

Diocese blessed

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"It's exciting, but a little fearful," he said of studying at Catholic University in the fall. "Theology is something totally different than what I've studied before."

"Friendships with diocesan priests have helped tremendously — getting their ideas and visions and seeing what their visions have done, how they've handled different questions," he said. "It helps take off the frightening edge."

At 27, Brian Ridley's journey has led him from speech pathology to youth counseling to priesthood. A graduate of St. John the Evangelist, Humboldt Street, and McQuaid Jesuit High School in 1976, he has considered the possibility of a vocation since high school.

The son of Frederick and Dorothy Ridley of Rochester, he earned a degree in speech pathology from St. Louis University in 1980. After graduation, he entered a summer volunteer program operated by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Omaha, Nebraska. He stayed for two years, entering the pre-seminary formation program.

In 1982, he left the program. "I felt I needed time to find myself, to gather things together and grow," Ridley said. He returned to Rochester and worked for eight months as assistant manager of a local restaurant.

He began studying at Nazareth College for a master's degree in speech pathology, but soon realized it was not what he wanted. Meanwhile, he had contacted Father Valenti and was participating in a diocesan spiritual direction program.

In November, 1982, he accepted a job counseling adolescents in Lincolndale, N.Y. where he has remained until the present.

"Basically, the idea of priesthood never left — it just seemed to get stronger," he said.

"I fear it a little from the aspect of getting back into full-time studies," he said. "It's nerve-wracking, but I'm looking forward to it."

A turning point

The election of Pope John Paul I was not a turning point in the lives of many 14-year-olds. But it was for William Wizeman of

Palmyra. It was then that he became interested in the history of the Church and in reading the Bible.

His attraction to the priesthood "was pretty consistent from then on," he recalled.

Wizeman, 22, is the only seminarian who did not participate in Becket Hall's discernment program. He did attend several meetings of the SEEK program, a non-residential diocesan discernment program.

Because he was fascinated by the scholarly tradition of the Society of Jesus, he attended Fordham University in New York City, graduating with a degree in theology in May, 1986. But once there, he realized he was more interested in parish work.

"The Jesuits there don't really get out that much, and there's the South Bronx — I mean the real South Bronx — right across the street," he recalled. "That seemed to me to be the heart of the matter for the Church."

Because Wizeman only contacted the diocesan vocations office last March, his plans are in "a limbo state" at the moment.

"I'll be living at Becket Hall for a year. I won't be going to classes, I'll be looking for a job in the diocese — parish work or teaching," he explained. "They want to make sure I'm ready to go into the seminary ... and it puts some breathing space between college and the seminary." It will also be his first experience of community life.

"From my point of view, it's a commitment ... but discernment goes on throughout life to the end of life," he said. "There are always doubts. You read that historical figures and saints had doubts. Whenever you think you've got it down pat, that's when you don't. It's not that easy."

Service comes alive

The closest thing to a flash of inspiration was experienced by Brian Jeffers, 22, of Webster. As a youngster, he had been "romantically intrigued" by priesthood, but that quickly dwindled.

Then, during an Easter vacation in 1983, he traveled to Florida with a friend. They attended Easter Mass in St. Augustine, and for Jeffers, the liturgy "really seemed to come alive."

"It wasn't the glitter or the robes, the great respect and dignity of priesthood," he

'I'm not going to raise people's hopes that this would continue ... I think we have to recognize the reality of the situation — that we've been blessed this year.'

Father Thomas J. Valenti
diocesan vocations director

recalled. "I saw more of the love and service Christ gave us, the meaning of his death and resurrection and the possibility of bringing that alive through the priesthood."

The son of James and Donna Jeffers of St. Rita's Parish, Webster, Jeffers attended public schools. In 1982, he entered Monroe Community College, but soon changed his major from engineering to general liberal arts and sciences. After graduation, he registered at St. John Fisher College, where he graduated with a major in psychology and a minor in philosophy last year.

Meanwhile, in 1983, he moved into Becket Hall. "The tough part for me was having had a public school education," he said. "The only religious education I had was CCD."

"It helped during my college years to be with guys who were thinking about a vocation in their lives ... and it helped me take a closer look at the priesthood itself."

"I'm not sure there was anything that said, 'Yes, the priesthood is for you.' It just feels right. All I've gone through has led me up to this point," he said.

He will study at the University of Louvain's American College in Leuven, Belgium, beginning this fall. "I've heard quite a bit about the academics. A challenge makes me work harder," he explained. "Then being with people from all over the world will help me to see the Church from other points of view."

He also believes that the new environment, away from the security of family and friends, will help him become more confident and knowledgeable about himself.

Yet it will be his first time away from home and the first time he's flown in an airplane. "I can use everybody's prayers while I'm over there," he said.

Toward the future

To all of this year's seminarians, the shortage of priests is a reality with which they in particular will have to contend.

"It's a scary thought," Ringholz said. "The numbers look staggeringly low. There are going to be far fewer of the ordained type of people, and it's going to take more involvement on the part of the people. There might be changes that are going to be hard for people to accept, like the number of Masses or visits a priest can do."

For now, Ringholz said, he can only dream what priesthood will be like. "All that I can promise if I become a priest is that I can be there," he said. "I feel comfortable with the idea. I feel I'm capable of adding something, of being productive."

As for the future, Wizeman prefers to look on the bright side. "I would imagine it will mean more parishes joined together and more responsibility given to the laity. I think that's good."

Coalition advocates consistent policy on range of life-threatening issues

A consistent approach to all life issues is the aim of JustLife, a newly formed political action committee which describes itself as pro-life not only on abortion, but also on arms control and poverty issues.

Backed by a nationwide coalition of Christians, including more than 50 peace and justice leaders from the Rochester area, JustLife plans to endorse candidates whose positions demonstrate a commitment to protecting life, justice and peace.

"We are people who believe we can no longer be selective about which life issues to support," said Colleen O'Halloran, a local supporter. "JustLife is an attempt to represent that consistency in our political parties and candidates."

Among the committee's supporters are members of anti-abortion and peace and justice groups, which have often been at odds in the past.

"Organizations of the Christian right often focus on the life of the unborn and ignore many other problems that also threaten life, such as poverty and militarism," observed William Leslie, JustLife president and pastor of LaSalle Street

Church in Chicago. "Organizations of the Christian left make the opposite mistake: they ignore the unborn."

The committee plans to challenge the assumption that organizations such as the Moral Majority and Christian Voice speak for all Christians. "In a pluralistic society, people of different faith perspectives can share common values," Leslie said. "As Christians, we hope to join with people of all faiths in promoting a common agenda for public justice."

Among the members of JustLife's national advisory board are: Lowell Erdahl, a Lutheran bishop; Episcopal Bishop William Frey; Roman Catholic Bishop Leroy Mathiesen; and David Allan Hubbard, president of Fuller Theological Seminary.

Locally, the committee's supporters include: Michael Affleck, Christopher Grannis, Hilary Gutman, Robert Laforet, Marvin and Kristine Mich, Dr. William Morehouse, Kathy Dubel, Don Peters and Christine Wagner, SSJ.

For more information, write JustLife, P.O. Box 15263, Washington, D.C., 20003, or call (202)543-9530.

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