

On the MOVE

Still at heart 15

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Father Gennaro "Ace" Ventura with a photo of himself in 1943 when he was ordained a priest. He was "crowned" in honor of his 80th birthday while staffing the Awakening Faith/Encountering Christ youth retreat Nov. 21 at Rotary Sunshine Camp, Rush.

Both men are known to many as Ace Ventura.

One is a 36-year-old Hollywood star, Jim Carrey. The other Ace is not a pet detective, but a retired priest in the Diocese of Rochester who recently celebrated his 80th birthday.

To his former parishioners, he is

known as Father Gennaro Ventura. But to many teens in this diocese, Father Ventura is affectionately referred to as "Father Ace," or, simply, "Ace."

The similarities between these two men are several. They clown around, fire off quick one-liners and have a huge following among young people.

Father Ventura spends two weekends each year staffing "Awakening Faith" (grades 9-10) and "Encountering Christ" (grades 11-12) retreats, which are held simultaneously at various locations in the diocese. On the weekend of Nov. 20-22, at Rotary Sunshine Camp in Rush, Father Ventura could be found floating back and forth between discussion groups, listening in and offering an occasional comment.

His attire usually blends right in with the teens: Except for formal services, when he dons his priestly garb, "Ace" is most likely to be found in sweat clothes. And he prefers sitting on the floor with

the teens during discussion groups, rather than standing at a distance.

He also enjoys one-on-one chats with teens, perhaps discussing sports or offering an encouraging word for somebody who twisted an ankle.

"Do you play golf? Golf is a tough game," he told one boy, shaking his head.

In addition to his behind-the-scenes ministry, Father Ventura led the retreats' reconciliation service and celebrated the closing Mass.

"The lack of sleep is certainly catching up with this young guy," Father Ventura commented at the Nov. 22 liturgy.

Even so, Father Ventura managed to run on high octane throughout the weekend, walking and talking at the pace of a much younger man.

"Really, I couldn't keep up with him," commented Sue Versluys, retreat director.

His energy is nothing short of amazing when you consider that he was laid up for several weeks earlier this year due to complications from a gall bladder operation. The illness put a damper on his 80th-birthday observance on Sept. 5.

However, the retreat staff and teens helped compensate by presenting him with a cake during lunch Nov. 21 and singing "Happy Birthday."

The teens, Father Ventura said, have helped quicken his recovery.

"Maybe this is one of the things that helps you keep your youth, or a young mentality," he remarked.

"He hasn't grown old, he just hasn't," Versluys commented. "He's still 15 (years

old) at heart."

Retreat participants, in general, guessed that Father Ventura was at least 20 years younger than his actual age. In fact, when Awakening Faith assistant director Erica Rivera was told that he's 80, her eyes grew wide and she exclaimed, "No way! I never would have figured."

Father Ventura began staffing teen retreats at Notre Dame Retreat House in the 1970s and later assisted at similar events at Holy Ghost Church in Gates, where he was pastor from 1980 until his 1989 retirement. He returned to the retreat scene in 1993 when Awakening Faith and Encountering Christ weekends were implemented in the diocese.

"I've always felt that if a priest can make a point of being with (teens) the whole weekend, he is promoting vocations — because they begin to see him, get to know him up close," Father Ventura said.

Father Ventura added that his ability to bond with teens is a gift that not every

priest owns.

"Just by their personality, (some priests) can never really loosen up," he said. "They may feel more comfortable with adults. The fundamental thing is, I enjoy it."

That point seemed obvious to teens who observed him in action Nov. 20-22.

"Oh, I love that guy. He knows how to communicate with teenagers," said Erica, 18, from St. Francis of Assisi Church in Auburn.

"He's just a great person to have around," said Albert Roy, 15, from the Schuyler Catholic Community in Watkins Glen and Odessa.

"Father Ace is just the best. He's so outgoing and fun," added Nico Giacona, 15, from Sacred Heart Church in Auburn.

For example: At the Nov. 22 Mass, Father Ventura told the congregation that they don't always need to recite structured prayers in order for God to hear them.

"He knows who you are ... you're a little squirt!" Father Ventura shouted.

According to Ben Aman, Father Ventura also gets serious at the proper moments, saying he provided a moving talk at the Nov. 21 reconciliation service.

"He made me want to go into reconciliation," said Ben, 16, from St. Patrick's Church in Macedon.

"Ace" said that he plans to maintain his retreat involvement for as long as possible — partially out of enjoyment, partially out of commitment.

"We keep saying that the young people are the church of tomorrow. But if I want them to be that, I have to be a part of the process," he stated.

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