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Adventure

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not afraid to bale hay, clean fish or take on the most challenging of tasks — including holding up Pope John Paul II himself.

Following a Jan. 4 Mass at the Vatican, during which he assisted the pope who had presided, the deacon and a small group of seminarians and clergymen stood with the Holy Father for a group photograph. Deacon Van Durme, a student at the American College located at the Catholic University of Louvain in Leuven, Belgium, was visiting Rome for the beginning of the Great Jubilee Year 2000. The aging pope leaned into Deacon Van Durme's arms to support himself after giving his cane to someone else. The two men exchanged some quiet jokes, Deacon Van Durme said.

"I've got my arm around the pope and I'm thinking, 'This does not happen to a guy from Dansville, New York.'"



Submitted photo

Deacon Patrick Van Durme was a guide for Outward Bound, an organization that uses outdoor experiences to foster clients' personal growth.

Cool priests

But it did happen to that guy who grew up the youngest of 10 children in a family that attended St. Mary's Church, Dansville. Although his family was not excessively pious, Deacon Van Durme said his parents, Anne and Nicholas, ran a religious bookstore in their living room when he was a kid.

"We never made a penny, but it was just a place where people could buy books and the Bible."

His parents were active parishioners, he said, noting they often lent a hand to the priests at St. Mary's.

"I knew (priests) not as someone up on the altar with vestments. I knew them as the priest who would come over and go swimming and goof around. I knew a lot of cool priests."

Deacon Van Durme's easy familiarity with priests as a youth spurred his interest in the faith, he noted, pointing out that he

served on the Diocesan Youth Commission as a teen. He also remembered his parents asking him once what it was he thought God wanted him to do with his life, and priesthood was an option he considered.

By the time he decided to go to St. John Fisher College in 1988, he was ready for the college's Becket Hall, which he called a "religious fraternity." However, after only one year in college, he realized he needed to see the world first before he could make up his mind, so he left and headed south to Florida where he worked various jobs. Throughout the remainder of the '80s, Deacon Van Durme explored various careers, and served in the U.S. Army for one year.

His other adventures included work in youth ministry for the Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, a cluster of four parishes, and peer ministry at Ithaca College, which he attended from 1989-92 and where he earned a bachelor's degree in outdoor education. He also taught outdoor education at Cornell University, also in Ithaca.

After his years in Ithaca, he spent the early 1990s doing recreational work, primarily as a guide for Outward Bound, a national organization that uses outdoor experiences to foster personal growth among its clients. He remembered, in particular, helping a 15-year-old girl overcome her fear of rappelling down a 400-foot cliff in Maine. When she finally did complete her descent, her expression was worth all the effort it took to encourage her, he said.

"Her face was absolutely aglow," Deacon Van Durme recalled. "She said, 'That was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I can do anything!' For me, that was it."

Eventually, though, Van Durme felt himself being called by God to go back to the seminary and, in 1994, he returned to Rochester, and entered the diocese's priest formation program. In addition to doing pastoral work at parishes in Sodus and Rochester, he has spent the second half of the 1990s pursuing theological studies at Leuven, and will return there after being ordained to study for one more year. However, no matter how high he flies academically, he said his priesthood will remain a down-to-earth ministry.

"I've had rent and couldn't pay my rent," he said. "I've had cars repossessed. I've been in the dirt of life."

Medjugorje

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to God's service when he is ordained a priest of the Diocese of Rochester.

A transitional deacon, Deacon McGrath was born in Rochester, the fourth child of 10 born to Bill and Mary Kay McGrath. One child, Colleen, died when Deacon McGrath was 1. Deacon McGrath attended Our Lady of Good Counsel Church and went to the parish school until he was 10, when his family moved to Palmyra. There, the McGrath family went to St. Anne's Church. And while Deacon McGrath remembered being a faithful young Catholic, by high school religion had taken a back seat to other concerns.

"By the time I was a junior or senior, it kind of became a periphery," he said of his Catholicism during an interview by phone from Rome, Italy. The deacon was finishing up his last year of theological studies at North American College.

A former computer technician, Deacon McGrath learned his trade by attending various colleges in the early and mid-1980s. At the same time, he lost interest in going to church.

