

# WOW on the OR

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**E**ven bishops can come up short when matching wits with John Patrick Himmelsbach IV.

The note pictured above, given to John by Bishop Matthew H. Clark, was the result of a football bet they made last fall. The bishop sided with the Buffalo Bills, and John picked San Diego because his one-time favorite Bill — Doug Flutie — is now the Chargers' quarterback.

As it turned out, San Diego rallied behind Flutie to win 27-24, and Bishop Clark's bank account shrank by 5 cents. The bishop also threw in a New York Yankees cap; both he and John are passionate fans of the Bronx Bombers.

John said he often partakes in these kinds of friendly exchanges with the bishop, saying "He's my buddy. He gives funny jokes."

And John's mother, Marianne, says she often hears loud laughter coming from the sacristy — due to John's yukking it up with the priests — on the days of John's altar-serving assignments at Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral.

John, 17, has Down syndrome and has faced many of its challenges: mild mental retardation; congenital heart defects that required surgery in 1986; hearing and vision problems; a deformed hip; and stunted growth (he stands less than 5 feet tall).

Even so, life is busy and enjoyable for John. He is quite comfortable in the public eye, having appeared on several local television talk shows and commercials, serving as a March of Dimes chapter ambassador, and taking part in stage productions.

Perhaps no public appearances are more important to John than altar serving at Sacred Heart. He serves frequently at the 7 a.m. Sunday Mass and is eager to fill in when someone else misses an assignment.

In fact, it was as an emergency substitute that John served his first Mass. In early 1998 — on the same day he was trained — John was called into action at the evening Mass when another server pulled a no-show. John's mom recalled that his successful debut prompted a special

## Buddies with the bishop



Altar server John Himmelsbach IV, 17, poses with Bishop Matthew H. Clark before Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral March 3. John, who has Down syndrome, has been an altar server at Sacred Heart since 1998.



John assists Father John Mulligan during Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral March 3.

announcement by Father Thomas Mull, who was then Sacred Heart's pastor.

"Father Mull said, 'Here's a young man who's been sitting in the front row all these years waiting to serve, and today he served his first Mass.' And everyone clapped," Marianne said.

"We've had so many positive comments because he serves, from people we don't even know," she added.

"That's right. I'm a famous altar server," John said with a big grin.

John often serves with his sister, Kristina, 19, who is his only sibling. He knows his job so well that he not only trained Kristina to serve, but is also quick to detect mistakes by other altar servers from his vantage point in the pews on non-serving

days.

"I see the kids; they messed up," he said emphatically.

John proudly stated that he served at Sacred Heart's midnight Christmas Mass in 2000, and that he had his feet washed by Bishop Clark during last year's Holy Thursday service. John also volunteers in the parish's religious-education program, which he has attended for 12 years and for which his mother is administrator.

"It makes me happy," John said of his volunteerism.

Since 1999, John has attended School of the Holy Childhood, where his favorite subjects are English and gym. He is due to graduate in 2006.

He resides in Greece with his mother, sister and father, John III. The younger John likes hanging out in his bedroom, where he cranks popular tunes on his CD player and sings along. He also lifts weights regularly, which helps keep him in shape for the numerous sports that he plays.

"I exercise a lot. I've got big muscles," he said, flexing a biceps.

John's crowded room reveals a wide array of interests: He owns numerous books and movie videos ("Stuart Little" is a personal-favorite flick); has a Flutie poster on his doorway; a photo montage of him and his sister on the wall; a crucifix over his bed; and trophies, plaques and certificates from his various achievements all over the place.

Oh, and then there's the matter of those Britney Spears posters.

"I keep taking them down, but somehow they keep reappearing," his mother remarked.