

## FEATURE

## Basilian priest reflects on 47 years of teaching

By Jennifer Ficaglia  
Assistant Editor

Change is something Father John Poluikis knows well.

The 79-year-old is the longest-serving Basilian priest at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, having taught in the mathematics and physics departments since 1955. His 47 years at Fisher have given him a bird's eye view of changes not only in education and campus life at Fisher, but in society itself. And those changes, in turn, have provided him with a wealth of life experiences for which he's grateful.

"I found it a continual, exciting learning experience," he said of his career.

Ever since he was an elementary school student, Father Poluikis knew he wanted to be a priest. He grew up in St. Stanislaus Parish in Rochester, and was encouraged to become a priest by the Sisters of St. Joseph, who taught at the parish school he attended. He also received encouragement for his vocation from his aunts, as well as the priests and nuns who taught him at Aquinas Institute.

"The idea was mainly my own to become a priest," he remarked.

Father Poluikis attended the University of Toronto, where he received a master's degree in applied mathematics and did some graduate work in physics. He also earned a doctorate of arts degree in mathematics from Idaho State University.

"I enjoyed mathematics," he said. "It's something I really took to like a duck to water."

He was ordained June 29, 1951, in St. Michael's Church in Toronto, and had his

first teaching assignment at the high school there. He taught mathematics and religion at Aquinas Institute from 1952-55, then became a professor at Fisher.

Father Poluikis has taught students from every graduating class at Fisher except for one (the class of 1955, which graduated just before he joined the faculty). He recalls the early days at Fisher, when it was an all-male school and the campus consisted of just one building, Kearney Hall, which housed the priest residence, classrooms, library and cafeteria. He also remembers when Basilian priests were the predominant teachers at Fisher. Now, he notes, there are only four Basilians teaching.

"It's changed because of the lack of vocations," Father Poluikis said.

His first assignment at Fisher was in the physics department, because physics teachers were in short supply in the 1950s.

"All the physics professors were being grabbed up by the U.S. government to keep up with the Russians," said Father Poluikis, referring to America's race against the Soviet Union to get into space and the Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957.

He said he enjoyed the theoretical and mathematical components of physics, but at the time didn't have much experience with laboratory experiments. By the 1960s, Fisher hired a professor with a doctorate in physics, freeing Father Poluikis to teach mathematics full time.

Over the years, Father Poluikis has noticed a dip in the number of students taking math and science courses at Fisher.

"In the early days, the students were taking a lot of advanced courses in math and



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Father John Poluikis, the longest-serving Basilian priest at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, talks to his students during his numerical analysis class at the school Wednesday, April 3.

science," he said. "There aren't as many students going into physics, chemistry and math."

He believes the decline occurred because such Rochester companies as Kodak and Xerox are cutting back in their research departments, and students seem to be more interested in business management because there is a very real possibility of making it big in the stock market.

Father Poluikis also helped usher Fisher into the computer age. In the late 1950s, he, along with Richard Pegis, helped install computers at the college.

"St. John Fisher was one of the earliest schools to get into computing," Father Poluikis said.

When computers were first introduced at Fisher, they were larger and bulkier than modern machines, Father Poluikis noted, and they cost up to \$200,000 each. And for that price, each machine only had 15,000 bytes of memory.

"Computers have come a long way," Father Poluikis said.

This new technology became a tool Father Poluikis used to make mathematical calculations and solve problems. He took favorably to computers, he said, because they made it easier and less frustrating to solve complex math problems that would have taken billions of computing steps for a person to solve.

"It was fascinating," he said. Father Poluikis' love of math and prob-

lem solving made him a natural chess player. His father owned a gas station in Rochester, and it was there that he met members of the Rochester Chess Club who came in for fill-ups and talked to him about the game.

He joined the Rochester Chess Club while a high school student, and managed the Aquinas chess club when he taught there. He became chess tournament champion of Rochester in the 1960s, and also played in Fisher's chess league.

"There were a few times when there were chess masters there. Once in a while, I beat them," Father Poluikis said with pride.

The highlight of his hobby came in the 1970s when Bobby Fischer played an exhibition game in Rochester, just before he became Chess Champion of the World. Fischer played chess against 50 people that day, including Father Poluikis.

"I made a bad move early on in the game and he won a piece," Father Poluikis recalled. "Then I saw something where I could strike back."

He did so, and Fischer threw his arms in the air in surprise, Father Poluikis said. Nevertheless, Fischer wound up winning the game four pawns to three.

Father Poluikis and Fischer met in the hallway after the game and shook hands. Even though Fischer played 49 other people in chess that day, he remembered Father Poluikis and commented on the move the priest made against him.

Father Poluikis no longer plays tournament chess, and retired from full-time teaching in 2000. He still teaches one course a year, and is currently teaching a class in numerical analysis, which involves high-level calculus and computer programming.

Teaching part-time gives him the opportunity to pursue some of his other interests, which include meeting with a group of Jesuit mathematicians from around the world during the summer to do advance work and have fun.

"I figured it would be a good time to start relaxing," Father Poluikis said.

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