

Story by Mike Latona • Photos by Greg Benenati

on the MOVE

Weighing the call

Ken Shelton is class president and ranked No. 1 among the 65 soon-to-be graduating seniors at Spencer-Van Etten High School. With those credentials, some might feel that he could make big strides in the professional world.

Which is the reason, Ken reported, that his plans to forgo a "money" profession for the priesthood are sometimes contested.

"My sister's first thing was, 'Well, don't they get paid less?'" said Ken, 18.

Cash isn't as powerful a force as the spiritual arousal that Ken felt shortly after he was confirmed three years ago. This awakening occurred while he was attending a healing service at St. James Church in Waverly.

The encounter was so profound, Ken recalled, that he "stood still for 15 minutes," trying to grasp what was happening inside of him. And his life was changed forever.

From that time on, he said, he began to build a close friendship with Father Thomas Watts, pastor of St. James in Waverly as well as St. Pius X in Van Etten, where Ken is a parishioner.

Ken began attending the healing services on a regular basis. He has also become active around St. Pius X as a lector and eucharistic minister, and has even preached at Sunday Mass a few times.

Yet Ken said that God's call to the priesthood



Father Tom Watts watches Ken practicing to improve his golf swing. The two get together regularly to socialize.



Ken Shelton, who hopes to become a priest, attends St. Pius the X Church in Van Etten, where he is a lector and eucharistic minister.

occurred not at church, but during a round of golf with Father Watts last summer. While they were conversing, he recalled, he suddenly began expressing his interest in pursuing a priestly vocation.

"I thought, 'Hey, this is pretty neat,'" Ken recalled. "(Father Watts) said that you never know when the call is going to come."

If Ken does go on to become a priest, he will be the first ever from St. Pius X, a small, 45-year-old parish located in Chemung County. The third-oldest of Jack and Janice Shelton's four children, Ken was born in Binghamton. His family later lived in Moravia, Cayuga County, before settling in the village of Spencer, about 20 miles south of Ithaca, seven years ago.

Along with his involvement at St. James and St. Pius X, Ken is active with Young Life and Campaigners, two non-denominational teen organizations with chapters based in the Spencer area.

Ken is due to enter St. John Fisher College in Rochester this fall, where he



Ken takes on many roles in the church, one being a eucharistic minister. Since his family also attends the same church, it is common for Ken to give Communion to his father, Jack Shelton.

plans to major in English. An avid drummer, he is also looking to minor in music. After two years of college, he said, he will likely enter Becket Hall — a preparatory program for people who are considering priestly vocations — while continuing his studies at St. John Fisher.

Ken said that his focus on the priesthood has grown increasingly stronger as he assesses his long-term future.

"I just see that all of my talents come back to helping people, feeling for people," he said.

In Father Watts' opinion, Ken "has all the characteristics of having a religious vocation."

"It's almost like he's one of those people who have been chosen by God, just plain chosen. That's what I see," Father Watts said.

Ken has the ability to connect with people of all ages, Father Watts said. "It shows his maturity level. He would relate well to adults," the pastor commented.

Ken admitted that his peers might be initially surprised by his future plans, especially since priestly vocations aren't exactly high on the list of most young men's career choices.

"It might be a shock, a drastic idea," Ken said. "That's the way society today is. They might look at the priesthood as a lower class job."

"But it's one of the most fulfilling jobs you could ever have. You have the best boss in the world — our Lord."

Practically speaking, Ken admitted, he's not yet 100 percent what his future will hold.

"A lot of guys go off to college to discern the priesthood, but then they fall in love and get married," Ken pointed out. "This is the early stage of discernment. You just have to be open."

Ken remarked that he would not be forced to choose between marriage and priesthood if priests were allowed to marry. However, he realizes that this law of the Roman Catholic Church is unlikely to change any time soon, if ever.

"That's not the reality," he said.

At this point, though, Ken said there's a strong possibility that he will opt for a celibate life.

"I'm willing to make the sacrifice, because Jesus made the sacrifice to die for us. To not get married is a small sacrifice compared to that," Ken commented.

"I see myself as a priest in the future — being a representative of Christ on earth. I do see that."

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