

# Duo adds 'degrees' of learning to diocese

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — A 19th Century English Catholic layman and priest personnel records may seem to have little in common, but those topics led to doctoral degrees for two Rochester priests.

Father Mark Miller, temporary administrator of Rochester's St. James Parish, last fall earned a doctor of theology degree from the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto with a dissertation titled, *Lord Shrewsbury and the Catholic Revival in England*.

Meanwhile, in January, 1991, Father Kevin McKenna, canonical consultant to Bishop Matthew H. Clark and a judge in the Diocese of Rochester's marriage tribunal, earned a doctor of theology degree in canon law from St. Paul's University in Ottawa, Canada, after completing a dissertation titled, *The Right of Confidentiality and Diocesan Clergy Personnel Records*.

Neither subject area — church history or canon law — would on the surface appear relevant to the needs of local Catholic Church. But the reverend doctors disagree.

"I think it helps greatly to understand and accept the present situation of the church knowing what the church has gone through in previous centuries," Father Miller asserted. "I think it helps to

understand the human side of the church. Church history concentrates on the changes ... the human decisions. I think it helps to realize that the church has not always been the way that it is now."

"The more I got into the study (of canon law) the more I got the idea that it is a pastoral instrument in the life of the church," Father McKenna remarked. "I think it's an extremely pastoral document because it ... attempts to see how the changes and reforms of the (Second Vatican Council) had actually been worked out in the Catholic Church."

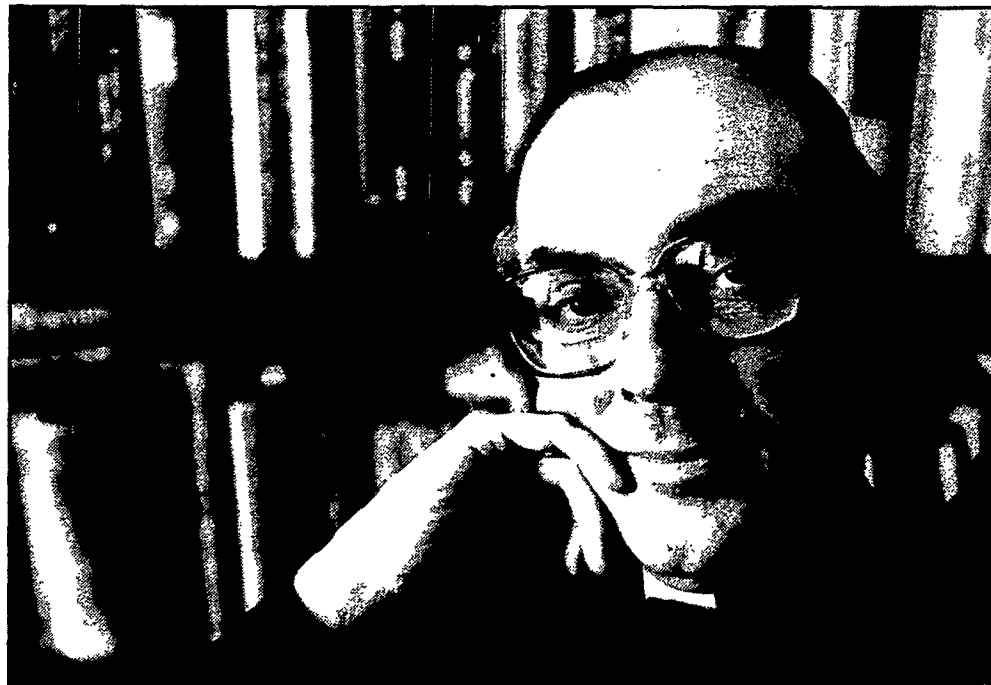
Still, neither priest originally chose to seek doctorates — particularly in areas that are not especially popular subjects.

Rather, they were asked by bishops to pursue advanced studies in those fields.

