

New priest was called to serve

By Father Michael R. Brown
Guest contributor

I'm writing this reflection on June 8, 1989, the two-month anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. The past two months have been filled with a great sense of joy and happiness each and every day, as I live out a vocation I have felt called to since my days as an altar boy at St. Pius X Parish in Chili.

I can remember the first time I seriously considered the vocation of priesthood, back when I received the sacrament of confirmation from Bishop Hickey in 1975. It was that Friday evening after receiving confirmation, when our family was starting out for a Florida vacation, that I could still smell the perfumed scent of the chrism oil on my forehead. As I lay quietly in the back of our family station wagon, I really felt a strong presence of the Lord assuring me that this vocation to the priesthood, which I had been thinking about as an altar boy, should be seriously considered.

Is it merely a coincidence that this chrism oil used in baptism and confirmation is the same oil used to anoint the priests' hands in ordination? I think it's more than a coincidence. It is in fact the reality of the gifts of the Holy Spirit made present through the symbol of oil, the prayer and the gesture of anointing. The sacred chrism oil is blessed by the bishop each year at the Chrism Mass, to be used for all the confirmations and ordinations throughout the diocese for that year. At this year's Chrism Mass, I could not help but think of my own confirmation and upcoming ordination when I presented the oil to be blessed by the bishop.

So, it was the grace of the Holy Spirit, through the sacrament of confirmation that really asked me to look closely at considering the life of a priest. I took these feelings of wanting to be a priest with me into high school.

While leading a very normal life at Gates-Chili High School, I enjoyed playing freshman basketball and soccer, and four years of Chili town baseball. Although I had many close friends through high school and the sports teams, I was never really comfortable talking about my idea of becoming a priest. Having experienced those feelings back then, I feel it is important for parents, teachers and priests today to invite our young people into dialogue and really ask them if they have ever thought of becoming priests.

Upon graduation from high school, I continued my education at Monroe Community College, graduating in 1981 with an associate's degree in business administration. Faced with a decision of continuing college work in business administration or looking more closely at this ever-present desire to pursue priesthood, I finally told my parents about wanting to be a priest. Since that day, they have always been extremely supportive of whatever decision I made.

In deciding to pursue my call to priesthood, I notified the diocesan vocation director at the time, Father Tom Valenti, and we decided that the best way to pursue this was for me to go and live at Becket Hall, the college seminary on the campus of St. John Fisher College.

It was in my two years there that I really began to create what I feel is a necessary foundation for anyone considering a vocation to priesthood — a love of prayer, love of Eucharist and a desire to serve others. To make these the foundations of one's vocation is to make the reality of Christ present in our own lives first, so we can make the reality of Christ come alive for our brothers and sisters as well.

From the campus of St. John Fisher, I moved back home to finish my undergraduate studies at Brockport State College. Upon graduating from Brockport, I entered the major seminary at Immaculate Conception on the campus of Seton Hall



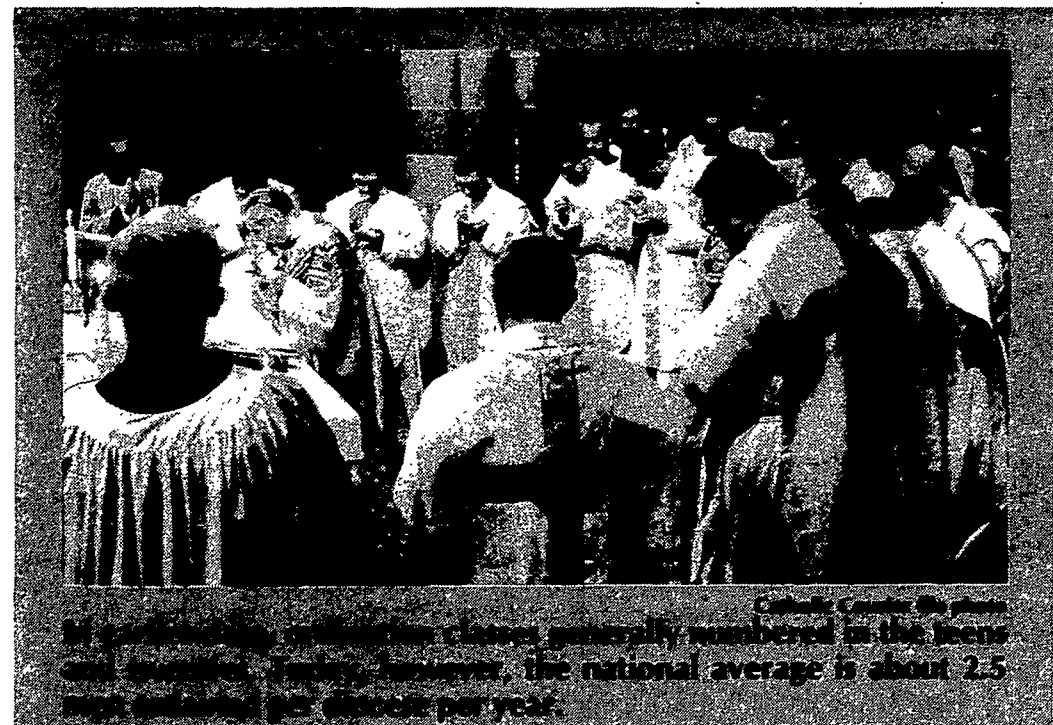
Imposition of hands on the ordinands remains an essential part of the Sacrament of Ordination.

