

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

Priesthood freed former lawyer from counting cost of caring

By Teresa A. Parsons

St. Ambrose Parish was a rather uncanny first assignment for Father Gary Tyman.

In mid-life, both Father Tyman and the fourth-century saint for whom the parish is named were led by the practice of law to the priesthood, although more than 1,600 years passed between their ordination days.

St. Ambrose, a gifted Roman orator, poet and lawyer, was acclaimed as a bishop by the people of Milan, Italy, at the age of 34 — even before he had been baptized or ordained a priest.

The people of Phelps, N.Y., where Father Tyman grew up and where he practiced law for six years, did not proclaim him a bishop or even a priest by popular demand. But not many were surprised by Father Tyman's ordination in April, 1986, at the age of 36.

"I had always been active in my home parish, so I think people were accustomed to seeing me in church...Something about my personality they found appropriate to the priesthood," he said. "I got the very definite sense from people that they thought this was a good thing, and that gave me great encouragement."

A few neighbors saw the priest in Father Tyman long before he did. An elderly lady and a co-worker of his father's both suggested during his high school years that perhaps he ought to consider the priesthood.

"(The man) told me he'd always wanted to go to an ordination, and I was the only one he knew who was likely to be ordained," Father Tyman recalled.

He gave the prospect some thought in the years just after high school, but instead studied journalism at St. Bonaventure University.

"It seemed that the attraction priesthood held for me then was not for the right motives," he recalled. "I saw the priest as the center of attention — a big deal. There was a bit of ego gratification in that image."

"Then there was the question of celibacy," he added. "When you're 19, 20 or 21, not everyone's ready to make that sort of commitment."

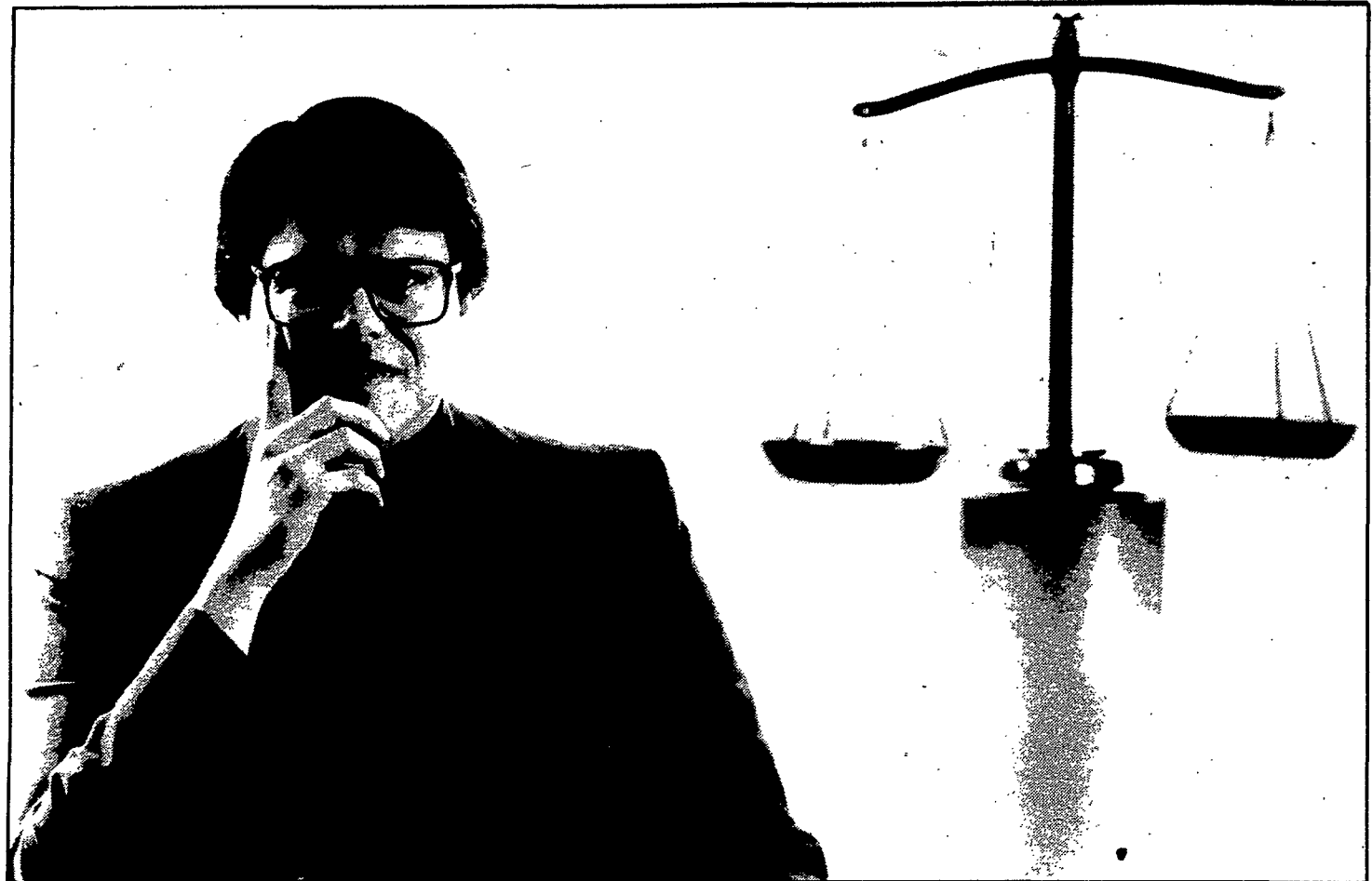
Father Tyman later switched his major to history and subsequently earned a law degree from Cornell University in May, 1975. After graduation, he returned to Phelps and a job with the only law firm in town. In November, 1980, his employer, John Britting, offered him a partnership in the firm. To all outward appearances, his life was in order.