Father Miller had his first taste of church history while a seminarian at St. Bernard's Seminary in the late 1960s. "I became interested in how the liturgy was celebrated in the early days of the church, and then the Fathers of the Church, and church history in general," the 1969 St. Bernard's graduate recalled.

Until 1978, Father Miller was involved in parish work. But at the same time, he was pursuing his interest in church history, writing occasional articles for the seminary's newsletter, *The Sheaf*.

In 1978, Father Robert McNamara, then



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

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professor of church history at St. Bernard's, began suffering from ill health and planned to retire in a few years. Faculty members at St. Bernard's recommended Father Miller as someone who eventually could fill Father McNamara's footsteps, and then-Bishop Joseph L. Hogan asked the priest to prepare to do so. Father Miller said yes.

He began his graduate work at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., completing a master's degree in theology in 1979. He then began working on his doctorate at St. Michael's.

By 1981, however, the seminary had closed and Rochester had a new bishop, Matthew H. Clark. Bishop Clark told Father Miller that since he was so far along, he could have one more year for course work, but then would have to return to parish work in Rochester.

Father Miller managed to complete his course work for the degree in that year, and began work on his dissertation.

Father McKenna, like Father Miller, had had little contact with his chosen field of study during his seminary days.

"My exposure to canon law had been brief at St. Bernard's," Father McKenna recalled. "We just had one semester."

After graduating from St. Bernard's in 1976, Father McKenna began working on his own toward a master's degree in theology at the seminary, earning the degree in 1981.

Then Bishop Clark asked the priest if he would be interested in studying canon law. Although he had not previously considered the possibility, Father McKenna also accepted.

From 1982-84, he studied at the Gregorian University in Rome — a "fortuitous time" to be studying canon law at that institution, he said.

The code of canon law was then in the process of being revised for the first time since 1917, and many of Father McKenna's professors at the university were involved in the process. "They were bringing to the classroom first-hand insights into what was going on," he said.

The new code was promulgated by Pope John Paul II in 1983. Father McKenna, meanwhile, returned to Rochester, where, for the next four years, he served as the diocese's vice chancellor. From 1988-90, he studied at St. Paul's to complete his doctoral studies, and then began writing his dissertation.

Now that both priests have completed their degrees, they will be concentrating on their duties within the diocese.

Father Miller is looking forward to a parish assignment when St. James' pastor, Father Robert C. Bradler, returns from a sabbatical this June. Meanwhile, he will teach courses in church history at St. Bernard's Institute.

Father McKenna, on the other hand, will continue working at the diocesan Pastoral Center, where on a daily basis he receives numerous requests from parishes, diocesan staff, and sometimes Bishop Clark, to help clarify some point of canon law. He will also continue to serve on the marriage tribunal.


Both priests hope to do some writing as well. Father McKenna, whose undergraduate degree was in history, is thinking about writing a history of the Diocese of Rochester's synods — especially in light of the fact that the diocese is currently involved in its seventh such gathering.

Father Miller, on the other hand, is considering a history of St. Bernard's Seminary, noting that the last history, written by Father McNamara, was completed nearly 25 years ago.



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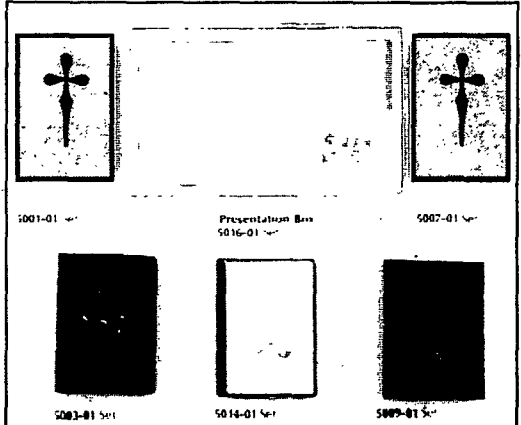
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