

Local News

# Despite size, Becket meets Vatican norms, officials say

By Lee Strong

Despite an enrollment of only four men, Becket Hall meets a new Vatican report's criteria for good priestly formation, according to diocesan officials.

The officials base their assessment on an analysis of the 11-page report on U.S. college seminaries, which was written by Cardinal William Baum, prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education. The report was released September 27.

"We certainly fit the criteria, though we are only loosely a formation program under the term as (Cardinal) Baum is using it," said Father Daniel Tormey, director of Becket Hall. "Formation is usually full-time, but our men are actually working and going to school. We're helping people prepare to go to the seminary."

Cardinal Baum's report summarizes the results of the college-level phase of a study of all U.S. seminaries and formation houses which was begun in 1981 by Pope John Paul II. A report on post-college seminaries was released in 1986.

In the new report, Cardinal Baum said that many college seminaries are not receiving adequate support and are starved for students, in part because many dioceses do not send their priest candidates to proper college seminaries. The cardinal suggested that small priestly formation houses should be closed and their college-level students should be sent to college seminaries.

Diocesan officials, however, say the Diocese of Rochester's pre-seminary program at Becket Hall, in spite of its small size, will remain open.

Father Thomas Valenti, director of the vocations office for the Diocese of Rochester, acknowledged that the number of students at Becket is small and that this has caused concern in the diocese. "I think any time people have low numbers, people begin to wonder," Father Valenti said. He added that efforts — such a vocations support group being formed at St. John Fisher College — are underway to recruit more men for the Becket Hall program.

"You obviously lose something with small numbers, but you gain a lot of familiarity," Father Tormey remarked. In spite of Becket's small enrollment, he maintained, that the pro-

gram at Becket Hall offers "as much or more than college seminaries" because of the availability of such institutions as St. John Fisher College, Nazareth College and St. Bernard's Institute. In addition, he said, "the presence of Becket in the community allows the men to pursue their pastoral ministry within the diocese," something they would lose if Becket Hall closed.

Father Tormey pointed out that closing Becket because of low numbers at this time would also raise too many problems. "I don't think that many of the men who are at the beginning of things are ready to pack up and move to a college seminary." Three of the students, he noted, have already completed college. One is working full-time; two are working part-time while studying part-time to fill their philosophy requirements for seminary study.

Father Valenti noted that the current group of Becket Hall residents includes a 27-year-old and a 31-year-old. "I think (an older) man would find it difficult to enter a college seminary given the disparity in age and maturity," he said.

Both priests said that the Cardinal Baum's letter contains recommendations that deserve careful study, but that the letter was not intended to provide hard-and-fast rules.

"I think the letter of Cardinal Baum is prompted by what's going on many college campuses, where the students are being exposed to what I call the 'college of the world' and be discouraged in their pursuit of the priesthood," Father Valenti said. "I think their identity becomes blurred because of their location on campus."

Becket Hall, on the other hand, is located off campus since moving from St. John Fisher College to the former St. Boniface Convent in 1984. "With Becket no longer located on a campus, it creates an atmosphere where a man can focus in on his formation," Father Valenti said.

Moreover, the vocation director noted, Becket Hall fits Cardinal Baum's description of a good house of formation.

In his letter, Cardinal Baum praised formation houses that are led by priests who are well qualified; are linked to a Catholic college or



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal  
Father Tim Brown of St. Margaret Mary's Parish in Irondequoit shares his priestly experiences with the young men of Becket Hall.

university which offers a healthy curriculum of suitable philosophical studies; and offer systematic priestly formation.

Students at Becket Hall fill the 18 hours of philosophy required for entry to a seminary by attending St. John Fisher College. At Becket, residents attend daily Mass together; have weekly discussions about spirituality, sacraments and Church history; undertake regular retreats and days of recollection; and take on pastoral ministry placements in parishes to "expose them to that life of a parish priest," Father Tormey observed. In addition, the students each have a spiritual director with whom they meet regularly.

As for having a well-qualified priest to head the program, Father Tormey laughingly said,

"Well, we certainly fit that criteria." In actuality, Father Tormey brings with him the experience of more than 33 years of ordained priesthood. During those years he has been: a parish priest; chaplain for the State Correctional and Reception Center in Elmira and chaplain at Rochester General Hospital; director of chaplaincy services at Strong Memorial Hospital; a missionary in Bolivia; and assistant director of the Office of Human Development.

Father Tormey said that Cardinal Baum's letter reflects "a need that we had discovered already: that some men who go to theologate are not well prepared. I think it's hitting a right note, that we do need formation programs be-

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