

# on the MOVE

## Doing his part through service on the altar



Patrick O'Neill and his sister, Katie, assist Father John O'Connor during 8 a.m. Mass Jan. 9 at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton. Patrick, a senior at McQuaid Jesuit High School, has been altar-serving for nine years.name

STORY BY  
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PHOTO BY  
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Patrick O'Neill's first experience as an altar server was so frightening, it could have been his last experience.

"I was all alone because the other person didn't show up," Patrick recalled. "I'm this little short kid with that gigantic cross. My mother had to practically force me to do it."

That was in third grade. Things obviously went more smoothly after that, because nine years later, Patrick is still altar serving at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Brighton. In fact, he's been doing it now for more than half his life.

Patrick, 17, said he considered relinquishing his role a few years back, realizing that "most altar servers do it for two or three years and then get bored." But he changed his mind because his sister Katie, 13, wanted to begin altar serving and do so alongside him.

"She won't serve with anyone else, although she'll have to next year because I'm not going to be here!" remarked Patrick, who will graduate from McQuaid Jesuit High School this June.

Patrick noted that he and Katie have served regularly at Sunday Masses in recent years. They've also filled in several times when they attended Mass with their parents and found that the scheduled altar servers were no-shows.

Patrick said he has stuck with altar serving because it's a special vocation for him within the parish.

"It's just gotten to be something I do. I feel like I'm doing my part, being active. When I look back upon it, I'll have fond memories of it," he said. "You get a lot of the 'Good job.' People appreciate it."

Patrick added that being such an active participant has also helped him be more conscious of the liturgy.

"It means more to you; you understand the symbolism," he remarked. "It has helped me in the faith department. You pay attention, especially during the homily, where if you're sitting in the back of the church ...," he said, shutting his eyes. "And you have to sit up straight when you're on the altar. You can't slouch down and get comfortable."

He has gotten to know the priests up-close as well, particularly Father John O'Connor, Our Lady of Lourdes' pastor; and Father Fred Betti, S.J., a weekend assistant who also teaches at McQuaid. "You get a little understanding of what

it's like behind the scenes, more of how the priests interact," Patrick said.

Patrick recommends altar serving for any young Catholic. "It's a good feeling. And it can be a stepping stone for other roles in the church — if there is a certain priesthood thing, or I've seen people go from (altar serving) to becoming eucharistic ministers or lectors."

Patrick, himself, took on the role of lector at Our Lady of Lourdes last year, and plans to remain involved in liturgical ministry at college. He is an active member of his parish youth group and received the diocesan Hands of Christ Award this past fall.

"He is a leader in his peer community with his warmth, friendliness and faith," remarked Johan Engstrom, Our Lady of Lourdes' youth-ministry coordinator, on Patrick's Hands of Christ nomination form.

Yet Patrick doesn't envision himself entering the priesthood, even though he said he's been approached on the subject.

"I think I have a deep appreciation of the church, but I'm not sure that would lead me to a (priestly) vocation," he said.

Rather, Patrick would like to pursue a career in the fine arts. He hopes to attend New York University next year and is currently involved in numerous productions at McQuaid. In a way, he acknowledged, altar serving has helped him get accustomed to being observed by big crowds.

"The more comfortable you are in front of people, the easier it is to do a lot of things. It does make theater easier," he said.

Patrick said that he still enjoys altar serving despite a full schedule that includes school, theater and a part-time job at the Brighton Town Library. But even after Saturday-evening theatrical performances, he remains dedicated to his scheduled 8 a.m. Sunday Mass slots.

"I'll be there. I just might have to leave early from the cast party so I can get some sleep," he remarked.

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