Fr. Gaesser plans missionary work

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Father Ronald Gaesser grew up in the city of Rochester, yet his true love has been ministering in areas far from the hustle and bustle of the big city.

"Outside Monroe County there was more time to be with people," he explained. "I could focus more on people and relationships."

Courier | Diocese of Rochester, NY | May 15, 2003 Milestones & Vocations 5

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College and country settings have occupied the last 36 years of Father Gaesser's 42-year priesthood. He will retire next month after having served 16 years as pastor of St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Ithaca.

Father Gaesser, 67, is a native of Rochester's Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish. He attended the parish school, then St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries, and later received a master's degree in education from Syracuse University. He was ordained June 3, 1961, by Bishop James E. Kearney at Sacred Heart Cathedral.

From 1961-67, Father Gaesser was assisting priest at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Rochester. He then spent three years as assistant at St. Mary's in Auburn and chaplain at Auburn Community College. From 1970-72 he was full-time chaplain at Auburn Community College and Eisenhower College.

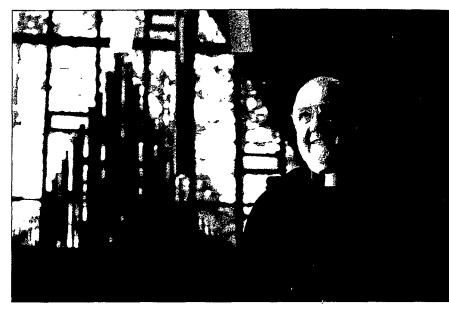
This era, marked by extreme social unrest across the country, saw Father Gaesser's activist spirit in full throttle. He organized campus protests against U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and provided guidance to students not only about the war, but also about their struggles with the emerging drug culture.

"People referred to me as this local hippie priest," Father Gaesser recalled. When it was pointed out that he went bald prematurely, thus impeding the opportunity for long hair, he quipped, "But I had the beard."

Father Gaesser became administrator of St. Joseph's Parish in Cayuga in 1973. For the next eight years he continued in that role while also serving as a college chaplain and psychology professor.

In 1981 Father Gaesser received his first pastorate, at St. Columba in Caledonia and St. Patrick in Mumford. He served there for six years.

The year 1987 marked the beginning of Father Gaesser's long stay in Tompkins County. Along with his



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Father Ronald Gaesser will retire next month from his pastorate at Ithaca's St. Catherine of Siena Parish.

pastorate at St. Catherine of Siena, he served concurrently as pastor of Lansing's All Saints Parish until 1998.

Diagnosed with prostate cancer in December 2001, Father Gaesser has been on disability leave since January 2003. However, the cancer is in remission now and he plans to spend most of his time in retirement working with the poor in the Dominican Republic.

He will serve in Monte Plata, where St. Catherine of Siena Parish has formed a sister relationship with San Antonio de Padua Parish and El Portal de Belen School. St. Catherine's has established a foundation for the school and has already raised \$160,000 toward its \$250,000 goal, he said.

Father Gaesser's retirement party will take place Saturday, June 21, at St. Catherine's following the 5 p.m. Mass. Despite his new status as a retiree, Father Gaesser said he plans to be anything but idle.

"I say it's a transitioning. I entered the seminary to be a missionary, so this completes the circle of life. It's what I set out to do when I was 13 years old," he remarked.

Fr. Kreckel has served city, country, suburbs

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

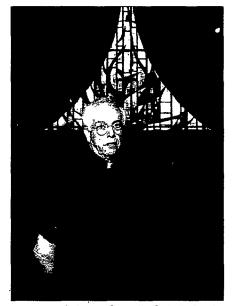
Parishioners at St. Mary's of the Lake Church in Ontario will host a dinner Thursday, June 12, to mark thé retirement of Father Robert G. Kreckel, pastor since 1985. The priest officially retires June 24.

Father Kreckel said he will live at St. Joseph's Parish in Penfield after he retires, but has made no specific post-retirement plans as of yet. However, he said he plans to perform sacramental ministry.

Born May 11, 1929, Father Kreckel grew up attending St. Boniface Church in Rochester, and said a parish priest there, Father E. Charles Bauer, planted the seeds of his own vocation.

"He encouraged (the parish's young people) to develop our spiritual lives as well as be concerned for others," Father Kreckel said of Father Bauer.

Father Kreckel attended St. Boniface School, Aquinas Institute, and St. Andrew's and St. Bernard's seminaries, all in Rochester. Bishop James E. Kearney ordained him to



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Father Robert G. Kreckel will retire from his pastorate at St. Mary of the Lake Parish in Ontario.

the priesthood at Sacred Heart Cathedral on June 5, 1954. Following ordination, he was named assistant pastor of St. Alphonsus Parish in Auburn, a position he held until 1960. "It was a very easy place to adjust

to because it was much like my own parish," he said of St. Alphonsus.

In 1960, he was named assistant pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish in Rochester, and became pastor in 1966. The priest said he enjoyed working at Immaculate, a primarily African-American parish, during a period in which the nation was interested in interracial issues.

"It was a wonderful opportunity to learn about discrimination and racism, which I hadn't known much about before I got there," he said, adding that he also served as moderator of the Catholic Interracial Council, which worked on civil rights issues at that time. Father Kreckel was among the leaders of a Rochester Catholic delegation to the March on Washington in August 1963, during which the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. made his historic "I Haye A Dream" speech.

Father Kreckel made some history of his own in 1973 when he became the founding pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Fairport. The priest said he welcomed the chance to help start a parish from scratch, adding that the parish concentrated on developing lay pastoral leaders.

Since his arrival at St. Mary's, Father Kreckel has ministered to its English-speaking members as well as the Spanish-speaking migrant workers in the area. He added that he has particularly enjoyed working in catechetical programs, especially those that enabled him to teach adults.

"You're not above them, you're not below them, you're just kind of sharing from one peer to another," he said.

Father Kreckel concluded by noting his career has taken him from the city to the suburbs to the country, all locations he has enjoyed, much like his vocation. In particular, he said he liked interacting with people over the years.

"I'm very content with my vocation," he said. "I enjoyed what I was doing. I think being a priest was natural."

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