

Ministry agrees with 22-year-old

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

BRIGHTON — As his 2002 graduation from St. Bonaventure University approached, Don Smith's friends weren't rating his chances of finding work very high.

"Everyone said, 'With a theology degree, all you can do is go on and get your master's and Ph.D.' I didn't agree with that," Smith said.

Smith found a job all right — in fact, he scored multiple jobs.

Serving as a faith-formation coordinator and a youth minister, he works 30 hours per week at St. Thomas More Parish in conjunction with a 20-hour commitment at neighboring Our Lady of Lourdes Parish.

Whereas Smith said several friends "are still searching for a job in their field," this 22-year-old has plunged right into parish ministry, working alongside people at least twice his age — despite not even getting his driver's license until after both jobs began in August. "I was on a bike the first month," he remarked.

Smith is a native of Montezuma in Cayuga County, and was baptized at the former St. Michael's Church, which closed in 1985. He then attended St. John's Parish in Port Byron. At St. Bonaventure he majored in psychology, then elementary education, before discovering his true love — theology.

Earlier this year he wrote to Bishop Matthew H. Clark, expressing his desire to work in the Rochester Diocese. Despite this initiative, Smith admitted he'd thought he was taking a long shot. "I had the mindset that I was too young," he said.

The bishop passed his letter along however, and he was granted interviews for the St. Thomas More position. The Our Lady of Lourdes opening emerged a short time later, and Smith soon hit the ground running on life after college.

Smith serves as St. Thomas More's faith-formation coordinator, overseeing religious education in grades kindergarten through six while coordinating sacramental preparation for baptism, first

penance and confirmation. He also has limited duty with junior-high youth ministry. At Our Lady of Lourdes, Smith is the youth minister for both junior and senior high, as well as the confirmation coordinator. He resides on the Our Lady of Lourdes campus.

With a laugh, Smith said his theology background has proven useful when he's been asked by teens to define such terms as "free will" and "stigmata." "My most recent one was, 'Can the pope retire?'" he said.

With a 50-hour workload that he cheerfully admits he often exceeds, Smith isn't exactly swimming in free time. When possible, he enjoys hitting coffee shops in downtown Rochester, as well as developing his own novel.

For the future, Smith expresses interest in attending St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry with an eye on perhaps becoming a parish pastoral administrator. In the meantime, despite making a rookie mistake here and there, Smith said he's growing into his current profession nicely, and has received solid overall support — particularly through the guidance of Father Lee Chase, St. Thomas More's pastor.

"It's very busy but very, very enjoyable. I'm absolutely loving all my hands-on work with the kids, and both parishes have been so welcoming to me. There's no way I couldn't be happy," Smith said. "I've been surprised at how well I've been welcomed as the coordinator and minister, not just as some 22-year-old trying to do an adult's job."

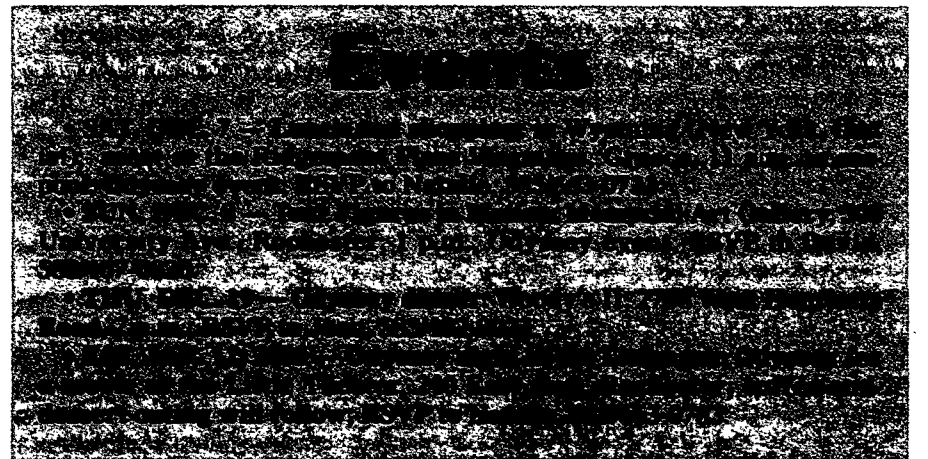
Maryann DiTucci, the faith-formation secretary at St. Thomas More, said Smith has done much to engender that positive response.

"I think it's just wonderful to have somebody young. He's integrating a lot of new ideas; they're fresh," DiTucci said. "Young people have great ideas and we need to give them the chance."



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Don Smith, a recent graduate of St. Bonaventure University, holds down multiple positions working with youths at St. Thomas More Parish and Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, both in Brighton.



WWW catholiccourier.com