



The church appoints individuals with special gifts to the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist.

Support sustains 60-year vocation

By Father Benedict Ehmann
Guest contributor

After 60 years a priest, I'm invited to go back into the vault of memory, to share with anyone of today's folk who might be interested in the genesis and growth of a vocation to the priesthood. I am accepting the invitation, but with no pretense that my story has any greater meaning than those of my priestly peers.

Marvellous indeed is our faculty of memory. St. Augustine devoted one long chapter of his *Confessions* to this theme; nowhere in literature can we find a more subtle and thorough analysis of memory and its working in human life.

So, memory of mine, let your rusty wheels turn again after so long, as I wind you up in this evening of life.

The subject is: vocation to the priesthood, when and how did it begin for me, and what helped it grow? Can memory find the many headwaters that merged into the channel of my calling?

Looking back, I've often sensed a kind of destiny in the course of my life — not from the stars nor from Capricorn under which I was born, but in the circumstances that combined to welcome me into the world.

The first of those circumstances was the pontificate of Pope St. Pius X (1903-1914) during which I was born, the first child of my parents who had been married three months before he was elected Pope. In profound ways he has been my benefactor. Because of his reform of eucharistic requirements, I made my first Communion at age 8, whereas under previous popes the age had been 12, and I was free to go often to Communion. Before Pius X, frequent Communion was a rarity because of stern Jansenistic theology.

Even more than this, Pope Pius X entered into the direction of my life with his mandate to restore the Liturgy of the Mass and the Divine Office. Before him, only choirs sang at Mass while the people were quiet in their individual praying. It was his order that the Gregorian chant should be restored, theatrical music excluded, and the congregations given an active share in the offering and singing of the Mass.

Thus in this first decade of my life was laid the road I was to walk during my whole career. It was the way of liturgy reform and church music.

My childhood parish church was St. Boniface in Rochester, where the liturgies were heavenly with people singing, along with a fine choir, and proper music including the chant. Every Sunday afternoon we were required to return to church for vespers and Benediction, and during Lent for the Stations of the Cross, for which people filled the church. I see in this sturdy current of Christian fervor one of the headwaters of my vocation to the priesthood, further strengthened by my being chosen an altar boy and eventually elected head sacristan.

Another important factor in the shaping of my priestly future was the prevalence of music from my early boyhood. My father, a good violinist, taught me to play when I was eight. But after a few months he sent me to learn the piano from Professor Philip Kreckel, a brilliant pianist, the organist of our church. For me this was "crossing the Rubicon" into a new terrain, which I have never left. Such progress did I make, that my mother's youngest sister, my aunt Lucy, who lived with us, had vision of me becoming a concert artist. But to her disappointment this was not to be, and perhaps just as well! God alone knows how I would have fared on the "fast track."

I owe more than memory can recall to the "good Sisters" the School Sisters of Notre Dame who taught in our parish school: devoted, sensitive, genuine beacons of light and love, alert in sensing where the Lord wanted me to go. My eighth-grade teacher, Sr. Thomasina, took me aside one day after school, and asked kindly, "Did you ever think of becoming a priest?"

I'm not sure now whether I'd thought so definitely about it before that. But I'm sure her question sank in and germinated, cultivated in a happy, colorful home and in so blest a parish.

So when I graduated from eighth grade, my mind was made up to go to the seminary. At St. Andrew's Preparatory Seminary, I entered a new orbit of experience and found new friends. The professors were all diocesan priests. None of them had master's or doctoral degrees, yet their tutoring helped blossom in me a great love of literature, history and languages, but not of higher mathematics, in which I was never more than second- or third-rate.

Our seminary life was closely involved with the work of the old St. Patrick's Cathedral next door, under the shadow of the Kodak "skyscraper" office. There we served many Masses for our seminary teachers and the priests of the Cathedral High faculty, who taught nearby, before moving to the new Aquinas Institute. We seminarians were the sanctuary choir, trained by a grand old man, Professor Eugene Bonn, a wizard of music on the great Cathedral organ.

Yes, I was growing in my fashion, and now I was to grow still more in proficiency and sense of vocation, with summer work playing the organ for services at the French Church (Our Lady of Victory) and at St. Joseph's. Church music became more and more the atmosphere of my being. This is not to say I shied away from Gershwin, or Victor Herbert, or Irving Berlin, whom I loved to play, but not in church, of course!

At last, an 18-year-old student and musician, I was advanced to the major seminary, St. Bernard's — another new world, almost cloistered — sharing common life away from home with 250 others of the same purpose and aspiration, drawing new strength from this vigorous community, and gaining

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