

God kept calling: Part I of a three-part vocation series

Class of 79 brought a wealth of experience to priesthood

By Teresa A. Parsons

In hindsight, it is not surprising that the men who entered St. Bernard's Seminary in 1974 heralded a change in the nature of priestly vocations.

Children of the 60s, they were part of a generation that rejected institutions, obligations and commitments.

As a commitment to one of society's oldest institutions, priesthood certainly qualified as countercultural during those turbulent years. Yet the four men who answered the call to serve in the Diocese of Rochester were hardly refugees from a world in which they didn't feel at home.

On the contrary, each left behind a comfortable identity and established lifestyle. At 29, Bob Werth was a social worker and indefatigable parish volunteer. Mike Bausch, then 25, was a regional organizer and fundraiser for the Boy Scouts of America. Mike Huerter, 24, was working with his father on the railroad. Tim Horan, 25, was teaching at Mercy High School.

When the four entered St. Bernard's Seminary in 1974, they followed a now-familiar pattern — graduating from high school and college and working for several years before entering the seminary.

Individual seminarians had blazed that trail before them. But as a group, St. Bernard's Seminary's Class of 1979 somehow widened the second-career course from a path to a road that has been heavily traveled ever since.

The four men came slowly to commitment. Yet they brought with them a wealth of experience that has enriched their present-day lives as priests.

Father Mike Bausch's previous experience as an administrator is not wasted in his current job as director of the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry. But he points to his friends as the most vital contribution his prior experience has made to his present life as a priest.

"If it hadn't been for the support of my 'Corning community' family, I would have been searching for priesthood in vain," he said. "And if I'd somehow gotten there anyway, I would have been empty.

"They support me when I need to be supported. They challenge me when I need to be challenged," he added. "They keep me honest."

Father Bausch relished his job as a combination community organizer, fund raiser and public relations man for the Boy Scouts of America in Steuben County. But he had little chance of resisting the call to priesthood that blew into the Southern Tier along with Hurricane Agnes in June, 1972.

Earlier in the year, a Cursillo weekend had reawakened Father Bausch's spiritual senses. During the flood that followed the hurricane, he was stricken by the response of a coalition of Southern Tier religious groups.

"I watched the secular organizations provide meat and potatoes and housing," he recalled. "But the religiously affiliated groups didn't just look at the material side of things — they looked at the full person . . . Their need for connectedness was being served by the Church."

Father Bob Werth was drawn to the priesthood by a similar search for connections between work and ministry.

After more than a decade as a social worker, he found that his ability to help people was be-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Members of St. Bernard's Seminary's class of 1979 came to commitment later in life than many of their predecessors in the priesthood, but they brought with them a rich and diverse body of experience. Shown (from left) are Fathers Tim Horan, Michael Huerter, Bob Werth and Mike Bausch.

ing diminished in proportion to the paperwork his job required. At the same time, he was testing the limits of leadership as a lay person in his parish.

"I felt called to a leadership position . . . (but) I had done everything I could do as a lay person," he recalled. "I felt fragmented between work and church, but when I was doing social work, I felt I was doing Church work."

Responding to what he called "an undefinable yearning," Father Werth entered the seminary, hoping to pull together both aspects of his life.

Today Father Werth is pastor of St. Bridget's Church, a predominantly black, inner-city parish. His knowledge of what the social service network offers for people in crisis has been helpful in his day-to-day ministry.

Perhaps less obvious has been the value of his awareness that sometimes he is helpless to offer material assistance. "Knowing my limits, as far as what I could do for a person, and also knowing I didn't have to be a messiah," he said, "were useful lessons from my previous profession."

Contrary to Father Werth's hopes, ordination did not end his struggles with celibacy and intimacy, or his search for a workable style of ministry and leadership.

"I would have thought that there was some major break as I went from social work to the seminary, but it was really a constant process," he said. "There was a time when I sort of thought I had it all together. I thought I was pretty well formed, but over the years, I found out I wasn't."

Father Michael Huerter's avenue to priesthood took a more traditional direction. He was impressed by the priests he met in school, at home and in his parish.

After graduating from Bishop Kearney High School, he lived at Becket Hall for three years while earning a liberal arts degree from St. John Fisher College.

After graduation, he decided to broaden his range of experience before making a final decision about priesthood. Moving out of Becket Hall, he went to work as a brakeman for the New York Central Railroad.

"You meet every interesting kind of person when you work for the railroad," he said. "I think it is helpful not to have an insular view, to have an understanding of what it means to budget and to live in the secular world."

As associate pastor at St. Louis Parish in Pittsford, Father Huerter can empathize with working parishioners' day-to-day concerns.

"You see a lot of people hurting because they're overextended in terms of finances," he said. "That can be as devastating as some spiritual problem."

Both Father Huerter and Father Tim Horan worked in secular jobs for relatively brief periods before entering the seminary. Although each acquired some skills that were relevant to priesthood, both point to confidence as the outstanding benefit of their previous experience.

"I gained a sense of independence — that I could float in the world and not sink," Father Horan explained.

After earning a bachelor's degree in history,

he taught for several years — first in elementary grades and later in high school.

As associate pastor at Holy Rosary Parish in Rochester, Father Horan still regularly teaches adult education, grade school and confirmation classes.

However, he views teaching less as a prior vocation than as an avocation that occupied him as he "bounced around looking for what to do."

Father Horan doesn't consider his path to priesthood an ideal one.

"I'm lucky to be a priest today," he said. "I was confronted by the possibility of priesthood three times, and I turned by back on it. I could very easily have lost my vocation."

The Church has not always offered second chances to men who seek the priesthood after such mid-course corrections.

Seminaries in the mid-19th century actually began to turn away candidates over the age of 22. In part the trend was prompted by the number of youthful recruits made available by the emerging system of American Catholic schools. Younger candidates were not only considered more impressionable, but also less affected by worldly influences. And the earlier a priest was ordained, the longer his term of service to the Church was likely to be.

In more recent years, seminary doors began to reopen to mature candidates, to the same degree that the halls inside emptied of their younger counterparts.

Changes in the diocesan seminary system il-

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