University. Four years of seminary included studies in Scripture, church history, church dogma and moral theology, as well as pastoral courses in liturgy and pastoral counseling.

My journey to priesthood has not been without its doubts, struggles, confusion and challenges. These are the realities that go into making any vocation choice, and I have to say that I have been blessed to have a loving family and good friends who have always been there to talk with in those times of difficulty.

These are exciting times in the church, and I am happy to be a part of them as a priest. The doubts, struggles, confusion and challenges have always been a part of the church and will continue to be a part of her. But together, as the people of God, we can all work to bring each other closer to Christ through prayer, Eucharist and service of others.

God's call leads former seminarian on a different path



In seminaries, ordination classes generally numbered in the tens and twenties. Today, however, the national average is about 2.5 per diocese per session per year.

By Frank Paolotto
Guest contributor

As I tried to put words on my experiences in the seminary, I found a litany of people who loved and supported me. I am thankful for being so richly blessed with images of men and women striving to serve and share God with others. It was the clarity of people giving of themselves that allowed me to consider if God was calling me to serve as a priest.

This need to serve God led me to Becket Hall. Looking back, it was a time of growth and discernment. Joys and sorrows, new relationships with new people, deeper relations with those already a part of my life. Most of all, it was a chance to learn how to live in community. Becket Hall was my opportunity to begin to see how loved and cared for I was in my family and how desperately others in God's family were lacking.

Thus the issue for me was: "How do I best love and serve God?" As Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34). This was what I sought. How do I best use my gifts and talents for God's work on earth? My life would not have meaning unless it was fully connected to God. I needed to be drawn on in my spirit.

I considered the church and priesthood because I had received so much from Father Sebastian Contegiamcomo at Most Precious Blood, who married my parents and baptized my sisters and me; from Bishops Casey and McCafferty and the priests of Sacred Heart; from the Basilians of Aquinas and St. John Fisher; and from Father Bob Hammond and all the priests of Seminar and Family Camp. They showed me an enthusiasm for life with God. I remember my confession at Sacred Heart and feeling lifted inside when I came out of the church. I loved to be on the altar to serve and be a part of God visiting us in the Eucharist. I felt that it would be a privilege to be part of this.

One of my strongest images of a priest was Father John Hempel, the rector of Becket Hall. He said, "Celibacy frees you to love more freely." I have found this to be true in my own life. It allows me to be available to

those God brings into my life. I would not be able to live the way I do if I was married and raising a family. My choice has been to make myself available to God's family. I am able to do this because I have peace that I am doing God's will. This peace, combined with the support of the Cephas-Attica community with whom I live and work and my worshipping community of Corpus Christi Church, gives me the strength to continue this lifestyle.

It was not always like this. Leaving the seminary was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. There are so many people I lived with, worked with, visited with and was supported by. All of these people are part of the fabric and colors of my life. But something was missing. My heart longed to be a priest and serve, but my spirit felt locked up.

I loved God and knew he was calling me to serve Him. Serving as a priest had been my focus, but somehow something was lacking. I was no longer feeling the inspiration and excitement. I took a year off from the seminary to try to discern His direction for me.

During this time I read more of St. Francis, the "little poor man" and his way of selling all and serving the poor. I joined Corpus Christi Church with its wonderful outreaches. Then I was asked to visit a Cephas-Attica group counseling session with parolees. In Cephas for me, there is community living, a simple lifestyle, a 24-hour a day focus on serving the poor and the chance to be with brothers and sisters who love Jesus. My life at Cephas has brought me more peace and fulfillment than I have ever felt before. I live a celibate life and feel I am doing what God would have me do.

This was an answer to my prayers. Cephas was able to strip me out of myself by asking me to sacrifice of myself to the poor. I was in love again. My spirit rejoiced, and peace reigned in my heart.

The most important lesson of my life was to hear what God was asking of my life. The answer was in two statements. "Your vocation is to belong to Jesus; he has chosen you for Himself, and the work is only a means for your love for Him in action" — Mother

Continued on page 19

Ordination numbers increase; priestly ranks continue decline

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Priestly ordinations are on the rise worldwide, but the number still does not make up for the annual decrease through deaths and departures from the ministry, according to the latest Vatican figures.

The figures show a total of 7,251 ordinations in 1987, the last year for which worldwide figures are available, as compared to 5,918 for 1978.

However, in 1987, there were 7,324 deaths and 986 priests who left the active ministry, for a total of 8,310. The result is a net loss of 1,059 priests.

But the gap between ordinations and loss of priests has been steadily decreasing over the past 10 years. In 1978, there was a drop of 2,867 priests.

Also decreasing has been the number of priests leaving the active ministry, from 2,037 in 1978 to 986 in 1987.

The Vatican gives a total figure for priests who left the active ministry and does not break it down into those who have been laicized and those who simply have abandoned the priestly life.

The 1978-87 figures were compiled by the Vatican's Central Office for Church Statistics and made public May 17.

They show a total of 402,243 priests in 1987, down from 416,329 in 1978.

At the same time, the figures show a 44 percent increase in major seminarians from 1978 to 1987. In 1987 there were 90,424 major seminarians. In contrast, there were 62,670 in 1978.