

CONTINUED...

Former Rochesterian thrives as WYD organizer

By Karen M. Franz
General Manager/Editor

TORONTO — Orchestrating an international event involving more than a half-million participants was far from the mind of Basilian Father Thomas Rosica when he was growing up in Rochester's St. Ambrose Parish during the 1960s and '70s.

In fact, the 42-year-old priest has said his career plan back then was to become a language teacher at a Basilian-sponsored high school such as Aquinas Institute, from which he graduated in 1977.

A vocation to the priesthood had surfaced early in adolescence, and he initially considered joining the diocesan ranks.

"I always thought that we were blessed in the Diocese of Rochester to have excellent diocesan priests and bishops," he remarked, noting that the late Msgr. Arthur Ratigan and "especially Father (James) Marvin had a great influence on my life." He also was influenced in his vocation by the Sisters of St. Joseph, who taught him at Nazareth Hall and at St. Ambrose School.

His mother, Roseann Rosica, former head of the language department at Aquinas, likely influenced his intention to be a language teacher. Father Rosica recalled that his mother and father, the late Dr. Anthony Rosica, lived their faith in an ordinary way. His mother also provided the link to the Basilian Fathers, which he sees as one example of "God's humorous

ways of pulling things together."

He had little interest in joining the Basilians during high school because he perceived them primarily as teachers and disciplinarians, rather than in pastoral roles. But Fathers Al Gaelens and Bud Cullen impressed him with their extraordinary kindness and dedication. He also was invited several times to the Basilian residence for meals, occasions that "provided another insight into serving the church."

He applied to the Basilian Associate program at Father Gaelens' suggestion, and "I haven't looked back."

"I would never be able to do what I have done without the support of a religious congregation," Father Rosica said. "They encouraged me to study; they gave me opportunities to pursue studies."

After graduating from St. John Fisher College in 1980 with a bachelor's degree in French and Italian literature, he taught at the Basilians' motherhouse school in Annonay, France, from 1980-81. Then he joined the Basilian novitiate in Detroit (1981-82). From 1982-85, he studied for a master's degree in theology at the Jesuit Faculty of Theology at the government-run University of Toronto. He said the Toronto School of Theology — a federation of seven denominational colleges, three of which are Catholic — is one of a kind.

"Being in Toronto has been a wonderful experience of ecumenism and the wider picture," he said, noting that he took his



Mike Latona/Catholic Courier
Father Thomas Rosica in his Toronto office, June 29, 2001.

preaching courses at the Presbyterian college, studied church history in Anglican and United Church-run colleges, and had Lutheran professors and a rabbi for Scripture. "What struck me about my theological formation was that it was living ecumenism," he said.

He took his final vows as a Basilian and was ordained a deacon in 1985 by the late Cardinal George Flahiff, CSB. He was then assigned for two years to St. John the Baptist Church in Amherstburg, Ontario, where he had special responsibility for the French- and Italian-speaking communities.

In November 1985, the Basilians asked him to serve as Cardinal Flahiff's secretary at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in Rome. "For me that was an extraordinary experience of capturing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council — that was the theme of those two weeks at the Vatican."

He was ordained a priest on April 19, 1986, at St. Ambrose Church by Bishop Matthew H. Clark. "I was very grateful to be ordained by Bishop Matthew Clark, for whom I have a great admiration."

The next year, after he'd spent a decade preparing to teach languages, the Basilians asked him to switch gears.

"They said, 'You've been using your languages as an end in themselves, rather than as a means to an end. So we ask you to consider teaching Scripture,'" Father Rosica recalled, explaining that Scripture is probably the most difficult discipline in theology because of the languages it requires. He is fluent in English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Hebrew and some Arabic. He also studied biblical Greek, biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin and one course in hieroglyphics.

In 1990 he earned a licentiate in sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. Then in 1992, he earned an advanced graduate degree in sacred Scripture at the Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francaise in Jerusalem.

"I figured, if you're going to study Scripture, you go where it was born. That was a tremendous experience. ... to live and work and study in the land of the Bible," he said. "I will never be able to read or teach Scriptures the same way after that experience."

Father Rosica and several other students from the Ecole Biblique were invited to assist Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah with the continuing formation of his priests. Father Rosica taught diocesan priests of the Latin patriarchate in Jerusalem, Jordan and Cyprus, as well as lecturing each week in an international sabbatical program for priests, sisters and lay pastoral workers.

"I loved the Holy Land despite the great pain of the political situation. There I was able to see at an even deeper level the ecumenical and interfaith dimension of our faith as Catholic Christians," said Father Rosica, who lived in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, did research and

language studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and studied at the Ecole Biblique on the border between Israel and Palestine.

"We (the Ecole students) were involved in all kinds of social-justice projects," Father Rosica recalled. Among them was a scholarship program that enabled three young Palestinian Christians to study at St. John Fisher College and Nazareth College.

When he returned to Toronto, the Canadian bishops appointed him to the national Christian-Jewish Consultation and the Middle East Working Group of the Canadian Council of Churches. He has been back to the Middle East only once in the past six or seven years, but maintains close ties. He is making it a priority to involve young Catholics from the Middle East in World Youth Day 2002.

Also upon his return, Father Rosica was asked to direct the Newman Centre at the University of Toronto, the second or third such campus parish to be established in North America shortly after Cardinal Newman's death in 1890.

The Toronto Newman Centre "had lost its original vision and purpose; and my role was to restore it to its primary purpose," the priest said. During his six-year tenure there, Father Rosica brought in 60 to 70 speakers including Patriarch Sabbah and Sister Helen Prejean of *Dead Man Walking* fame, as well as other church leaders and representatives of culture and the arts. The talks drew large numbers of people from the university and beyond, and helped to reinvent the centre.

Campus ministry clearly is a passion for the youth-day CEO. "The Newman Centre is at the critical crossroads between the university and the church. The church has to be there, at the crossroads of science, technology, faith and culture ... There is no better place for the church to teach than at the university," he said.

In December 1998, while the Canadian bishops were awaiting Vatican approval to host World Youth Day 2002, they asked Father Rosica what kind of person should lead the effort and to consider the possibility himself. Three months later he was asked to formally apply, which the Basilians permitted him to do, thinking he would not get the job. For one thing, Father Rosica had not yet become a Canadian citizen. Ironically, he took the oath of Canadian citizenship on July 4, 1999, two months after learning that he would, indeed, direct the WYD 2002 effort. He now maintains dual citizenship.

"I believe where we are, where we serve, is where we belong," Father Rosica said. "And this was just another normal step of my commitment to the church and the people of Canada."

Having done all his priestly formation in and through Canada, "I know the Canadian reality of church much more than I know the American reality," he said. Whereas "the U.S. reality speaks very much of assimilation, of a melting pot, the Canadian reality speaks of a mosaic that doesn't pretend to blend everything together," he said, so the Italian-American priest now feels very comfortable calling himself Canadian.

Although World Youth Day 2002 will end on July 28 of next year, Father Rosica will remain on the job until April or May 2003 in order to wrap up and write final reports to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican.

Thereafter, he hopes to have a few months off to write before starting his next assignment. "My heart is set on going to Assumption University in Windsor, where the Basilians have ministered for over 100 years," he said. He currently holds the post of vice president at Assumption, where he would be an administrator and teach New Testament Scriptures.

"But I'm not getting to Assumption very often these days due to a mountain of work on my desk in Toronto," Father Rosica said with a laugh.

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