

on the MOVE

Story by
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Photo by
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Is priesthood another hat?



Rob Stevens, 19, says the Our Father during Mass Jan. 7 at Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Brockport. Stevens, a college student at Grove City College in Pennsylvania, has been considering the priesthood as a vocation.

In recent years, at diocesan teen retreats and conventions, it was hard to miss the young man with the crazy hats and scads of paraphernalia hanging from his neck.

His name is Rob Stevens, and someday he might be known as Father Rob.

Rob, 19, is a freshman majoring in education at Grove City College in Pennsylvania. While home on Christmas break, Rob attended a vocation retreat Dec. 27-29 at Borromeo Prayer Center in Greece. He was the youngest of the five men at the diocesan-sponsored event.

The idea of becoming a priest grew significantly on Rob last summer, he said, just as he was preparing to begin college.

"I guess I was always scared away in high school by celibacy. I wanted to have children and my own wife to cherish and hold onto," said Rob, 19, a parishioner at Brockport's Church of the Nativity.

But through intense prayer, Rob said, he realized that being a priest means "the positives are coming from someplace else."

Rob plans to go on to seminary after completing his bachelor's degree. That may

come as a surprise to folks who only know Rob from his sometimes-zany outward appearance. As a leader at diocesan events, Rob has been known to adorn himself with 15 different hats on a given weekend. He has also worn a set of huge makeshift necklaces to which he attached name badges of other teens; an empty soda bottle; used disposable cameras; and a crucifix.

"Some people didn't know my name, but they wanted to know who was that guy with all the junk," Rob recalled.

Rob also has a deeply reflective side.

Engage him in conversation on serious issues, and he'll give long, thoughtful answers. A friend, he said, once told him that he has "the perfect combination of craziness and seriousness." As a priest, he believes he could use humor as an attention-getter and then work into deeper spiritual issues.

"I can make people smile and feel good about themselves," he remarked.

Rob can also see himself incorporating leadership skills he has developed as a teen. He was a member of the Diocesan Youth Committee for two years and also served on the teen staff at Family Camp, a summer camp held in the Finger Lakes area.

"I really like the idea of having an influence on other people," Rob said. "I feel like I'm touching a lot of lives, that a lot of people will benefit through God working through me."

In fact, Rob said he would like to staff Family Camp as a priest. He said his spirituality grew because of the camp's interactive setting, where families clap to hymns and children may lead prayer services and take other active roles in liturgy. Rob and his family have attended numerous Family Camps.

Rob said he has also gained positive role-modeling from Father Roy Kiggins, former pastor at Church of the Nativity; Father John DeSocio, rector of Becket Hall, the diocesan pre-theology program; and Bishop Matthew H.

Clark, whom he's met several times at the annual Diocesan Youth Convention in Geneseo.

"Bishop Clark has had a huge influence — the way he interacts, the effort he puts forth to remember people's names. I see him as a friend," Rob remarked.

Rob spent considerable time with other clergy during the Dec. 27-29 retreat in Greece. The event was led by two diocesan priests, Fathers Lee Chase and Eric Phillips, as well as a seminarian, Mark Brewer. One of the key points Rob learned on the retreat, he said, is

to assess what — and who — God is calling him to become. From there, he can better discern what God wants him to do.

Rob said he will look for future guidance by praying a lot. He will also count on the continued affirmation of his parents, Gary and Carol.

"They've always been very supportive, but never excited about it to the point that they'd be disappointed if I didn't (become a priest)," Rob said.

Despite his attraction to the priesthood, Rob noted that his final decision may not come for quite some time. He has had girlfriends in the past, and isn't ruling out the possibility of dating and marriage.

"Any relationship I get into is going to take a lot of prayer and some discernment," Rob said. "Like the priesthood and religious orders, marriage is a vocation. You can't take it back, despite what our society says."

Rob said he can draw many similarities between teaching and the priesthood. He added that he may not discover his true vocation until he's well into seminary studies.

"Seminary is not a decision. It's only preparation," he said.

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