

Living out the priestly promise

Editor's note: Second in a series.

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

During a recent chat, Father James Jaeger's 17-year-old niece was talking about her boyfriend and the happiness he brought her.

"She asked me, 'Don't you get lonely or wish you had someone there for you?' I said that everyone gets lonely — married or not. I just explained I have countless people who support me," said Father Jaeger, pastor of the Roman Catholic Faith Community of the Canisteo Valley, a four-parish cluster in Steuben County.

Bishop Matthew H. Clark sensed similar support while attending the 100th-anniversary celebration of St. Michael's Church in Newark in late September. He said he renewed many acquaintances, enjoying "familial kindness and hospitality, not just as an official." It's a feeling he gets at many parishes around the diocese, he added.

"There's something hard to describe about their attention to, and care for, a person trying hard to live a celibate life," the bishop said.

A lifelong promise of celibacy can entail considerable effort and sacrifice. For some priests, their struggles with this commitment are often linked to loneliness, workaholicism and/or substance abuse. Other priests may deem the celibacy requirement too heavy a burden to shoulder, and either break their

promises or leave their vocations, whichever comes first.

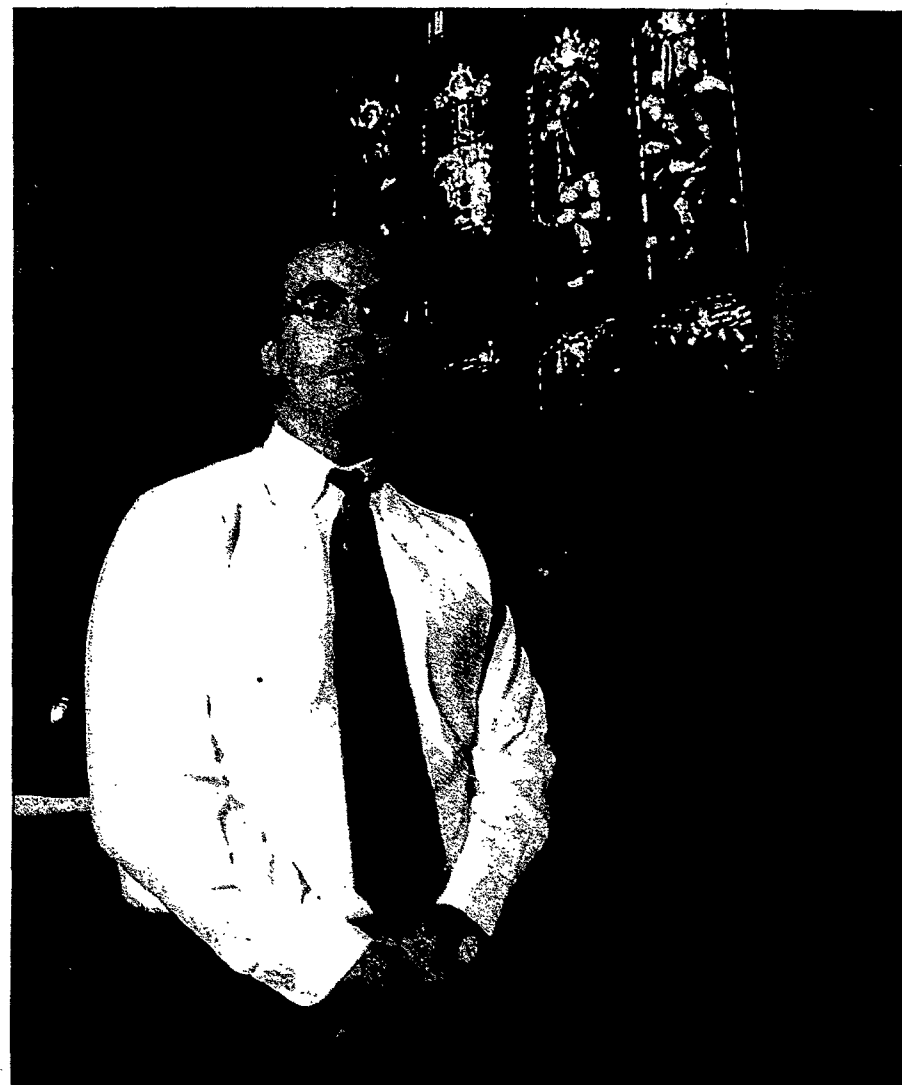
Then again, countless men have successfully met the challenges of celibacy, finding joy and reward in their devotion to serving God's people. On the one hand, Bishop Clark said if he had been called to marriage, "I probably would have been very happy in it." The bishop says he often wonders "what might have been, what might have happened — children and a spouse, having grandchildren, and possibly even great-grandchildren by now."

But neither has the bishop ever second-guessed the vocational path he opted to follow. "I'm grateful for celibacy. All of my energies can be oriented toward the people of the community in a way I don't see how I possibly could have if I were married," he remarked.

Paul Flansburg, a seminarian from Becket Hall, the diocesan pre-theology program, remarked that marriage is "a good thing. But sometimes good things are in conflict with each other."

Father Joseph Hart, a diocesan vicar general and moderator of the Pastoral Center, noted that even priests who believe celibacy should be optional "will openly admit they couldn't put in the time they do" in ministry if they were married.

Added Father Jaeger: "I see celibacy as that grace and reality that makes me present for others when they need me. I'm no less a



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Paul Flansburg, a seminarian in the diocesan pre-theology program at Beckett Hall, poses at Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church Oct. 20.

person for celibacy."

MEANINGFUL RELATIONS

Although marriage and priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church require different disciplines regarding sexual activity, the two commitments share similar ideals. Both involve "good times, bad times, sickness and health," Father Hart observed. And Father Jaeger noted that both require "attachment, commitment, being there for others who need you." The key difference, he added, is that marriage can be "a commitment between two people at the exclusion of others. Priesthood frees me to include parish, family, friends."

"By not raising a family, a priest is more free to focus on his parish family. It's that simple," Flansburg said.

Within the expanse of people they serve should exist some close friendships, said Father Donald B. Cozzens, a diocesan priest from Cleveland. Father Cozzens claims that priests who lack such friendships are more likely to engage in inappropriate sexual activity or other negative behavior.

"By itself, without deep and authentic human friendship, (priests')

intimacy with God made experiential through prayer, sacraments, and devotional practices leaves their spirits slightly out of balance," Father Cozzens wrote in his 2000 book, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*.

The former seminary rector contends that a priest must balance friendships "with both men and women, both priests and laity" while adhering to his promise of celibacy. "If the celibate intimacy with a few close friends is authentic, the priest discovers that the core of his heart remains fixed on God alone," Father Cozzens wrote. "Meeting the soul's essential longing for union and intimacy will from time to time be dangerous. Greater danger awaits, however, for priests and laity alike who willfully determine to live their lives in the pseudo safety of emotional isolation."

Along these lines, Father Jaeger said he especially cherishes the companionship of three fellow priests with whom he resides at St. Ann's rectory in Hornell: Fathers Robert Kanka and Paul Schnacky, who are retired; and Father Elias Menuba, the cluster's parochial vicar.

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