

Features

# Call to priesthood nurtured through discernment groups

By Lee Strong

Noel Franus liked staffing retreats and working with people, but his interests hadn't prompted him to seriously consider the priesthood. "It didn't strike me particularly, but I did think of the priesthood as one possible route," he acknowledged.

Then one day last year, the Bishop Kearney senior was introduced to Father Thomas Valenti, the Diocese of Rochester's vocations director. The priest was looking at some pictures from a retreat, and noticed Franus in them. "Father Tom asked me if I'd ever thought of being a priest?" Franus reported.

Today, he is one of 31 young men enrolled in one of the Diocese of Rochester's vocation discernment programs.

The number of men like Franus involved with diocesan discernment programs belies suggestions that the Church in Rochester is less concerned with increasing vocations than with opening to lay people ministries and roles once reserved for priests. Enrollment in discernment programs is up from 25 in 1987.

"I in no way want to signal that plans for lay ministry mean that we are not actively recruiting anybody to diocesan priesthood," Father Valenti declared. "If that message is out there, I want to say clearly that my approach will be even more aggressive in the future than it is (now)."

Although Father Valenti applauded the growing involvement of lay people in church ministries, he said the Church will always need priests.

"The Eucharist and the celebration of the Mass will be only possible through the ordained priesthood," Father Valenti said. "I can't imagine that God will stop calling people to the priesthood because of the growth in lay ministries. My faith leads me to believe God will continue to call to the priesthood as well."

In pursuit of recruits for the discernment programs, Father Valenti regularly attends retreats for young people and speaks at area Catholic high schools. The discernment programs, he noted, are needed as a follow-up to the retreats and to the talks.

"You need to have something in place to help these guys discern their vocation to the priesthood," Father Valenti explained. "They need feedback, to be encouraged and supported, to be challenged to grow in their spiritual life. The

discernment programs become very important after a retreat or a waking up of a call to priesthood."

Franus and other men involved in the discernment programs are examining whether they have that call.

"I'm not committing myself to be a priest," Franus explained. "I'm trying to figure out, 'Do I want to be a lay person, a priest, a brother?'"

"If I had to make my decision today, I would probably be in the seminary," noted Doug DellaPietra, a sophomore at St. John Fisher College. "But I'm still in college. I'm not ready to make that decision yet."

Both men take part in the Seek Program, which is designed for high-school and college-age men. This program is intended to supply information about the priesthood and offer support through regular retreats and biweekly discussion groups. Eighteen high school and eight college students are currently members of this program.

Kevin Mannara, a teacher at Bishop Kearney High School, is certain he would like to be a priest. "I know it's a calling, it's just which calling is greater — the priesthood or having a family," he said.

Mannara is one of five men in the Affiliate Program, which is designed for men of college age and older who are actively pursuing the idea of priesthood. Mannara, for example, has already spent one semester in a seminary studying for priesthood in a religious order. He left the seminary last December, realizing he would rather be a diocesan priest.

While deciding whether to return to seminary studies, Mannara is participating in the Affiliate Program. "I'm able to be around a lot of guys my own age who are dealing with the same issues I am," he noted. "Without the group, I would probably think a lot less about my vocation. It wouldn't be nurtured the way that it is now. (The group) is a really big support."

"It's good to know that other people are discerning along with me," DellaPietra observed. "(The Seek Program) is there to help us all to see that we are kind of similar. It provides support — that's hard to replace."

Inadequate support is one of the major reasons for lack of interest in vocations to the priesthood, Father Valenti acknowledged.



Linda Dow/Hayes/Courier-Journal  
Father Tom Valenti talks with high school members of the Seek Program during one of their biweekly meetings.

Young men who express interest in the priesthood are all too often discouraged by friends and family, he added.

"So many of their peers put them down," Father Valenti said. "Even members of their families discourage them. Parents will say, 'I want grandchildren.' That says to me they don't care what God has called their sons to do."

Mannara experienced similar discouragement when he told people about considering the priesthood. "When I first started talking about priesthood, my friends said I was crazy," he remarked. "One of my friends said, 'Just become a Eucharistic minister, why become a priest?' That's like saying, 'Why become a doctor, just put on some Band-Aids?'"

