

Milestones

First deacons earned trust quickly

By Mike Latona
Staff writer



Photograph courtesy of Deacon Thomas Cass
The diocese's first permanent deacon class poses in 1982 with Auxiliary Bishop Dennis Hickey, Bishop Matthew H. Clark, Retired Bishop Joseph L. Hogan, and Sister Mary Hilaire Gaelens, RSM.

They were 24 men, going boldly where no group in this diocese had gone before.

On April 17, 1982, the first class of permanent deacons was ordained by Bishop Matthew H. Clark. These men had trained four years for their new ministries, yet their pioneer status left some questions about how their roles would be defined — and received.

"We worried about acceptance. We were guinea pigs, to a great extent," Deacon Raymond Defendorf commented.

"There was a real question as to what we were going to be able to do, as well as how well we were going to be accepted," Deacon Edward Sergeant added.

Fifteen years later, those questions have been largely answered. The 1982 class members have strengthened their parishes, and communities at large, in a wide variety of ministries.

Many members of the class have served as part-time volunteers, performing parish and community ministry. Others have become full-time paid parish employees: Deacon Defendorf is pastoral associate in the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, and Deacon Steven Carroll is religious-education coordinator at St. Thomas More Church in Brighton.

Meanwhile, Deacon Sergeant and Deacon Nemesio Martinez are full-time chaplains employed by the state. Deacon Sergeant works with developmentally disabled people over a 12-county area, and Deacon Martinez ministers to inmates at the Livingston Correctional Facility.

"I think the perception of the deacon is excellent. We've been very, very well-received," Deacon Sergeant said.

Deacon Sergeant, a former employee of Bausch and Lomb, said he had "no intention of going into ministry full-time" when he took his chaplaincy in 1985.

"But I was certainly open to what the Spirit was asking me to do," he said.

Deacon Tony Mercadel, who has served at Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta throughout his diaconate, has taken on increased responsibilities since he retired from Eastman Kodak Company in 1991.

"I'm doing a lot more now — many more weddings, and most of the funerals," said Deacon Mercadel. He noted that Father Richard Hart, the Guardian Angels pastor, died in 1994 and was not replaced by a resident priest.

Deacons have the authority to

administer two sacraments: matrimony and baptism. Although they are involved in many aspects of parish life, their primary responsibility is community service. Some examples of this ministry are working with the inner-city poor; at hospitals and nursing homes; at alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers; in prisons; and with migrant-worker communities.

The first permanent deacon to serve in the Rochester Diocese — and in the United States, in fact — was Deacon Michael Cole, who was ordained in 1969 by then Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. Deacon Cole's ordination came shortly after the Second Vatican Council decreed that the diaconate could be re-

stored as a permanent and separate rank. Pope Paul VI restored this practice in 1967.

Deacon Cole left the diocese soon after Archbishop Sheen retired in 1969. It was 13 years and two bishops later before another permanent deacon ordination took place in this diocese. Ordinations now take place annually here.

Deacon Mercadel noted that preparation for the diaconate has changed over 15 years. Although his class took several preparatory theological courses, 1982 members were not bound by the current requirement of a master's degree or its equivalent.

Despite these changes, Deacon Defendorf offered a sentiment about his 1982 class that may well

apply to others.

"We were a combination of people who had been very involved in their church, and were very in love with their church," he stated.

A 15th-year reunion party for the class of 1982 will be held Saturday, May 3, at Davinci's Restaurant in Penfield. Deacon Mercadel, who is helping organize the dinner, said he is looking forward to renewing ties with some very special friends.

"I don't think we'll ever lose those memories of the day of ordination," Deacon Mercadel said. "We were people who shared the same goals and the same ideals, and we knew almost for a fact that we would go on being close to one another."

Groton pastor to retire in June

Although he had the option of retiring at the age of 70, Father Robert Egan saw no reason to step down so soon from his pastorate at St. Anthony's Church in Groton.

"I liked what I was doing; I love the parish. Why sit around, twiddling my thumbs, when I could be doing something useful?" Father Egan remarked. So he stayed on another five years at his Tompkins County parish.

But now, Father Egan, who celebrates his 75th birthday on June 20, will retire at the end of that month in keeping with the Vatican-mandated retirement age for priests.

Father Egan, an Auburn native, grew up in St. Alphonsus Parish. From 1942 to 1946, he served in the U.S. Army Air Force and was stationed in the Pacific Theater.

He was ordained in 1954 by

Bishop James E. Kearney. He served as assistant pastor at the following diocesan parishes: Blessed Sacrament, Rochester (1954-58); St. Mary's, Waterloo (1958-59); Immaculate Conception, Rochester (1959-62); St. Jerome's, East Rochester (1962-67); and concurrently at St. John the Evangelist, Clyde, and St. Patrick's, Savannah (1967-72).

Father Egan's first pastorate was at St. Bernard's Church, Scipio Center; St. Hilary's Church, Genoa; and St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming. He served all three Cayuga County parishes concurrently from 1972 to 1981.

"That was a cluster before they called them clusters," Father Egan remarked.

He moved to St. Anthony's in 1981 and has remained there since. Father Egan said he has enjoyed the closeness generated by

the small-town parish communities in which he has served.

"You know everybody by their first name. It's more intimate; you know the people real well," Father Egan said.

No retirement dinner had been planned for Father Egan by press time. Upon retiring from St. Anthony's, Father Egan will take up residence at Holy Family Church in Auburn.

Father Egan said he plans to assist the Holy Family parish community on a regular basis. He noted that his new ministry won't be much different than his current duties in Groton, except that he'll leave behind many administrative concerns.

"Rather than worry about a leak in the roof, I'll just call someone else, stand aside, and let the water hit the floor!" he joked.

- Mike Latona

'82 class: Where are they now?

Dominick Abballe — retiring this June from volunteer ministry at St. Patrick's Church in Macedon.

Steven Carroll — full-time religious-education coordinator at St. Thomas More Church in Brighton.

Raymond Defendorf — full-time pastoral associate in the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community.

Robert Dizer — no longer active.

William Dougherty — volunteer ministry in Elmira's St. Casimir and St. Charles Borromeo cluster.

Stanley Douglas — volunteer ministry at St. Rita's Church in Webster.

Patrick Graybill — no longer active.

Leo Kester — retired from Holy Trinity Church in Webster. Still active as a volunteer.

Daniel Kinsky — volunteer ministry at Church of the Resurrection in Perinton.

Anthony Marini — no longer active in the diocese.

Nemesio Martinez — full-time chaplain at Livingston Correctional Facility.

William Maune — no longer active in the diocese.

John Medico — died in 1993.

Eliseo Melendez — no longer active.

Anthony Mercadel — volunteer ministry at Guardian Angels Church in Henrietta.

John Prave — volunteer ministry in the Cayuga Team Ministry cluster.

Kenneth Scariotta — retiring this June from volunteer ministry at St. Joseph's Church in Penfield.

Edward Sergeant — full-time chaplain for the Finger Lakes Developmental Disabilities Service Office.

Robert Solan — died in 1995.

Julio Vasquez — died in 1992.

Carlos Vargas — volunteer ministry to the Hispanic community in Rochester.

George Welch — will return to volunteer ministry this July at Eastside Catholic Parish in Elmira.

James Whitford — no longer active in the diocese.

Stan Zawacki — died in 1994.

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