

Reflections



DIOCESE OF HAMILTON

A Newsletter from the Vocation Office

September 2004

Son's Vocation Surprises Parents

Paul Wendling and his wife, Sherry, were surprised and excited, but also initially concerned when their son, Mark, announced that he wanted to become a priest in the religious order of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT).

"We had mixed emotions only because we didn't know much about the order and we realized we might not see much of him because it's a missionary order. We were excited about his vocation but there was a fear of the unknown," Paul says.

In 1995, Mark Wendling had just graduated with high honours from biochemistry at University of Toronto. He was planning to attend graduate school but decided to take a year off to teach in a small high school in Belize, Central America – a school run as a mission by the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

– continued on page 4 –

Vocation and the Family:

A Foundation of Strength and Commitment

How did I know that I was being called to the priesthood? So many people ask me that question, yet no simple answer is possible.

The call of God in the life of each one of us is both a gift and a mystery... an incredible mystery which can be difficult to recognize. After all, it's not as though Jesus delivers us a letter with directions as to how we should live our lives!

Sometimes an extraordinary event moves our heart to respond to God's call in a particular way. But, more often, it's in the ordinary events of everyday life and in the simple gestures of people around us, that we are prepared for and receive a call from God.

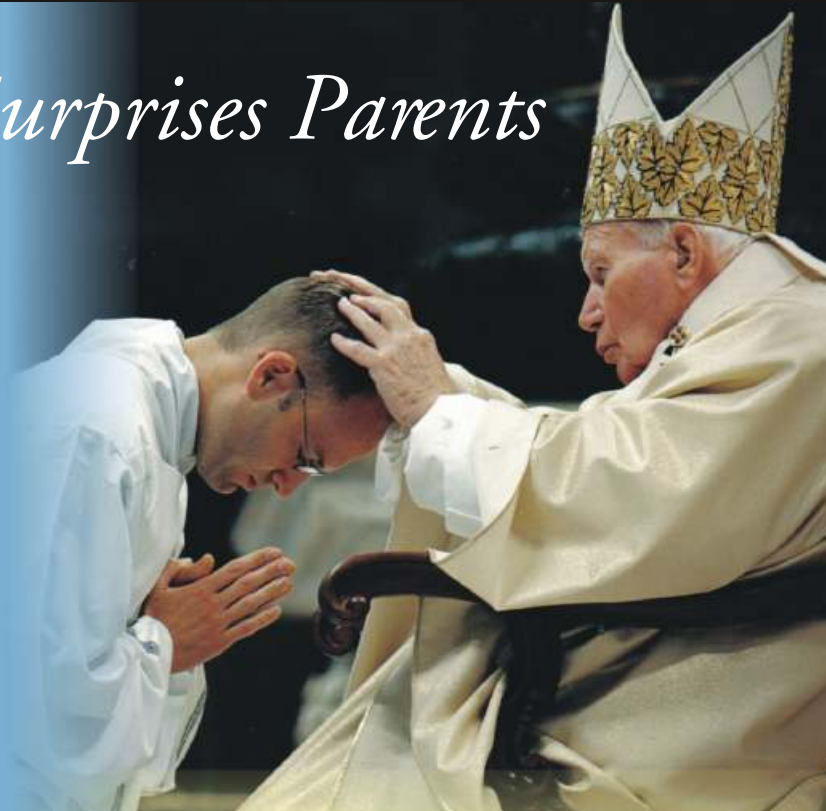
I remember my older sister walking with me to Sunday Mass, my father making sacrifices for the family, my mother gently caring for me in sickness, a dedicated teacher, the example of a joyful parish priest, a grandparent praying, and a friend bringing me to a spiritual retreat. In the heart of everyday life, my vocation was planted, nurtured and formed.

The importance of the family as a place of formation for children cannot be underestimated. The Church calls families "the domestic church." It's within a loving Christian family that a young person first discovers God, experiences prayer, finds a spirit of service and learns to give and receive love. The foundation of a strong Christian family is a crucial part of opening our hearts to receive our vocation from Jesus, including a vocation to the priesthood or religious life.

