

# 'Holy Smoke' fights fires with skill and faith

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

SPENCERPORT — As Father Robert Winterkorn might tell you, no disciple can become greater than his master.



Then again, one of the priest's former altar boys is now his boss — or at least, one of his bosses.

So now, the pastor of St. John the Evangelist must answer to his former charge, Dave Goddard, president of the Spencerport Fire Department, which the priest has served as a volunteer for the last 15 years.

Goddard assisted Father Winterkorn when he celebrated Mass as the assistant pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Greece during the 1950s. The two have become adult friends through their association in the fire department.

"I'd say we're closer now (than when I was young)," Goddard said of his relationship with the priest. "I've seen him at least once a week. I've got a better appreciation for the things he does and the life he leads."

That life is one dedicated to serving others, according to Father Winterkorn, who drives the ladder truck for the fire department. His volunteerism includes chaplaincies with two fire departments, four fire associations, boy and girl scouts, the Lions Club, and several other local organizations.

The pastor sees his extensive service, especially to the fire department, as a way of paying back the community in which he lives. "I guess maybe I felt that since we don't pay any property taxes as a church, that this was one of ways I felt I could do something for the community," he said.

And the priest's community has recognized his efforts. He was recently named Citizen of the Year by the Ogden Spencerport Council of the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce. "Holy Smoke," as he is known by his friends at the firehouse, has developed a reputation for fine service during his 15 years with the fire department.

"He can maneuver that (ladder truck) like you and I can maneuver a car," Goddard said, adding that the priest responds to an above-average number of calls each year. Some of those calls he might rather

have avoided, the priest remarked, noting that while the rush of going out to fight a fire is exciting, the tragic results of some blazes can be difficult to deal with.

"There's nothing worse than burnt flesh," Father Winterkorn said, noting that he's administered last rites to some fire victims. "There's nothing glamorous about that. That's strictly doing your job as a priest," he added.

He has occasionally brushed with death in the midst of his duties. During one fire, he found himself inside a room of a house that was pitch-black and filled with smoke.

"I almost fell through the floor," Father Winterkorn said, noting that only afterward did he learn that he had stood inches away from a hole in the first floor that would have sent him on a one-way ride to the house cellar.

Father Winterkorn also recalled getting lost in a fire. "You're always with a buddy," he said. "I got separated from him ... We were doing a search to make sure no one was in a room."

Fortunately, "Holy Smoke" found his companion. The priest noted that he has also suffered from frost-bite while fighting



Firefighter's "bunkers," boots and trousers, stand ready at the door.

a mid-winter barn blaze, and got a wood splinter in his right eye when battling another inferno.

One should not get the idea that Father Winterkorn revels in such heroics. If anything, the priest downplays his role, noting its usefulness to the community rather than its importance in his own life. His participation in the Spencerport crew is no different than that of any other fire fighter, he said, except for the effect he has on some of his colleagues.

"Most of the guys wouldn't think of darkening the doorway of a rectory," he said, "(but) if they've got family problems ... they'll stop in the firehouse and talk about the most intimate things you can imagine."

While they're talking to this particular firehouse colleague, however, four-letter words will be absent from their conversations, said Father Winterkorn, recalling a comment Goddard made about the priest's effect on the fire crew.

"He said, 'We don't fight any fires any better, but the language sure has cleaned up around here,'" the priest laughingly remarked.



Smokey, Father Robert Winterkorn's now-constant companion, "found" his owner two years ago. The dog had previously been abused and abandoned.



In addition to driving a ladder truck, Father Winterkorn (above), the pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Spencerport, is qualified to don oxygen gear and enter burning buildings. A child's fire truck (right), removed by Spencerport firefighters from a house on Webster Road last Sunday, gives a surreal impression.



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