

# Students' paths converge at an improbable degree

By Teresa A. Parsons

Denise Mack sought a master's of divinity degree for reasons that are neither subtle nor complicated.

"I feel that basically I am a priest and that's what I should be," she said.

Paula Dumont believes that Mack and other women who want to be priests should have the chance, but she isn't one of them. For her, a master's of divinity degree was simply part of an intellectual quest for faith.

A hunger for theological education brought these divergent paths together this spring as Mack and Dumont became the first two women who are not members of a religious order to earn what was once known as "the priest's degree" from St. Bernard's Institute. In 1973, Sister Gratia L'Esperance, RSM, became the first woman to receive the master of divinity degree from St. Bernard's Seminary. Two other women religious earned the same degree before the seminary closed; thus Dumont and Mack brought to five the number of women who have earned master's degrees in divinity from St. Bernard's.

Mack did not always accept her inclination toward priesthood gracefully, but she well remembers the day she stopped fighting it. She had given a talk at a retreat. Afterward three men approached her separately within the space of five minutes and offered the same comment. "You ought to be a priest," each man said.

She is not sure what prompted their remarks. "I do know I see God in most everything," Mack said. "The education has allowed me to articulate that and it does delight and challenge people."

Long before she felt called to priesthood, Mack succumbed to the lure of education. During the early 1960s, she began volunteering as a parish-religious education coordinator. Her own theological education began, aptly enough, when a priest friend suggested in 1971 that she take some courses at St. Bernard's Seminary.

Mack was both amazed and intrigued by the idea. "I wanted desperately for our sacramental programs to be well-founded theologically," she recalled. "It's very easy to do cute things with first communicants — too easy."

She began with scriptural studies because the few people she met who were enthusiastic about scripture always seemed to be fundamentalists. "I knew there had to be more to it than that," Mack said.

She spent what she still considers the best summer of her life sitting at her dining room table, studying St. Paul and the Psalms while watching her four children splash in the backyard pool. "It was so clear that I was doing the right thing," Mack recalled.

Paula Dumont experienced a similar feeling of rightness when she began attending Mass as an adult. She had grown up in a family whose members shared strong humanist ten-



Michael N. Aydogan

*'I love my ministry, but I do look forward to the day when I am ordained.'*

Denise Mack

dencies and a subtle anti-Catholic bias as well. "Science was our god," she recalled.

Then she met and married David Dumont, a Catholic. The couple began attending Mass together and right away, Paula Dumont realized she'd come home. "I felt nurtured by the great beauty and spirituality I found in the Church," she recalled. Despite her non-religious background, Dumont had what she continues to believe was a mystical experience during her late teenage years. She was thus immediately drawn to the writings of such mystics as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. "They became like a family to me," she said.

Meanwhile, she began meeting with a spiritual director and spending an hour or more each day in private prayer. Father George Maloney, a Jesuit who has written extensively on the subject of contemplative prayer, became one of her favorite authors.

One day Dumont dropped in to visit her spiritual director, who coincidentally was talking on the telephone with Father Maloney. When offered the chance to say hello, Dumont complied and impulsively invited the priest to Rochester — an invitation he acknowledged graciously but vaguely.

Several days later he called Dumont's spiritual director again. "Every time I go to prayer, God tells me to go and see this woman," he reported. Father Maloney came to Rochester soon afterward and spent nearly a week teaching Dumont about contemplative prayer.

Dumont began studying theology in 1975 at what was then St. Bernard's Seminary. "I was in it not so much for the degree, but for the pursuit of Christ, of who Christ is for me," she said. "I had by then been through a lot of different esoteric philosophies and religions, so it seemed that the last thing I was likely to accept was something as simplistic as 'Jesus saves' and 'Jesus loves me.' But the intellectual quest has been a route of salvation for me."

While she studied theology, Dumont continued to devote hours each day to contemplative prayer and service to the poor, in addition to caring for her husband and two children.

In 1983, she focused her work with the poor on Assisi House, a Lyell Avenue storefront where, as coordinator, she continues to offer a blend of advocacy, catechesis and community building.

Somehow, instead of exhausting her, Dumont's regimen has brought her a surprising degree of energy and inner clarity. Looking back, she recalls not an endless round of increasingly dreary chores, but family picnics on the seminary grounds, impromptu concerts with which her children and Monsignor Francis B. Burns would entertain one another, and the kindness of seminarians who sometimes babysat for her.

Mack likewise considers a balance of prayer, solitude, work and study "the only way to live." She particularly appreciated the chance to combine academics with on-the-job training.

Continued on Page 14



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Paula Dumont

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