"It wasn't a central place to me."

Pilgrimage

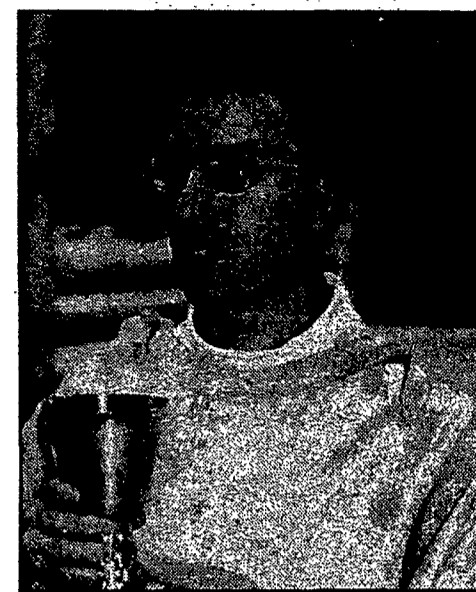
But learning about Medjugorje reignited

his interest in Catholicism, he said.

"After that, I began to pray on my own and to frequent Mass regularly," he said. "I then began to study up on church matters and investigate my faith more in depth. Slowly, I began to think about the priesthood. At first, it was just a matter of thoughts coming freely into my mind, but after awhile, I asked myself 'Why do I keep thinking about it?' Then I realized 'Ah! Maybe God is speaking to me.'"

He spoke to a priest about discerning his vocation, and then decided the path to priesthood was the one he wanted to take. An experience that cemented his decision was a trip to Medjugorje in 1989 with two of his cousins. Although he knew of the various miracles alleged to have occurred there, Deacon McGrath said he wasn't terribly interested in miracles, and never did see any. But he did find something he had never seen before — a community that attracted believers who openly prayed in public places, saying the rosary as they walked.

"I definitely experienced a peace there," he said.



Submitted photo

Deacon William F. "Mickey" McGrath

After he returned to Rochester, he entered the diocese's priest formation program and majored in interdisciplinary studies at St. John Fisher College where he graduated in 1991. He then went to Rome for two years to study, before returning to do a year of pastoral work at Holy Ghost Parish, Gates. He said he enjoyed working at the parish, but he also began to doubt whether he was up to meeting the demands of being a priest. He said a priest is the type of person who must console a family that has lost a loved one at one moment, and then return to his church to preside at a wedding Mass the next.

"I just didn't know if I ever would have enough energy," Deacon McGrath recalled thinking. "It certainly felt bigger than me."

Walk on water

He decided to leave the path to priesthood and eventually wound up taking the road to Mobile, Ala., where he served as a director of religious education at a Catholic parish for three years.

"During my three years there, I was blessed with many wonderful experiences, and I made many great and lifelong friends," Deacon McGrath said, adding that he tried dating for awhile. He even considered a career in religious education or some other form of teaching. Yet, despite the enjoyment he had living in the South and working in a parish, "that was not enough."

In the fall of 1998, he returned to Rome to continue his theological studies, and was ordained a deacon in October 1999. Although he hasn't yet learned where he will be assigned in the diocese after ordination, Deacon McGrath is now firmly convinced he's made the right choice in becoming a priest. Like St. Peter, who sank in the water when he took his eyes off Jesus and looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, Deacon McGrath realized that he can only walk on the waves of priestly challenges by keeping his eyes on Christ. "It can't happen but by grace."

All invited to liturgy

Bishop Matthew H. Clark will ordain Deacon Patrick Van Durme and Deacon William F. "Mickey" McGrath to the priesthood in Sacred Heart Cathedral, 206 Power City Park, Rochester, at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, June 24.

Following ordination, Deacon Van Durme will celebrate a 10 a.m. Mass of thanksgiving at St. Mary's Church, Dansville, on Sunday, June 25. Deacon McGrath will celebrate a 1:30 p.m. Mass of thanksgiving the same day at St. Michael's Church, Newark. Deacon McGrath also plans to celebrate Masses of thanksgiving at St. Anne's Church, Palmyra, and Holy Ghost Church, Gates, as soon as his schedule allows. The ordination ceremony and thanksgiving Masses are open to the public.

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