

Divine dramas

The Black Death helped inspire a 15th century morality play staged last week by area youths, and provided a backdrop for a current film blending medieval faith with modern doubt. Pages 6-7



'Call' beckons 110 potential priests

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Joseph Placious doesn't know who submitted his name to the diocesan vocations office. But when he received a letter from the office telling him that someone had recommended him as a good candidate for the priesthood, he responded readily.

"Priesthood for me is an option," said Placious, a member of St. Andrew's Parish, Rochester. "I'm in the process of deciding what I want to do. I think I will continue the process."

Likewise, Dick Thorpe is in the dark about who submitted his name. But he, too, decided to investigate the priesthood, even though he is 59.

"I always had it in the back of my mind, but I pushed it back," acknowledged Thorpe, a member of St. Francis of Assisi Parish, Rochester. "I'm aware of the need, and I feel as Catholic Christians we should be willing to listen to the call and accept it if it's there."

Placious and Thorpe were among approximately 60 men who traveled to St. Dominic's Parish in Shortsville Saturday, Aug. 12, for a day of prayer and reflection on the vocation of priesthood. At least 50 other men — including a serviceman stationed in Panama — expressed interest in learning more about the priesthood, but were unable to attend the day.

Those 110 men, in turn, were among the more than 600 named by members of the diocese as men who might make good priests. The campaign, entitled "Bishop Clark's Call to Priesthood," was launched this spring, and thus far has exceeded all expectations.

"I think this is an answer to prayer," asserted Father Thomas Valenti, assistant to the bishop for vocations. "I think this is because of the prayers of the people."

Prayer has, in fact, been a key part of the campaign, Father Valenti said. When the effort was launched in May, parishes throughout the diocese were asked to pray for vocations. The official prayer was also printed in bulletins and on cards, nearly 72,000 of which were distributed.

Bishop Clark attributed some of the success of the campaign to efforts in recent years to develop lay ministry in the diocese. He also cited the Commitment to Ministry process through which parishioners are assessing their parishes' staffing needs and options as an important impetus to the priestly vocations campaign.

"We've engaged in our diocese for several years in a very constructive effort to develop lay ministry and have provided opportunities for the development of that," Bishop Clark said.

In the midst of this effort, the bishop continued, "and especially through the Commitment to Ministry reflection teams, (the development of lay ministry) seems to have provided an ... awareness that the shortage of vocations to the priesthood is a very real one. There's come a strong, grass-roots call ... to be sure that we focus attention to call for candidates for diocesan priesthood."

Out of that call emerged a focused effort to recruit more candidates. This spring, the vocations office was reorganized and moved from the Division of Personnel to the Bishop's Office. The move was intended to show Bishop Clark's commitment to participating in attracting more vocations to the diocesan priesthood.

The vocations office then developed the Call to Priesthood campaign, basing it on the "Called by Name" pro-



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Bishop Matthew H. Clark conducts Mass at St. Dominic's in Shortsville for approximately 60 men who attended the Aug. 12 day of prayer and reflection on the vocation of priesthood. Fifty others were unable to attend the program, but expressed interest in learning more about becoming priests.

gram created by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Vocations, of which Bishop Clark is a member.

The program has been used in a number of dioceses, including Buffalo and Syracuse. The Syracuse effort, which ended in June of this year, garnered the names of 270 men who might be potential candidates for the priesthood.

Father Valenti acknowledged that Commitment to Ministry helped to focus attention on the need for priestly vocations. He also suggested that the Call to Priesthood effort provided a mechanism for acting on concerns over that need.

"I think we gave them something concrete," Father Valenti said. "I also think we gave them a means to respond — to pray, and secondly, to provide names."

The campaign also gave the men considering priesthood something concrete to look forward to and to help them in the discernment process. The day of reflection and prayer at St. Dominic's included information sessions with priests, seminarians and men who are already involved in the vocations process through Becket Hall or the discernment programs for high school and college students. The day also gave the men a chance just to be with others who are thinking along the same lines.

Dave Patch, for example, said he sometimes feels hesitant to talk openly about the priesthood. "It's just not something kids our age are doing," acknowledged the 16-year-old Fairport High School student. "I do at times back down, back away, and not talk about it freely."

But Patch, who has been involved with the diocesan discernment program for two years, said, "When I hang out with kids in here and guys at Becket, we're open and free."

The day also gave Patch a chance to meet newly ordained priests. Father Michael Brown, ordained this year, was in Patch's small group. "Seeing someone who's new in the priesthood and close to my age is inspiring," he said.

Placious, on the other hand, said that at 28 he's old enough not to be overly concerned about what others think of his interest in the priesthood. He acknowledged, however, that when he first learned about the campaign he

had some doubts about the effort.

"I was a little skeptical when I first heard the diocese was going to do this," Placious said. "You never know what the quality of the person would be in just a general calling."

He said he came to terms with the campaign, however, when he learned that the names would be submitted by fellow parishioners — people who were more likely to know the candidates personally and thus be in a position to judge them.

Once his skepticism was out of the way, Placious decided to come to St. Dominic's to help him in the process of discerning whether priesthood is for him. "The draw for me is probably working with the people, helping people," he said. He granted that he could help others as a lay person, but said that being a priest would allow him to concentrate more fully on serving others and being involved with the church, rather than just fitting them in between "working and trying to make a living."

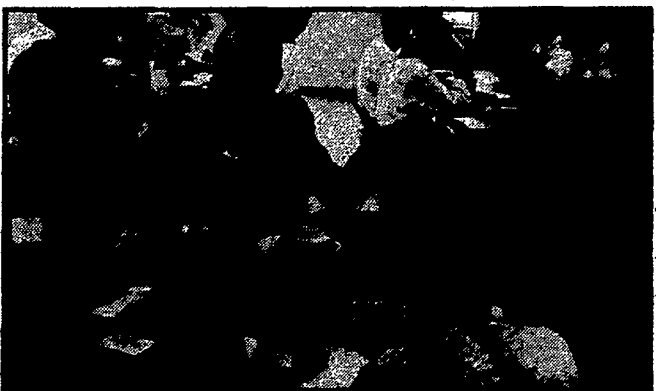
Working, making a living and raising a family are precisely what Thorpe has done for a number of years. A seminarian from 1945-51, he opted for marriage instead of ordination. Now divorced and with his family grown, he feels ready to look once again at his possible calling to priesthood.

"I thought I would go (to St. Dominic's) to see what it involved and whether it would be feasible," Thorpe said. He was particularly concerned that he might be too old, but thought "if they encouraged me, I would follow through on it."

Bishop Clark acknowledged that more candidates like Thorpe and Placious are coming forward — men who were older and had experienced more in life. This has forced the Diocese of Rochester — and other dioceses across the country — to be more flexible about their priestly formation programs.

"When I was ordained, approximately 95 percent of those ordained were 25-, 26-, 27-, 28-years-old," Bishop Clark said. "Now they tend to be older, more experienced. Their educational backgrounds vary. We can't waive requirements, but we can offer flexibility about

Continued on page 13



During the lunch break, Bishop Clark talks with some of the young men involved in the Saturday program.