

Seminarian heeded call to vocation

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While growing up in the Flansburg house, I prayed the rosary daily with my family. Quite often, we would pray the "Family Rosary for Peace" with Msgr. Cirrincione. Afterwards, my mother would tell us stories about different saints or blessed. On one occasion, she told us the story of Maximilian Kolbe and how he was visited by Our Lady and offered two roses to choose from: a white one for the priesthood and a red one for martyrdom. He chose both, and I wanted to be able to do the same.

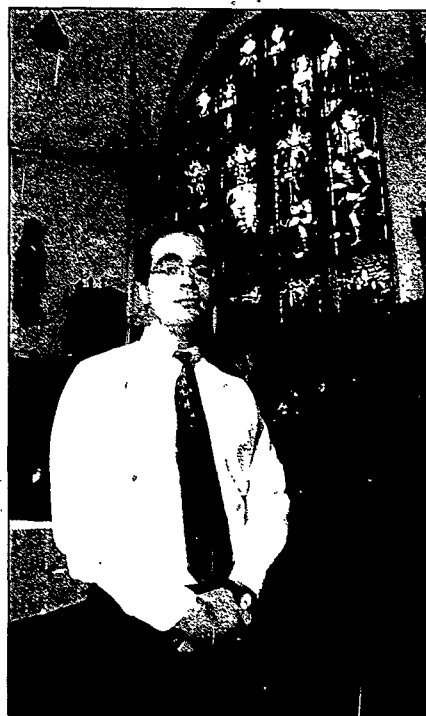
As a young altar server at St. Rose Parish in Lima, I asked Father William Flynn (our then-parochial vicar and diocesan chancellor), when I would be allowed to light the candles on the high altar. The high altarpiece at St. Rose had a magnificent array of candles (never lit), which ultimately drew our attention to the Eucharist centrally located beneath a near life-sized crucifixion scene. Father Flynn replied that the candles could be lit once I was ordained to the priesthood. The Eucharist was not central to my life then, but it was for Father Flynn. I'll never forget his witness to the Real Presence or his encouragement to consider the priestly vocation.

During my college years at SUNY Geneseo, I struggled with academia. I needed Catholic Christian support to finish my degree requirements and found what I didn't realize I was looking for, community.

It was at the Newman community of Geneseo that the student body gathered to support each other, to pray together and to have meals with each other. Children who came to church out of obligation or with indifference became adults who hungered for the Holy Spirit. Each day, we looked forward to celebrating Mass together, especially during Christmas, Lent and Easter seasons.

Quintessential to the health of our community was the presence of our priest, Father Jim Hewes. He prayed with us, heard our confessions, shared our meals and accompanied us on retreats and other outings. He encouraged us to contribute to our church community and to our community at large. Parish councils were exciting gatherings and well attended. Service projects were invitations to encounter Jesus in our rural areas and were the highlight of the spring semester.

My sense of church community grew from simply an opportunity to



File photo

Paul Flansburg, shown in October of 2002 inside Rochester's Blessed Sacrament Church, is a first-year seminarian at Catholic University of America's Theological College.

receive the sacraments to the foundation for lifelong relationships. Father Jim is my good friend and example to this day.

Subsequent to my college years, I took a job in sales and joined Blessed Sacrament Church. My occupation afforded me a greater sense of independence. I could buy and keep a car, afford my own apartment (I had always shared living quarters before) and take vacations to distant places. I started a 401(k) plan and realized that a career in the sales industry could adequately contribute to the support of my family. My involvement in Blessed Sacrament allowed me to join small Christian communities,

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to work in the supper program and to participate in wonderful liturgies with the contemporary music ensemble.

However, I wasn't quite at peace. At work, I grew unhappy with our advertising campaign and its effect on unwary customers. On the other extreme, sales promotions became so frequent that, when more authentic discounting events happened, customers treated them as part of the game. I was tired of the game and wanted to help people without always having to look out for Number One. Worse, I saw a trade magazine that very openly discussed how the industry I was involved in exploited cheaper labor overseas. In some cases, American raw materials were actually exported to the foreign labor market before being imported as finished products in the U.S. I knew that the profit margins were greater on these products and that the prices were lower than American-made goods, but I was uncomfortable with the extreme unbalance between myself and the producers.

Meanwhile, I began to realize something else: I was getting older. The notions that God might be calling me to the priesthood were still with me, but I was afraid that they would disappear before I gave them a real chance. If God had been calling me my whole life then my response has been, largely, no. What if, one day, God said to me, "Fine, have it your way." How was I to live the rest of my life in opposition to God's desire for me? Moreover, if God wanted me to serve him in my youth, how much of it was left?

Fortunately, I've always had a

spiritual advisor. Priests who are spiritual advisors can function as confessors, but they are more than that. I've had a series of three such confidants upon entering the seminary and have a current advisor here at Theological College in Washington, D.C. These individuals have sustained a genuine concern for my eternal well-being. I grew in holiness because they helped me to see myself and to evaluate my life situations. They asked about my prayer life, and I entrusted them with my inner struggles. They helped me to acknowledge Christ's presence in the charity of others whom I would later emulate. They "met me where I was at" but always encouraged me to love Christ more.

When I suggested that I might have a call to the priesthood, Father Tim Horan of St. Margaret Mary's Church helped me to take proactive steps and prayed with me regularly. With the decision to discern my vocation at Becket Hall (Rochester's "minor seminary") in the fall of 2001 came a remarkable sense of peace.

As a first-year theologian at Catholic University of America's Theological College, I'm on track for ordination to the diocesan priesthood in the summer of 2008. I can only hope that, as a parish priest, I become a witness and example of Christ's uncompromising mercy. I hope to "remember the poor" as St. Paul did and to offer myself as God's instrument for evangelization. After all, "the harvest is good but the laborers are scarce."

Paul Flansburg is a first-year seminarian at Catholic University of America's Theological College in Washington, D.C. He is scheduled to be ordained a priest of the diocese of Rochester in 2008.

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