in Pennsylvania. But after two years, he left what was then a very strict, sheltered environment. "I wanted to see what life was like on the other side," he said.

Bartolotta graduated from Fairport High School in 1969 and studied at SUNY Brockport and the University of Mississippi. He then spent time working for the Glenmary Home Missionaries before returning to upstate New York in 1977.

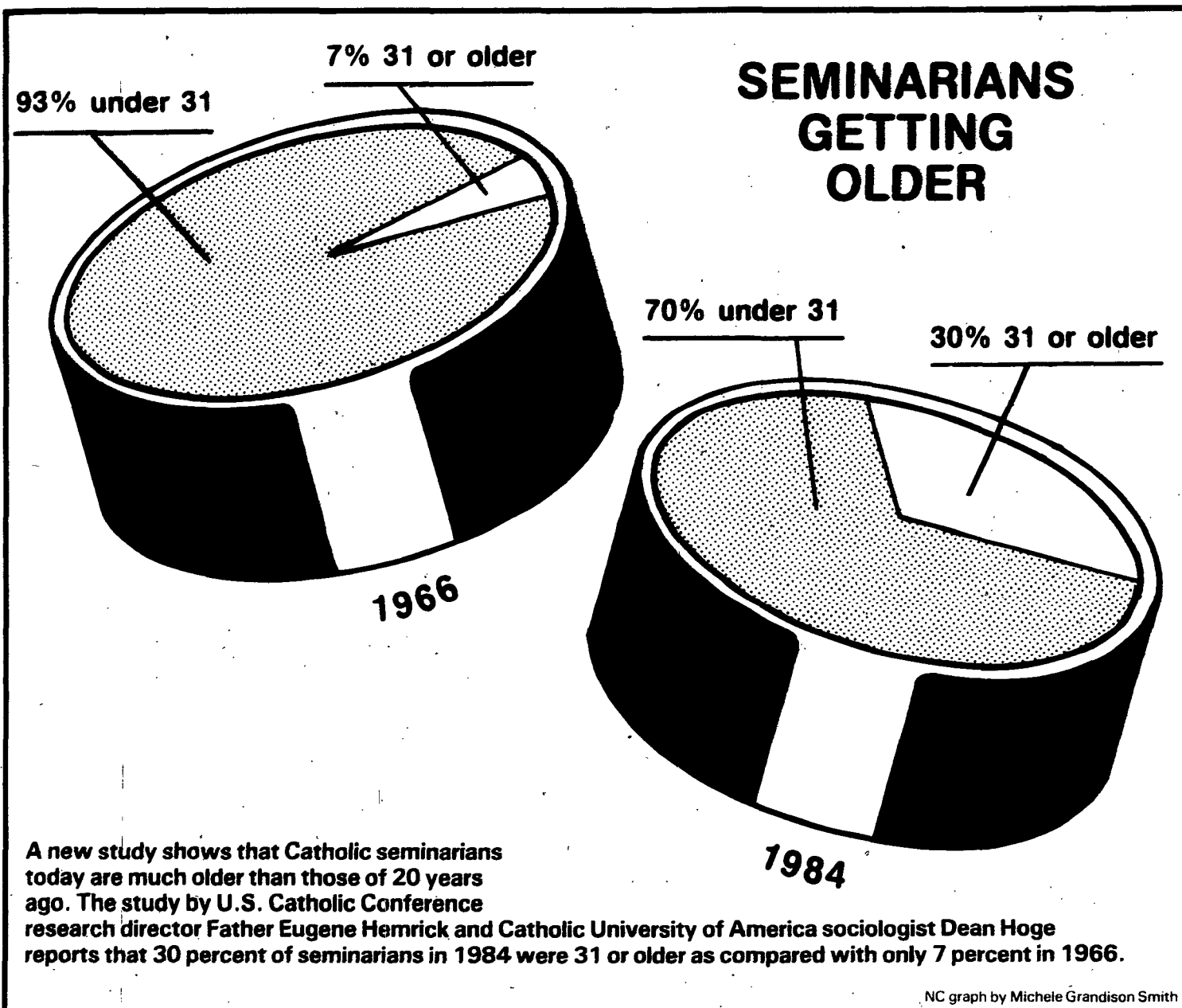
While working as youth minister at St. Stephen's Parish in Geneva, Bartolotta met and married Maxine Venuti in 1978. Seven years later, she died of cancer at the age of 33.

