

Retiring pastor provided 'nuggets' to muse

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

FAIRPORT — Father John P. Norris, a native of Glasgow, Scotland, has no qualms about speaking his mind, but he fully realizes that some people don't always want to hear what he's thinking.

"I've often made the comment that there is no tongue worse than the tongue of an Irish washerwoman, but that there are times in my life when the tongue of a Scottish pastor is worse," joked the 70-year-old pastor of Assumption of Our Lady Church, 20 East Ave.

Friends and admirers of the Fairport pastor will honor him during a dinner marking the priest's retirement on Friday, June 21, at Arena's Banquet Center in Webster.

During his 45 years in the priesthood, the pastor has often voiced his concerns about the communities in which he has lived — whether those communities were bounded by city streets, suburban roads or institutional walls.

After serving as assistant pastor of St. Mary's and Holy Family in Auburn, St. Charles Borromeo in Greece, and St. Boniface in Rochester, Father Norris became pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish. Prior to taking on his first pastorate in 1968, he spent most of the 1960s ministering to delinquent youths as chaplain of the State Agriculture and Industrial School at Industry.

Father Norris hopes to continue to speak out on various issues even as a priest-in-residence at his next parish, St. Catherine's in Mendon. He wondered aloud if at his next parish he might continue writing a column such as "NUGGETS by Norris," which appears in Assumption's weekly bulletin.

A recent sampling of the pastor's wisdom in the June 9 bulletin contained these reflections on "dechristianization," a term Pope John Paul II has used to label the process by which Catholics cut themselves off from their religious roots. Such a process consists in "making God meaningless in our lives, or replacing God with the various idols of contemporary society," Father Norris quoted the Holy Father as saying.

"(Dechristianization) is particularly evident among American Catholics who have succumbed to values we ingest from television and publications, from the media, and from the liberal 'politically correct curriculum' that seems to be at the root of



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

Father John P. Norris, retiring pastor of Church of the Assumption in Fairport, oversaw the construction of the new church during 1982-83.

the division(s) that are breaking our church apart," Father Norris continued.

The retiring pastor acknowledged that the expression of some of his own opinions has lacked a Christian spirit at times.

"I apologize when I hurt, but I don't apologize for speaking out," he said.

Part of what has driven the pastor to promote his views is his strong belief that a priest is more than a sacramental minister; he is, indeed, the leader of the parish community.

"I do not back off from the fact that the pastor has a very strong voice in the leadership of the community," Father Norris said.

The priest emphasized that leading a parish does not mean dictating to its members. In fact, Father Norris said, he was pastor of Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Parish in the 1970s, when the church was establishing its first parish council.

Father Norris stressed that he has always enjoyed pastoral work, which is why he didn't enter any orders that specialized in such areas as teaching.

"I always felt that a priest should be

(engaged) in some kind of pastoral ministry," he said, explaining his vision of the priesthood. "I feel that that's a role of priest, to be the mediator between the Lord and the people."

Father Norris recalled that two priests helped him decide to serve God. One of those priests served at St. Augustine's Parish in Rochester, where he attended school after his family moved to the United States from Scotland when he was a boy.

The priest persuaded the teenage Norris to transfer from Aquinas Institute to St. Andrew's Seminary. While struggling with the idea of a priestly vocation himself, he recalled the neighborhood barber confronting him with the idea of taking up such a life only a few years after his mother had died.

"A barber asked me when I went to get my hair cut, 'I supposed you promised your mother that you'd go into the seminary when she died,'" Father Norris remarked. "I said, 'She didn't even know I was thinking about it.'"

Father Norris added that the words of a former parish pastor during his seminary years helped him stick to the priestly path despite his doubts. He remembered that the former pastor "put the guilt trip on me."

"There are people in the world who are depending on you," the elderly priest told the younger Norris. The former pastor

cited a Scripture passage where Jesus tells his disciples, "Remember I have chosen you — you have not chosen me," to support his contention that the young man should profess his vows.

Now, at the end of his "active" career in the priesthood, Father Norris enters retirement with mixed emotions. A colleague told him recently to "get ready for the process of going from being somebody to being nobody."

"That could be a blow to your ego," Father Norris reflected, noting that he has always told others that *who* you are is more important than what you are. Now the pastor must learn the meaning of that teaching for himself, he commented.

But he plans to greet the new phase in his life with the same faith that gave him such relish for his pastoral work all these years.

"I've always tried to preach a little trust in the providence of God," he said.

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EDITORS' NOTE — To make reservations for Father Norris' retirement dinner on June 21, call Lynn Marra at 716/377-1407. In addition to the dinner, parishioners will host receptions in the church hall following the 4 p.m. Mass on Saturday, June 22, and the 7:30 a.m., 9:15 a.m. and 11:15 a.m. Masses on Sunday, June 23.

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