



Father Herman Siebert, OFM Conv., estimates that he has painted more than 150 works in his lifetime. Behind him is one of several paintings he has made as altar fronts for Holy Rosary Church, where he is a priest in residence. Babette G. Augustin/Photo editor

Franciscan's career spanned three continents

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — In 1981, Father Herman Siebert, OFM Conv., was one of 45 men belonging to the College of Confessors in Vatican City. Ordained in 1945, the priest had come a long way from a Rochester neighborhood that used to be called Swillburg — now known as the South Wedge.

Since 1963, Father Siebert had served as a Vatican confessor, one of an elite group of multilingual men especially trained to examine the cases of clerics who needed to perform penance for various sins committed in the course of their ministry.

Father Siebert also boasted the ability to forgive the sins of tourists each day in English, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish and French.

The priest was in St. Peter's Basilica one day, as thousands of tourists milled about the famed structure — including a stately clergyman. When he came up to Father Siebert and a companion, the gentleman asked if he could still dine with the Franciscans as he did before his name became world renowned.

"When I was a priest, when I was bishop, when I was a cardinal, you guys would always have me over for lunch," Pope John Paul II said. "When are you going to have me over for dinner?"

The pontiff slated a May 19 dinner with the Franciscans, but the bullets fired from an assassin's gun five days before the planned meal abruptly canceled any plans for festive dining with the Holy Father.

Stories such as his brush with the pope pepper the recollections of the 73-year-old priest in residence at Holy Rosary Parish, 414 Lexington Ave.

Although he was born in the United States, the energetic cleric has spent most of his career outside his homeland. Father Siebert was a missionary in Brazil for a total of 25 years on and off between serving as a substitute confessor in Rome.

"I didn't miss the U.S.," said Father Siebert, who was Ray Siebert when he graduated from St. Boniface School and Aquinas Institute (1937).



Father Siebert also does intricate embroidery — or "needlepainting," as he calls it — on vestments. This scene appears on the front of a chasuble he designed and executed in 1983-87.

"It's not the country it was when I left. The democracy we had is gone."

Bemoaning what he views as a lack of social and civil courtesy among much of the population today, Father Siebert spoke lovingly of his days abroad among the Catholic faithful in Brazil and Italy.

Prior to his first assignment in 1946 to South America, the newly ordained priest spent one year in the United States — working at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Hoboken, N.J. While serving in Hoboken, he often spent his free time bowling with the first cousin of none other than crooner Frank Sinatra.

Pope Pius XII interrupted Father Siebert's

New Jersey assignment when he called upon the U.S. Conventual Franciscan to "start spreadin' the news" — as in the *Good News* — among Catholics in rural Brazil.

In addition to working in rural parishes around Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia, Father Siebert served as chaplain at two hospitals, taught catechetics, and performed the pastoral functions of baptisms, weddings and Masses.

His missionary land's tropical environment dramatically changed one aspect of the priest's life: his artwork.

A painter since he was a child, Father Siebert became serious about his art in the 1950s. Prior to living in Brazil, his palette lacked the vivid colors of purple and orange and bright green he saw around him when he left the United States. To this day, paintings that bear his name and vestments embroidered by his hand bear the stamp of South American color and liveliness.

At the same time, Father Siebert has integrated his knowledge of European medieval icon imagery with his love of bright color to create striking religiously oriented works.

Holy Rosary worshipers may see some of the artist's works when they go to Mass on Sunday. Staring at the faithful from the altar may be a portrait of an enthroned Christ flanked by John the Baptist and the apostles Andrew and John on one side, and Moses, Abraham and Isaac on the other.

And if Father Siebert is celebrating Mass, it's safe to say that he will be donning a robe embroidered with scenes from the Bible, or one of his favorite images: the fleur-de-lis.

Father Siebert noted that his paintings hang in the offices and homes of many famous clerics in the church, including a number of cardinals such as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Despite the acclaim for his paintings, however, few parish priests consider the time and effort his embroidered priests' vestments take to create, Father Siebert said.

"You know, men don't appreciate them," he declared. "They want these Beefeater Gin robes."