Let's give thanks to all the parents and families who make so many sacrifices while striving to live the vocation of Christian marriage and create Christian families. Each family becomes a school of love, of communion, and of prayer.

This issue of *Reflections* examines the role of family in nurturing and supporting vocations.

Fr. Mark Gatto
Vocation Director, Diocese of Hamilton



Fr. Mark Wendling, ordained by Pope John Paul II in Rome, 2003.

Faith Begins at Home: *"Families are the answer to everything"*



Teresa Hartnett, Office for Family Ministry, Diocese of Hamilton

Hearing and responding to God's call to be a priest is intensely personal and individual, but many of the Diocese of Hamilton's current seminarians share similar backgrounds. They speak of parents who attended church with their children, a close relative that was a priest or sister, a Catholic education and the positive example of a popular parish priest.

Teresa Hartnett, of the Diocese's Office for Family Ministry, believes parents who live their faith create a vocation-friendly environment for their children. "Family is the answer to everything," the former schoolteacher says. "If families pray and talk to each other every day, we have a good foundation for vocations to flourish. We need to show our children respect for Mass, respect for prayer and the belief that God is present in our lives. If you don't have these things, you don't have vocations."

Artur Nycz, one of three seminarians who came from Poland to complete their studies at St. Peter's Seminary, describes a home life very much like the 'foundation' Teresa describes. "My family played a huge role in my vocation, especially my mom. I prayed with her, pretty much every night. Family, I would say, was the beginning of my vocation."

If families pray and talk to each other every day, we have a good foundation for vocations to flourish.

Teresa Hartnett

Wojciech Kuzma, who emigrated with his family to Canada when he was 14, spent his teenage years in Hamilton attending St. Stanislaus Church with his family. He was involved in youth groups and was always in close contact with priests and sisters. He too describes a home where faith discussions and prayer were part of family life. "My family has remained very supportive and I think they are very happy for me," says the St. Augustine seminarian, ordained a transitional deacon in June 2004.

For Jeff Bergsma and Tim Hingston, who were also ordained as transitional deacons in June, their sense of calling to the priesthood came later in life. Tim worked in hotel and food management, and Jeff worked as a general labourer. Both Jeff and Tim had been taken to church as youngsters, but then drifted away in young adulthood. Both were in their 30s when faith became a bigger part of their lives and they began to consider the priesthood.

"I never lost my faith, I knew God was there, but I had a life to lead and I didn't see the need to go to church," Jeff says. The influence of Father Ed Henhoeffer and

Father Phil Sherlock at St. Clement Parish in Cambridge played a key role in Jeff's growing sense of vocation.

"They were prayerful and generous men and very human – people I could relate to. They really were role models."

For Tim, his faith was re-ignited by crisis. A friend was tragically killed and in grief, Tim went to church only to discover he'd even forgotten the words to the Lord's Prayer. "That was a trigger to me to say, something's wrong. It was a growing sense something was missing in my life and it just took time for that to come forward."

In her role at the Office for Family Ministry, Teresa Hartnett is looking for new ways to support Catholic families in the Diocese, and to help them create a vocation culture at home. "There are programs and supports for people who are in crisis, but I think we need also to support families who are basically doing fine. They may need to talk or ask questions about how to enhance the faith life of their family." One of the initiatives the Office for Family Ministry now has underway is a regular parenting tip published in church bulletins.

"We know in most cases where someone chooses the priesthood or religious life, there is a strong family affiliation with the Church. I think we need to do more to support families and bolster that affiliation," Teresa says.

Family Vocation Prayer

Loving God, each member of our family is a special gift from you. You have given each of us gifts and talents so that we may enjoy life but also so we can share with others. Generous and loving people are needed for service and leadership in our Church. Help us to know how to encourage and support each other so that we can respond generously to this need. We know that you will be with us. Help us to trust in you and in each other. Amen.

