

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

'Voice of diocese' heeds call to communicate on higher level

By Teresa A. Parsons

More people would probably recognize Father George Norton by voice than by sight.

To Rochester's early-morning radio listeners, his is the biweekly voice of the "Good Morning God" program. To reporters, his is the voice of official diocesan response as director of the communications office.

But to the residents of Providence, Rhode Island, his gravelly tones would probably call to mind just plain George Norton.

For nine years, Father Norton broadcast the morning news at Providence's WPRO radio station. For nearly 15 years, he worked as a reporter, news director and public safety liaison in Rhode Island's capital city.

Looking back, George Norton observed that his life began with broadcasting. However, he recalls the day he became Father Norton, at the age of 39, as the happiest day of his life.

"I loved my job, I had a good family, I was making good money and I loved the city," he recalled. "But there was a feeling of emptiness in my life. I didn't know if it was because I wanted a family, or something else."

Father Norton had now and again considered priesthood while he was growing up in Lee, Mass., and attending Catholic elementary and high schools. "There just seemed to be something I had to get out of my system first," he recalled.

In fact, there were a few things. After his graduation from high school in 1955, his love for movies drew him to a job as assistant manager of a cinema. "I thought I wanted to be in the theater business," he recalled. "Going to work that first day was like realizing a great dream."

In his spare time, Father Norton began tinkering with the closed-circuit broadcasting system at a local Veterans Administration Hospital. His hobby became such a passion that when the theater chain that employed him offered a promotion in another city, Father Norton turned it down.

After a series of stints on small-town radio stations in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, he landed a job as "utility man" at WPRO in 1960. The following year, he was promoted to street reporter and was soon anchoring evening newscasts. Despite long hours at the radio station, Father Norton once again turned his spare time to good use, earning a degree in philosophy from Providence College.

In 1969, he left WPRO for a post as public safety liaison for the city's mayor. When the mayor lost the next election, he returned to the airwaves as morning anchor on WJAR.

Although Father Norton assiduously avoided any hint of a commitment, he gradually began spending more and more time with priests. Among his closest friends was Franciscan Father Remington Goodreau. When Father Goodreau inquired whether he was considering priesthood, Father Norton recalls responding: "Remy, you're crazy! That was all over with a long time ago."

Nevertheless, Father Goodreau urged him to join the Third Order of St. Francis, then maneuvered him into leadership positions.

"He didn't push me, but looking back, I



Father George Norton takes five in his basement recording studio in the diocesan Pastoral Center.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

can see a lot of subtle things he did." Father Norton said. "After a while, I started wondering if maybe he wasn't as crazy as I thought."

On August 6, 1976, after nearly four years of indecision, the microphone and a chapter of Father Norton's life closed with his final newscast.

The decision cost him a few friends. "There are people who have never spoken to me again," he said.

Most, however, accepted his decision with equanimity and more than a little wonder. "A lot of people thought I'd never make it because I liked a party and still do," he said.

Father Norton is still annoyed by stereotypes of vocational candidates as people who are overly serious or exclusively young.

"I get uptight when I see saying, 'Be something for the Lord,' and they show only young men and women," he said. "People need to know the Lord does not just call young people ... The call can come at any time in your life and sometimes more than once."

In the 1970s, many traditional seminaries were still hesitant to accept older-than-average students. In response, several dioceses throughout the country opened seminaries expressly geared to preparing older men for priesthood.

A second-career seminary was one of the options open to Father Norton. But while he

awaited word from the Diocese of Providence on his seminary assignment, Providence's vocations director happened to visit St. Bernard's Seminary in Rochester.

Father Joseph Brennan, who was then rector at St. Bernard's, had previously accepted as seminarians several men who were older than average at that time. He agreed to meet with Father Norton.

"I actually didn't think of George as that much older than the rest of the class," Father Brennan recalled. "But then I tried not to think of (seminarians) in terms of age very much. I tried to think of them as adults, whether they were 22- or 23-year-olds ... or 42- or 43-year-olds."

By the time Father Norton arrived at St. Bernard's in August, 1976, the structure of seminary life had already eased considerably. Yet he found the initial adjustment difficult, after years of independence.

"Certainly my life experience helped me grow in the priesthood, but it made the adjustment from bachelorhood harder," he said. "I did find a great deal of support from the faculty and my fellow seminarians from the first day."

"I started out with a whole new set of friends, a new career and a whole new horizon of challenge, but it really didn't present a trauma at all," he added.

What did jolt Father Norton was the transition to parish life. "I was shocked

sometimes at the demands people would place on both priests and religious," he said. "People seem to think that ordination or profession changes a person radically, and it does, but it doesn't take away your humanness."

After Father Norton's ordination in May, 1983, the last assignment he expected was to direct diocesan communications.

"It's something I swore I'd never do," he said. "I didn't become a priest to be a communicator in that sense."

However, having long advocated increased Church involvement in all types of communications media, Father Norton couldn't plead apathy. And once he realized Bishop Matthew Clark's commitment to the diocesan communications office, Father Norton found he "really couldn't say no."

Since his appointment as communications director in 1985, the growth of religious broadcasting on cable television and radio and the demand within diocesan departments for his consultative services have far exceeded his expectations.

At 50, Father Norton still daydreams about a chaplaincy post somewhere in his future. But he has learned not to count too much on his own vision of the future.

"I don't object to following (the Lord's) plan," he said. "It's been a good one so far."

■
■
The Krakow-Rochester Sister Cities Committee

proudly presents...

The Krakus Song and Dance Ensemble

from Krakow, Poland

Tuesday, May 26th — 7:30 P.M.

Franklin High School Auditorium
Hudson Avenue — Norton Street

Donation: \$10.00 — Adults \$5.00 — Students

For ticket information, call:
467-0930 or 342-2136.

Proceeds will benefit the Krakow-Rochester Sister Cities Committee's scholarship fund

Joseph Shale

INC.

Country Club Plaza
East Rochester
(716) 385-6530



ADC 5000 Drawknob

Does Your Church Need A New Organ or Piano?

We recommend the Allen Digital Computer Organ. No unification of stops, no periodic tuning. Consoles, specifications, and casework custom designed for your church at reasonable costs.

Outstanding pipe organ unaffected by today's lower heat requirements.

Complete Selection of Pianos & Organs for Home, Church, and School

Fine Pianos and Organs by
Allen, Steinway, Sohmer,
Everett, Yamaha and others.

Joseph Shale Inc.
Mon.-Fri. 10 a.m.-9 p.m.
Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