After six years, however, Father Tyman knew his heart would never be at home in the legal profession. "I was just paying the bills," he said.

He first considered applying to become a permanent deacon, but doubted whether he could do justice to a career, family and ministry.

"Then I thought again — for the first time in years — about being a priest," he said. "I could see the pieces of my life fitting into place. There was a sudden excitement, enthusiasm and attraction there."

Even after he decided to seek the priesthood, Father Tyman delayed announcing the news to his employer or anyone else until he was certain that the diocese would accept him as a candidate. Then one evening, Britting called him into his office to discuss the partnership agreement.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Father Gary Tyman left the legal profession behind when he became a priest at the age of 36. Although he no longer offers legal counsel, Father Tyman doesn't view that training and experience as wasted, since it has enriched his abilities as a pastoral counselor.

"It was soon obvious that I couldn't continue the conversation without telling him that I was planning on leaving," Father Tyman recalled. "It was a big surprise to him. For a minute, I thought I was going to have to call for oxygen...but I left with his blessing."

Father Tyman had yet to tell his parents. While he expected his mother to be pleased, he wasn't so certain of his father, who was not Catholic, and who had supported him through college and law school.

But when he announced his intention the following morning at breakfast, his father expressed no reservations. "He told me, 'Do whatever makes you happy,'" Father Tyman recalled.

At first, the news knocked the wind out of several of his closest friends. One in particular "looked kind of white," he recalled. "I think he had a feeling of loss, not being a Catholic. After he came to see that this didn't cost him a friendship, there really was a sense that this was right."

Far more difficult for Father Tyman than announcing his decision to become a priest was leaving family and friends behind for the seminary. He applied to St. Bernard's Seminary, but it closed the same year. He was assigned instead to study at the Catholic University of Louvain in Leuven, Belgium.

After spending more than 30 years within an hour or two of Phelps, Father Tyman found his first real separation from home to be wrenching.

"I never realized what a strong umbilical cord I had maintained," he said. "But after a tough time, I began to find being three hours by train from Paris broadening."

Now he appreciates having had the opportunity to encounter people from other continents and cultures.

"I have seminary classmates from all over the world," he said. "We lived in Europe, but we could talk with people from Africa and Asia about living conditions and the Church in their countries...It really allowed me to look at life from different angles."

Even before his ordination, Father Tyman determined that he would not seek to practice law as a priest. In fact, he consciously rejected his "lawyer side" for several years after leaving legal practice.

"It's only recently that I have felt more comfortable, more reconciled to the fact that I am a lawyer and always will be," he said. "It's just one facet of me and my background."

Even though Father Tyman now avoids offering legal advice to parishioners, he has been surprised at how similar the roles of pastoral counselor and small-town counselor-at-law can be.

"As a lawyer, I was doing a fair amount of counseling or even ministry with (clients). In some cases, I was the only person they could turn to," he said. "I have found that people's problems are often a 'mixed bag'"

of religious, emotional and legal factors, which I can still help to sort out.

"One of the great reliefs of becoming a priest is that you don't have to say, 'You have to pay me \$200 or \$300 before I'll help you,'" he added. "Making a living is not tied so directly to helping people. I appreciate that a great deal."

On the other hand, Father Tyman's hope was quickly dashed that courtroom experience would lend him confidence in preaching. "I found (preaching) wasn't like that at all — it was worse," he said.

Among the most difficult adjustments priesthood has required of Father Tyman was rectory living. "I'd never had the experience of 'living over the store' before," he said. "You're always on display in one way or another. You never leave and go home."

He believes that maturity has been a primary factor in his ability to handle such challenges so far.

"Maybe I developed later than other people, but I don't see myself at 21 or 22 as being mature enough to be a priest," he said. "When I was younger, I was a bit more self-centered. Gradually, I became more interested in helping other people."

"I remember thinking, as I approached 30, how much I had grown up between 25 and 30," he added. "This was the best way — really the only way — for me to have come to the priesthood."

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