

# Becket program supports youths following call

By Barbara Ann Homick  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — When he was 14-years-old, Matt Thielmann experienced a major change in his outlook on life.

The transformation occurred when — after attending a youth retreat — Thielmann realized he wanted to serve God.

"I didn't get a call to the priesthood then, but it felt good and when something feels good you do it," said the 17-year-old Thielmann, whose mother encouraged him to attend the retreat.

Thielmann, an active member of the youth group at Webster's Holy Trinity Church, is also one of several young men enrolled in the high school discernment program at Becket Hall — the diocesan center for vocations to the priesthood.

The high school program at Becket Hall offers an opportunity for young men seeking to learn more about the life and ministries of the diocesan priest to develop their spirituality and to offer support for one another.

Thielmann said Father Thomas J. Valenti, assistant to the bishop for vocations, invited him to look into the program during last year's Bishop's Day with Youth. The priest has become a major influence in Thielmann's spiritual development, according to the senior at Webster High School.

"They don't force you into the priesthood (at Becket)," Thielmann explained. "They just challenge you to find out what you are supposed to do."

Although the discernment program draws as many as 15 young men to such events as biweekly retreats and days of recollection, the group has about five regular members. John Bell, a senior at Nazareth College and a Becket Hall resident, coordinates the group's activities.

Bell said he can empathize with the group's members, because he has gone through many of the same experiences. The group coordinator said he started thinking about the priesthood during his freshman year at the former Cardinal Mooney High School, but he decided to seek other interests.

"I wanted to pursue sports, dating and getting popular," said Bell, who will attend St. Augustine's Seminary at the University of Toronto this fall.

Bell said it was not until he graduated from high school that he began seriously



Photo illustration by Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

thinking about pursuing the priesthood. Father Valenti asked the philosophy major to join Becket Hall's discernment group in 1987, and Bell began coordinating its activities in 1990.

Bell's responsibilities include inviting young men considering the religious life to join the group. He keeps up with their spiritual progress and struggles once they become members of the group, Bell said.

"Once we get to know them, we get to know how they are doing in their life, in their prayer life and in their struggles," the Nazareth College senior said.

For Dave Patch, a 17-year-old Fairport High School senior, those struggles were very real.

Last fall, Patch said he hit a low spot in his life and he did not attend the Becket sessions for about two months. During that difficult period, Patch said he realized how important the group was to him.

"I could make guesses and assumptions and say it was one of those tests that everyone goes through to be sure," said the 17-year-old Patch. "But not coming here was

hard because my faith started to dwindle and my closeness to God was starting to decrease."

Patch, who plans to attend John Carroll University in Cleveland this fall, added that he experienced problems associated with "the party scene." Patch's difficulties made him realize how much he needs his faith.

"I have been able to build my faith back up and get on track again," said the parishioner of St. John of Rochester Church in Fairport.

Although Bell, Thielmann and Patch are aware that the road they have chosen may not be the easiest to travel, they said they have been overwhelmed by the support they've received from outside of the group.

"I don't walk around saying I go to Becket Hall and I want to become a priest," explained Thielmann, who plays volleyball and runs track for Webster High School. "But they don't ever mock me. They just usually accept it."

McQuaid Jesuit sophomore Chris Rothfuss has also been pleasantly surprised

by the reactions of his peers.

Rothfuss noted that although he doesn't go around boasting that he is thinking of becoming a priest, he is not afraid to express his opinions on social or religious issues.

And when people ask, "Why do you want to become a priest?," he simply answers, "It's my call."

Rothfuss added, "They (peers) don't think it's dumb. They don't say forget you, you're not my friend."

With the help of the Becket program, Rothfuss said he is more aware of what is going on in his life.

"I am a better person, trying to lead a cleaner, more direct life," said the Holy Trinity parishioner who plays soccer for McQuaid.

Bell said that Thielmann, Patch and Rothfuss are very serious young men, but whether they go on to the priesthood is up to God. He noted, however, that thoughts of the priesthood are hard to escape.

"It's a very mysterious call, but you know when it is true," noted Bell. "You constantly have thoughts of the priesthood and they are difficult to get out of your head. It weighs on your conscience, but once you accept it, you are very happy and peaceful."

Patch, who said he is not definite that his call to the priesthood is real, said he needs more time before deciding what to do.

"My first call was to become a priest," Patch said. "As for the second calling, I'm still waiting to hear."



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