

History, theology find common ground

Priest's vocation and avocation combine

Mary Frances McCarthy/CNS

WINCHESTER, Va. — On a clear day in Winchester, he donned an old-fashioned leather helmet, goggles and bomber jacket. A white scarf circled his neck.

"I want to fly," he said. A hint of a white collar was visible amid the folds of his scarf as he boarded the "Screaming Chicken" and flew off.

Father Michael Kelly was "test flying" one of his latest biplane bikes.

While his primary job is serving as parochial vicar at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Winchester — visiting the sick, helping at Sacred Heart Academy and ministering to the parish — he can also be found dressed up as a private in the 28th Massachusetts Regiment, or the 47th Virginia, or riding on one of nine biplane bikes.

Father Kelly has converted "his side" of the rectory garage into an airplane hanger of sorts. Strewn on a table are drawings and templates of two-dimensional biplanes. Father Kelly has constructed and painted nine different planes that can be mounted to his bicycle. His planes are reproduced with historical accuracy to resemble planes flown in World War I and World War II.

He remarked on "the tremendous courage it took to get up there," referring to the pilots who flew the warplanes. "God can make good come out of evil," he added.

Father Kelly began building bi-



Arlington Catholic Herald/CNS
Father Michael Kelly, parochial vicar at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Winchester, Va., models the uniform he wears during Civil War re-enactments.

planes for bikes about a year ago. "I like to dress things up," he told the *Arlington Catholic Herald*, newspaper of the Arlington Diocese. "What started out as art turned into a life of its own."

The priest thought up the idea of the biplane bikes while reading an article on parade floats and floats based on bikes. Later, he saw pedal-car planes for small children, and thought, "Why do the little ones have all the fun?"

Each plane, built of lightweight foam board, takes about one week to build.

Father Kelly finds it easy to relate history to theology. "There are people who risk themselves on something greater than themselves. Otherwise, we wouldn't have St. Louis or St. Joan," he said. "If you don't risk what you have in this life, you won't attain something greater in the next. Our forefathers did it for democracy; we do it for God."

This all-American priest and his family were always fascinated with history. His father served as a Marine until the 1970s, when they settled in Alexandria. His mother received a degree in art history and was especially interested in medieval history, religious art and architecture.

He said that he and his two brothers, Daniel and Matthew, sat with their parents at the dinner table and placed nickel bets on history trivia. Their father would often start the bet and ask the question, and the nickel would pass around the table until someone answered correctly or until someone would run for the encyclopedia after dinner to find

the answer.

Father Kelly's youngest brother, Daniel, just returned to the United States after serving as a lieutenant colonel with the Marine Reserves in Iraq. He teaches social studies and history at a private school in North Carolina. The middle child, Matthew, is a member of the city council in Fredericksburg and uses his knowledge of history to promote tourism.

Father Kelly served in the Navy for eight years before working as a security consultant prior to entering the seminary in 1990. He was ordained in 1995 for the Arlington Diocese. All three of the Kelly boys earned their undergraduate degrees in history from Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg.

Father Kelly and his brothers use to re-enact Civil War battles, but since coming to Sacred Heart Parish, it has become more difficult for Father Kelly to participate.

Sacred Heart has only two priests ministering to two churches and one school in two counties, where there is also a major hospital and 12 nursing homes.

Father Kelly visits classes at Sacred Heart Academy each week to teach the children a lesson, usually on theology. He said he likes to include a bit of history in his lessons so that the children can understand the background of their faith.

In the future he wants to talk to the students more about history and its importance. Father Kelly hopes eventually to secure a patent on the biplane bikes and market them to children as an exciting, hands-on introduction to history.

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