

Vocations

'Atypical' individuals typify discerning men, women

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

Twenty years ago, Peter M. DeBellis would have been an atypical seminarian.

The Auburn native did not begin active pursuit of the diocesan priesthood — he had spent three years in the late 1970s studying for the Oblates of the Virgin Mary — until he spent a decade pursuing such diverse careers as modeling, business, restaurant management, and construction.

But DeBellis, who has completed two years of study at St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto and is currently serving his pastoral-internship year at Pittsford's St. Louis Parish, always sensed a desire to help people in ways other than he was doing at his home parish of St. Francis of Assisi or through his various volunteer activities.

Then his brother, Julian, suggested that he return to the seminary, and the suggestion struck a chord in DeBellis.

"After a year of working around at home and helping in my parish, I felt at peace with what I was doing," DeBellis said. So he approached the diocese about becoming a priest.

When he began his path to the diocesan priesthood, DeBellis was already older than most current priests upon their ordination. But, like DeBellis, most of today's seminarians are older than they have been in the past, noted Father John A. DeSocio, assistant to the bishop for vocations and priestly formation.

Indeed, the average age of the diocese's nine current seminarians is 28 or 29, Father DeSocio observed.

"Different ages, different backgrounds, different concerns in life — much more than when we were younger," Father DeSocio said.

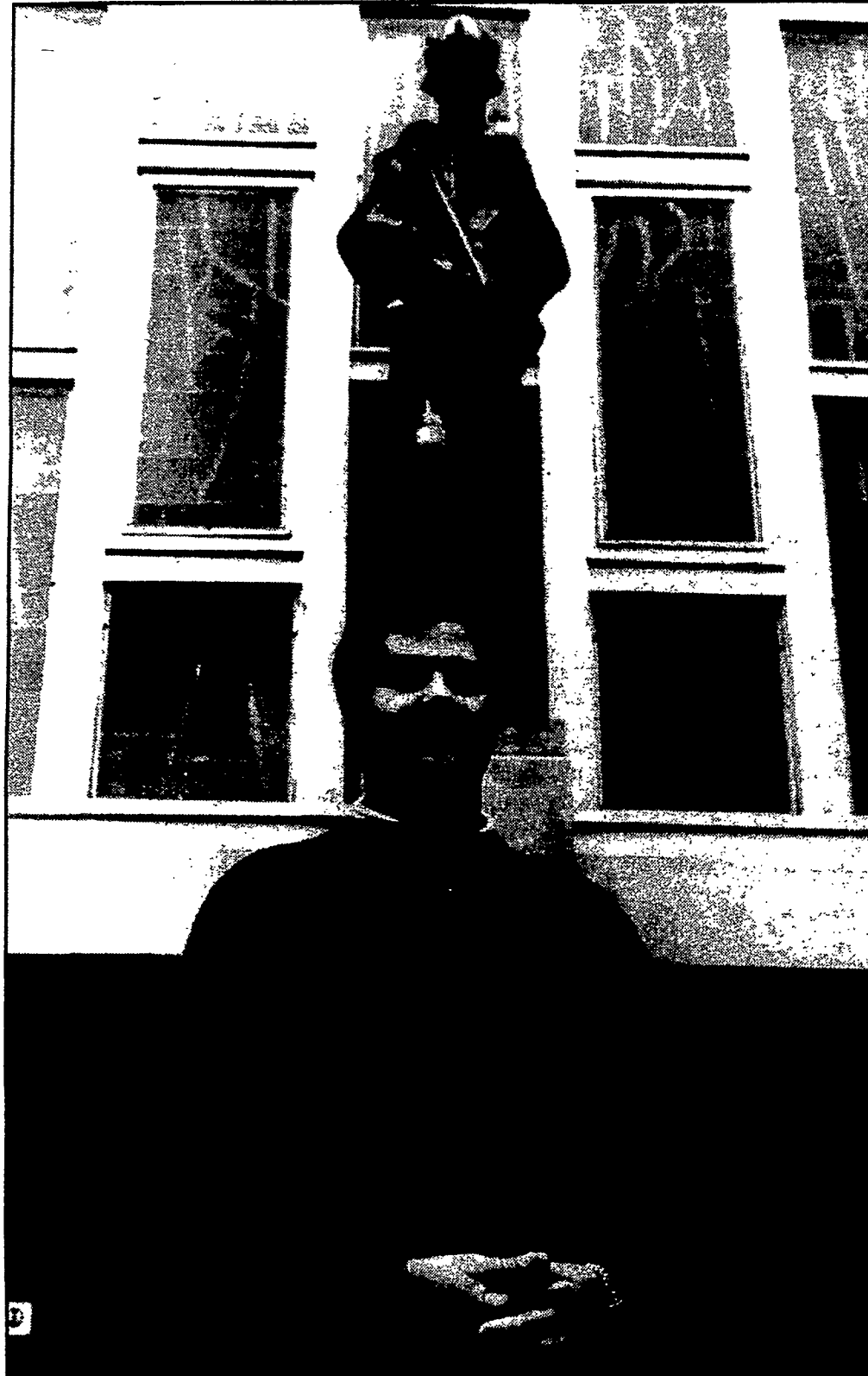
The same is true of women exploring vocations with the two major congregations of women religious in the diocese: the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester and the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester.

