

# Bishop's Call to Priesthood continues upswing

By Lee Strong  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — On Aug. 12, 1989, 110 men responded to the Diocese of Rochester's inaugural Call to Priesthood campaign, which involved attending a day of prayer, reflection and discernment with Bishop Matthew H. Clark at St. Dominic's Parish in Shortsville.

The following year, 17 men attended the first regional Call to Priesthood day at St. Mary Our Mother Parish in Horseheads.

This Aug. 11, an as-yet-unknown number of men will attend the second regional gathering, slated for the Corning/Painted Post area.

Those days are just part of the effort by the diocese to recruit potential candidates for the priesthood.

And while the results may be small, they are noticeable.

In December, 1988, before the Call to Priesthood effort was launched, the various diocesan priestly discernment programs had 31 participants. That number is currently 42.

Further, the number of seminarians from the diocese has increased from eight to nine, with two more men waiting to learn if they have been accepted in seminaries.

Still, in light of the fact that the number of active diocesan priests has declined from approximately 240 in 1988 to 218 currently, the numbers of men expressing interest in the priesthood could be disheartening.

"I think people do get concerned about how few seminarians we do have," acknowledged Diane Knittle, a member of both the diocesan priestly formation board and the Committee for Vocations to Priesthood. "There were days when we had more than 100 seminarians, but look at how many people left after Vatican II. The people we're getting now are more committed. They've had more life experiences."

"We're trying to discover new avenues of encouraging people to come forward," noted Father Thomas Valenti, assistant to the bishop for vocations.

As part of that effort, the diocesan vocations program is evolving to accommodate the different types of men coming forward to explore a potential vocation to the priesthood.

The vocations program includes a high school program, an affiliate program for men of college-age or who are in their 20s, an over-30 program, a Southern Tier program (which emerged from the Call to



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Gathered on the steps of Becket Hall are (from left) Father Thomas Valenti, assistant to the bishop for vocations, and pre-theology students Mickey McGrath, John Bell, Doug DellaPietra and Dave LeForte.

Priesthood day in Horseheads) and the pre-theology program at Becket Hall.

The Committee for Vocations to Priesthood is also looking into ways to recruit more minority candidates, especially from the Black and Hispanic communities.

Meanwhile, Becket Hall is developing into a center for priest vocations rather than just a residence for the men in pre-theology — completing course work needed for acceptance at a seminary.

As a result, Becket Hall, located in the former convent of St. Boniface Parish, has become the site of more and more meetings of those discerning whether they have a vocation to the priesthood.

Another effort underway consists of using the building as a site for meetings among youth groups to discuss vocations.

The vocations effort has also been expanded to involve men currently in the discernment programs, residents of Becket Hall, and seminarians in meeting with potential priest candidates. "I find it very valuable to have a discernor or a seminarian witness to their call," Father Valenti said, adding, "Someone closer to their age."

For example, two Becket Hall residents, John Bell and Mickey McGrath, work with those in the discernment programs. Bell

leads the high school students, and McGrath works with those in college or in the affiliate program.

McGrath, a senior at St. John Fisher College, acknowledged that having someone like himself — who is still involved in discerning his vocation — is helpful to the young men.

"I think they look at how strongly they feel called at this point in time," said McGrath, who is waiting to learn if he has been accepted at the North American College in Rome.

One common fear McGrath addresses is

what happens if a man chooses to come to Becket Hall and then discovers that he is not called to be a priest.

Even when a man ultimately decides not to become a priest, his involvement with the vocations program can prove helpful down the road, Father Valenti noted.

"I think a majority of those who, through the discernment programs, determine that God is not calling them to be a priest, continue to develop their spirituality and most likely will take an active role in the life of the church," Father Valenti said.



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