



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer

In addition to his pastoral duties at St. John the Evangelist Church on Humboldt Street in Rochester, Deacon Paul Bonacci (center) has been substitute teaching at the parish school. Here, the "Deac," a nickname given to him by his students, is surrounded by fourth- and fifth-graders. Deacon Bonacci will be ordained a priest at Sacred Heart Cathedral on June 22.

Former deputy seeks another kind of 'collar'

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — If not for an act of charity, Deacon Paul Bonacci might still be known as Sheriff Deputy Bonacci.

Deacon Bonacci, the only seminarian who will be ordained into the priesthood at Sacred Heart Cathedral on June 22, served as a sheriff's deputy in the late 1970s. He remembers the day when a couple needing help arrived at the Seneca County Sheriff's Department in Waterloo.

The couple had driven from California to Central New York for a job interview, Deacon Bonacci recalled. When the husband's interview didn't go well, however, they were left without the job or any money.

After taking up a collection among his fellow deputies to assist the couple, the former Deputy Bonacci was reprimanded by his superiors.

"I thought, 'My God, you get in trouble for helping people,'" Deacon Bonacci said.

The incident led Deacon Bonacci to reconsider his choice to become a law enforcement official. The Waterloo native then began to think about the priesthood.

The idea of becoming a priest had actu-

ally been suggested to Deacon Bonacci during his years as a student at St. Mary's School and Waterloo High School.

He was not interested, however. "I didn't want to be a priest," Deacon Bonacci recalled. "It didn't fit in with what I wanted to do."

He was able to "fit in" many of his interests. An active participant in such sports as wrestling, football and baseball in high school, Deacon Bonacci later coached several teams before becoming a certified football referee and baseball umpire. He also enjoyed working with theater groups.

His image of the priesthood was also decidedly negative at the time.

"My impression of priesthood was it was solemn and quiet and removed from life," Deacon Bonacci said.

That impression changed, however, when he began visiting a friend who had entered Becket Hall. At the time, Becket Hall — located on the campus of St. John Fisher College — served as a college seminary program.

What he discovered at Becket, Deacon Bonacci recalled, was "there's room for holiness, and there's room for activities and relationships."

Deacon Bonacci entered Becket Hall and

St. John Fisher College, graduating in 1983 with a degree in religious studies. He then moved to Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University in New Jersey.

While living at the seminary, however, Deacon Bonacci began to question his call to the priesthood. "There was a lot of self-awakening that went on," he remembered.

As a result, Deacon Bonacci took a leave of absence from the priestly formation program after graduating from the seminary in 1987. He later found a job teaching third grade at St. Mary's School in Waterloo.

In April, 1988, he visited Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, the site of reported apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary. During the trip, he met a Methodist minister who taught the 19th Annotations of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Upon his return to the United States, Deacon Bonacci learned that the minister was directing the annotations at High Acres, a retreat center in Geneva run by the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester. Deacon Bonacci subsequently joined the program.

The series helped him confirm his call to the priesthood, he said, noting, "Through the Ignatian method of contemplation, I

experienced in the prayer that Christ was calling me to follow him."

After his second year at St. Mary's School, Deacon Bonacci re-entered the diocesan priestly formation program. Having already completed his seminary studies, he was assigned in 1989 to St. John the Evangelist Church, 549 Humboldt St., for a pastoral year. Continued discernment led him to extend the pastoral year to two years.

In addition to his pastoral duties, Deacon Bonacci has been a substitute teacher at the parish school. He has also served as director of the 19th Annotation Retreat Program at High Acres, and has continued to work as a high school football and baseball official for the Wayne/Finger Lakes League.

After his ordination to the priesthood, Deacon Bonacci will serve as a priest intern at Church of the Assumption in Fairport.

Although his path to the priesthood has been a winding one, Deacon Bonacci said, "At this point, I wouldn't change it. I can see the hand of God guiding me through it all."

"I'm as sure as I can be," he concluded, "that I'm where God wants me to be right now."

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