Father Valenti noted that one of the primary reasons for rejecting priesthood is the issue of celibacy — which society brands as unnatural. "I think it's very important to help young people understand that the world in which we live today would not promote celibacy," he observed. "I think as a person begins to grow in the life of faith, they begin to perceive celibacy as a gift."

Developing a life of faith through prayer and spiritual growth is at the core of the discernment programs. "In the priesthood today, they really need to know the Lord Jesus and develop a relationship to God through a prayer life," Father Valenti said. "I generally tell them quite openly, 'If you're not willing to engage in a disciplined prayer life, a daily life of prayer, you have no foundation on which to build a call

to priesthood."

With retreats such as one offered at the Cenacle on Saturday, Nov. 26, the vocations office attempts to help men in the discernment programs grow spiritually. Billed as a "Thanksgiving Day of Prayer," the retreat challenged the 14 young men who attended to share their sense of their own vocations and to make commitments to spiritual growth.

High school students, for example, talked about five points in their lives that changed them through awareness of Christ's presence. "It was basically to provide some sort of support — to know what other people have gone through, what they've learned, what they've achieved," Franus said.

DellaPietra found the discussion of commitments helpful.

"It was stressing that priesthood is a commitment, and we need to make commitments in life," DellaPietra said. "We have to make smaller commitments in our daily lives."

As part of the retreat, each participant wrote on a sheet of paper a commitment to do something extra on a daily basis to help his spiritual growth. They all gave the papers to Father Valenti, who will mail them back at Christmas. "Hopefully, when he sends back those commitments, we'll be able to say, 'Yes, I've been able to keep that commitment,'" DellaPietra said. "They're sort of a reminder to ourselves."

Although the two discernment programs currently in place are attracting increasing

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## Cooper named to top administrative post of Elmira's merging hospitals

By Richard A. Kiley

Four months after the merger of Elmira's two hospitals was announced, the Elmira Medical Center (EMC) has named its chief executive officer and board of directors.

Anthony J. Cooper Jr., Arnot-Ogden Memorial Hospital's president and chief executive officer, was named president and CEO-designate of the Elmira Medical Center, which is the name that has been chosen for the consolidated Arnot-Ogden and St. Joseph hospitals.

The announcement of Cooper's appointment was made at a news conference at Arnot-Ogden on Friday, Dec. 2.

Sister Marie Castagnaro, president and chief executive officer of St. Joseph's Hospital, has been named chief operating officer-designate

of the new center.

Both Cooper and Sister Castagnaro will retain their current titles until the Elmira Medical Center is incorporated, which could take place by June, 1989.

The hospitals announced their planned consolidation on August 11 after nearly two years of study on the feasibility of a merger. Arnot-Ogden and St. Joseph's hospitals will merge into a 500-bed regional referral center, keeping both buildings open, but consolidating some services in order to eliminate duplication.

During the interim period, Cooper will assume a key leadership role. His responsibilities will include the planning and production of the New York State Certificate of Need application for establishment of the EMC, as well as overseeing the activities of the hospitals' various task forces.

As chief operating officer-designate of the center, Sister Castagnaro will be responsible for overseeing all healthcare operations in addition to assisting Cooper in his responsibilities as chief executive.

The Elmira Medical Center Board-Designate is made up of 23 voting members, 10 from each hospital and four ex-officio members.

Last August, Deacon Stanley Douglas, then-community relations director at St. Joseph's Hospital, called the planned consolidation "historic" and said that the hospital would not compromise its "Catholicity."

He said that such religious and philosophical issues as abortion and sterilization procedures were never a problem for hospital officials. Doctors at St. Joseph's Hospital do

not perform abortions, and Arnot-Ogden has not done them in nearly two years. Arnot-Ogden does, however, perform sterilizations.

Douglas also stated that the hospitals will establish a board — with reserve powers — especially concerned with issues related to canonical law. That board will be accountable to Bishop Matthew H. Clark, according to Douglas.

### Office offers free phone calls

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