In 1980, Bartolotta earned a master's degree in religious education from Loyola University in Chicago. Three years later he completed a master's degree in systematic theology at St. Bernard's Institute.

He cites a number of diocesan priests as influencing his discernment. "They are people who could obviously be doing other things successfully, but because of their vocations, they do what may be more difficult and lonely in trying to respond to what God wants in their lives. It only makes sense from a faith perspective," he said.

Because of his responsibilities to his daughter, Bartolotta will study part-time at St. Bernard's Institute in the fall. He will continue neighborhood outreach work for Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish until January.

"By this, the diocese is saying it will allow me to be a parent and a priest," Bartolotta said. "Because of my experience, I think I have something unique to offer."



"I see great similarities between the single, celibate and married life. What is important in life are the things that take a lot of time and a long commitment — like raising a daughter," he said.

Older seminarians

Statistically, this year's class conforms to research that indicates men are entering the seminary later in life. Only one seminarian, Lance Gonyo, entered Becket Hall as a college freshman. Six of the seminarians participated in Becket Hall's discernment program — one of three offered by the diocese.

Gonyo, 22, is the son of Albert and Carolyn Gonyo of Greece. He attended St. John the Evangelist School on Ridge Road and graduated from Aquinas Institute in 1982. During his freshman year at St. John Fisher College, he moved into Becket Hall. Last spring, he graduated from Fisher with a degree in psychology and philosophy.

"It's a very supportive environment. You find people there who are interested in the same area you are," Gonyo said.

He was attracted to the priesthood by "the way of life" of priests he knew. "It probably has a lot to do with the people I've encountered at a time when I was looking and trying to see what I'd be doing with my life," he said. "It just so happened that I found people who were willing to listen and take the time to be supportive."

He's looking forward to studying at Catholic University this fall, but added

"where I will be a year from now, only the Lord knows."

For Joseph Ringholz, 24, discernment was realizing a certain pattern in life "that showed me there was something going on I need to look into."

The pattern began in fifth or sixth grade, when he became an altar boy at Holy Family Parish, he recalled. The priests he came to know impressed him. "Each time I thought of it (becoming a priest), it made a little more sense."

The son of George and Inez Ringholz of Rochester, he graduated from Cardinal Mooney High School in 1980, then worked more than a year at "odds and ends." Unable to find a job he enjoyed, Ringholz returned to school at Monroe Community College, where he earned an associate's degree in 1984. Shortly before graduating from MCC, he moved to Becket Hall.

"I decided to move someplace where I could give it (the priesthood) deeper thought and further study," Ringholz said. "I think being at Becket Hall, I looked at a lot of issues I wouldn't have otherwise."

"You have to ask yourself for the longest time 'Is this the right path or the wrong path? Where do I fit in the big picture?'" he said. "Because you keep asking these questions, it keeps you alive and on your toes."

While living at Becket, he attended Nazareth College, majoring in religious studies.

Although he views this step as a deeper commitment, Ringholz believes discernment is a continuous process. He views the priesthood as "a life of forever asking questions and seeing where the answers lie for you at that point in time."

"I never looked at it as a career or a job, but a style of life," Ringholz said. "It's who you are as a person, what you do and how you live your life that has to speak for itself."

Changing roles

Once, Ken Waldemiller thought he would be an electronics technician. In fact, he worked in that field for five years at Gleason Works. Now at 25, it appears he will be a priest instead.

The oldest of the six children of Roger and Pat Waldemiller, he is a graduate of Holy Ghost Elementary School and Churchville/Chili High School. In the fall of 1978, he began to study electronics at Monroe Community College. He continued to attend MCC after landing a job at Gleason Works, graduating in December, 1981.

He registered at Rochester Institute of Technology in the fall of 1982 and studied there until September, 1984, when he entered Becket Hall and transferred to SUNY Brockport.

Last May, he graduated magna cum laude from Brockport with a major in computer science and minors in philosophy and math.

Waldemiller had been involved with Teen Seminar, the Emmaus program and family camp throughout his high school years. "I started getting a feeling I had a further calling," he recalled, "so I started investigating. I took my time."

During his two years at Becket Hall, Waldemiller has worked with the young adult committee and folk group at St. Boniface Parish next door. "The ministry component has been really good," he said. "That's what really carried me through."

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