

Features

Geneva pastor follows his dream to African missions

By Lee Strong

This fall, Father Edwin Metzger will finally get a chance to pursue a dream he's had almost since he was ordained 33 years ago.

On September 1, Father Metzger will go to Maryknoll, N.Y., to start a four-month orientation session for the Maryknoll Associate Priest Program. After he completes the session in December, he will leave for Tanzania, Africa, to study at the order's language and culture school in Musoma before beginning a four-and-a-half year commitment to serve as a missionary in Africa.

The decision to become a missionary follows years of thought, prayer and discernment for the Rochester-born priest.

"I wanted to go to the missions early in my priesthood," Father Metzger said. "I've felt a call to it for many years."

In fact, Father Metzger made an earlier attempt to become a missionary in the 1960s. At that time, he asked then-Bishop Fulton J. Sheen for a leave to work with the Glenmary Fathers in Appalachia. Instead of approving the leave, Bishop Sheen suggested that the priest create a diocesan program for the rural poor. Father Metzger decided not to follow the suggestion. "I didn't want to start a program," he explained. "I wanted to join one that already existed."

So the missionary dream was temporarily put aside, as Father Metzger continued his duties in the diocese. From 1967 to 1975 he served as the director of field education at St. Bernard's Seminary. He was the pastor of Holy Redeemer Parish in Rochester from 1975 to 1980, when he became the pastor of St. Francis DeSales Parish in Geneva.

Several years ago, while he was at DeSales, Father Metzger's desire to become a missionary resurfaced when he read some literature from the Missionaries of Africa, who are better known as the White Fathers. "I began to feel a call to it — as clear a call as to the priesthood in the first place," he recalled.

He wrote to Bishop Matthew H. Clark about his desire to become a missionary. Bishop Clark responded encouragingly, giving him permission to pursue his dream, Father Metzger said.

The priest began to read about Africa and to correspond with the Missionaries of Africa. He described the process of discernment he went through as similar to that which anyone must go through to choose a vocation.

"What you do with a call is learn about what you seem drawn to, pray about it, get permission to leave, and get accepted," Father Metzger explained.

He completed that process this year. In January — at the suggestion of the White Fathers — he attended Maryknoll's month-long cross-cultural program, which consists of spiritual and psychological counseling and examination of the missionary vocation. The program helped Father Metzger to resolve whether his age and stamina were suitable for undertaking missionary work. He decided to go if accepted.

While at Maryknoll, Father Metzger also applied for the Maryknoll Associate Priest Program. Throughout the spring he kept his



Bonnie Trafelet/Courier-Journal

Father Edwin Metzger shares a few moments reminiscing with Catherine Farrell of Rochester in the Genesee Hospital, where he is temporarily working as a hospital chaplain while waiting for a mission assignment in Africa.

applications to both orders open, and, finally chose Maryknoll because of its "clearer, more definite program."

Bishop Clark reaffirmed his support for Father Metzger's decision — as he has done with similar decisions by diocesan priests, Father Metzger noted. "Bishop Clark looks at a call like this as filling a need for the Church as a whole," the priest explained. "I don't want to speak for the bishop, but he's open to the needs of the universal Church as well as the needs of (the Diocese of) Rochester."

Father Metzger said he chose to go to Africa instead of another mission area in part because of inspiration, but also because of the nature of the Church there.

"I understand the Catholic Church is booming," he remarked. "There's a lot of enthusiasm for the Church among the lay people, and a need for priests, sisters and lay people to serve there."

He will be assigned to a parish in either Tanzania or Kenya, where he will carry out duties similar to those he would perform in a U.S. parish: saying Mass, administering the sacraments and teaching catechetics and Christian initiation for adults. He will remain in Africa until 1993, when he will return to Rochester

to take a diocesan assignment.

Father Metzger is cautious about predicting his future, however, and notes that a chance still remains that he may not make it to Africa. During the orientation session, either he or the order may decide that he shouldn't go. "I'm just taking it one day at a time," he said. Since leaving DeSales in June, he has been working as the temporary Catholic chaplain at Genesee Hospital, where he has concentrated on and enjoyed his duties, instead of worrying about the coming months and years.

During the four months of the orientation session, Father Metzger will join 28 other potential missionaries to undergo psychological and spiritual counseling, take classes, learn of other missionaries' experiences overseas and in returning to the United States, and make a directed retreat.

The priest acknowledges that choosing to become a missionary meant making some hard choices, perhaps the hardest of which was leaving St. Francis DeSales Parish in June after eight years as pastor.

"I certainly had mixed feelings about leaving," he noted, adding that parishioners' posi-

tive responses helped make his departure easier.

Outweighing the sadness of leaving, however, is the prospect of what he will experience and learn in Africa.

"I think there's a special kind of message that comes back (with people who visit missionary countries)," he said, referring to his experience of a 1987 visit to El Salvador.

"The faith of the people (in El Salvador) was so strong and inspiring," the priest recounted. "That experience was only for 10 days or so. I just got a hint of the lesson that people who are deprived and poor, yet faith-filled can give to our country. I hope to share that message when I come back."

In addition, he noted, his pastoral experience indicates that when a parish — or a diocese — sacrifices for the missions, the rewards received in return are always greater than the sacrifice.

"It's bread cast upon the water," he concluded. "The diocese has sent many people to serve in the missions, and the spiritual rewards come back to the diocese 100-fold"

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