Sister Marilyn Prey, SSJ, novitiate program coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, noted that many of the women coming to her congregation are in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

"We're very pleased with that, with their sense of maturity, with their sense of spirituality," Sister Pray commented.

The diocese's vocations programs and the two congregations have adapted to take into account these changing circumstances.

The Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, for example, offer retreats for women during which they can discern where God is leading them, noted Sister Jane Schur, RSM, the congregation's director of vocations. In addition, the congregation



Auburn native Peter DeBellis stands outside the entrance to St. Louis Church in Pittsford, where he is currently serving his pastoral internship.

S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

has created Mercy Corps, through which women work for extended periods in various ministries, and a Ministry in Mercy Program, for which women can volunteer for one or two weeks with various local Mercy ministries.

"It's really a good thing to introduce them to what the Sisters of Mercy do, and helps the ministry," Sister Schur observed.

The Sisters of St. Joseph, on the other hand, have used such means as retreats, films with follow-up discussions

and contact with youth groups to assist in their efforts to help women discern how they might serve God. Sister Pray noted that talk is underway to work with the priestly vocations office to invite youth-group members — both young men and young women — to the motherhouse for prayer and reflection.

The diocese's effort to bolster the number of priests includes Becket Hall, where young men can reside while pursuing prerequisites needed to enroll in a seminary program. Father DeSocio said

one man is currently in residence there, while two others are still considering the move.

In addition, Father DeSocio operates a group for college men who are exploring a possible vocation to the priesthood, and an Affiliate Program for college graduates considering a vocation. He is also in regular contact with youth groups and speaks at campus ministry programs and services. Moreover, he said a project is being considered through which young men will be invited to gather together with priests to talk about a vocation to the priesthood.

Beyond being generally older than those pursuing such vocations in the past, the women and men in formation for congregations or the diocesan priesthood also find themselves in different situations than they would have in days gone by. Whereas at one time they might have lived together in a single, independent formation community in the diocese, priests and women religious are now scattered throughout communities or seminaries across the country — and even around the world.

Kathleen Caffrey, a canonical novice with the Sisters of Mercy, is currently at the Mercy Collaborative Novitiate — which serves Mercy congregations from across the country — in St. Louis, Mo.

Meanwhile, the Sisters of Mercy have two women who've taken their temporary vows: Sister Connie Derby, RSM, who works for the Office of the Propagation of the Faith at the Pastoral Center and lives with the Sisters of Mercy Community on North Street; and Sister Carolyn Rosica, RSM, who teaches third grade at Seton Catholic School, and resides at St. Louis Parish in Pittsford.

The Sisters of St. Joseph also have three women in formation: Elizabeth Leonard is a canonical novice, studying at the SSJ Motherhouse in Pittsford. Dianne Crowley is a second-year novice, currently teaching in the Honeoye Central School System and residing above the St. Joseph Neighborhood Center in Rochester with Sister Pray; and Donna DeSanto, another second-year novice, is currently working at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester as a parish-nurse coordinator while residing at the Sisters of St. Joseph's community on Pennsylvania Ave.

The seminarians are even more scattered, studying in seminaries from Toronto to Rome.

In addition to DeBellis, Steve Lape, currently in first theology, and Douglas Della Pietra, who is in third theology, are studying at St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto.

St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore has two diocesan seminarians: Deacon Kip

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