Questions for Parents

from the North American Vocation Congress Pastoral Plan

- 1** *Am I willing to allow God to act in the inner life of my children, leading them to ordained ministry or consecrated life if it be God's will?*
- 2** *How does my plan to fulfill the call to holiness include a loving openness to whatever call God has chosen for my children? Does it include encouraging them to investigate the possibility of a call to ordained ministry or consecrated life, as well as marriage or single life?*
- 3** *In what ways is my family a community with an intense life of faith encouraging a generous response on the part of those called to ordained ministry or consecrated life?*
- 4** *How am I seeking opportunities to strengthen my understanding of the faith in such a way that I can respond to the young who seek answers?*
- 5** *The youth and young adults of today are seeking "authentic joyful witnesses" to all vocations in the Church. How do I demonstrate this witness, having received the Sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony and having been blessed as a parent? What more can I do to reorient my life making this joyful witness more obvious?*
- 6** *How will I discuss the call to ordained ministry or consecrated life with friends and parents who resist their children's interest in either of these calls from God?*
- 7** *Do I seek opportunities to participate in programs for youth and young adults in my parish? Do I assist them in identifying the specific call that is theirs?*
- 8** *What more can I do to help create a "Vocation Culture" in my family? In my neighbourhood? In my local church?*

A Brother Looks Back *"You see the human side"*

The Kroetsch brothers grew up just one year apart in age. They walked to their Catholic school together and went to church with their parents on Sundays. But that's where the similarities ended. Murray always had his head in a book and Ed was busy playing sports. "He was academic, I was physical. We were going in different directions," Ed, now 51, recalls.

Music was another focus for young Murray; by his early teens he was already a skilled organist and played regularly at their home parish of St. John in Kitchener. It was also in his teenage years that Murray decided he wanted to be a priest... an announcement that made his younger brother shake his head in amazement at his brother's decision-making abilities.

"My first reaction was great, I wish I could figure out what I want to do," Ed recalls.

But along with his parents and younger brother, Ed was as proud as anyone in 1978 when Murray was ordained a priest (he now serves as pastor at Pius X in Brantford). By that time Ed was married and a father, and the two brothers had grown closer despite their different life directions.

Looking back, Ed realizes that the example of his immediate and extended family no doubt played a big role in nurturing Murray's vocation. "Both my parents and our extended family were very devout and I think that had more influence than I realized at the time. We had a number of relatives in religious life or the priesthood and we were always a church-going family."

Although their mutually busy schedules keep their time together less frequent than they would like, the brothers do enjoy camping trips together, sometimes with other priests. One of the benefits of having a priest in the family, Ed believes, is the opportunity to see the man behind the priest. "Within a family relationship you see the human side and our camping trips have been great opportunities for me to get to know other priests in the same way."



*Ed Kroetsch (left) with
Fr. Murray Kroetsch
enjoying time together.*



Fr. Mark Wendling,
with his parents
Paul and Sherry Wendling

"He had no thought of a vocation whatsoever," says Paul of Mark's decision-making at that time. "But he found that he thoroughly enjoyed the teaching, loved the people, and decided to go back for a second year. And I was a little upset. I said, Mark, you have to get on with the rest of your life."

Year two in Central America brought with it Mark's realization that he was being called, and he decided to become a priest in the SOLT order. After a year of discernment at the novitiate of the order in New Mexico, and another year of philosophy at a university in Texas, Mark studied theology in Rome at the University of St. Thomas Aquinas. Pope John Paul II ordained him a priest in 2003, in Rome. Father Mark is now serving at a mission parish in a small village near the Guatemala border, the same mission where he first realized his vocation.

Sherry, a choir director, and Paul, a retired engineer, now realize that the family habit of service to the Church likely did influence their son, although Paul jokes, "We're not taking credit for any of this."

The Wendlings have always been active in their home parish of Holy Rosary in Burlington, and have served as volunteers for a number of Catholic organizations in Hamilton and Burlington. They sent their five children – three daughters and two sons – to Catholic schools, and the whole family attended church together.

While Paul can't recall specifically discussing vocations as a family, he says he "always let it be known that one of my constant prayers throughout life was that my kids would do whatever God called them to do. But never did I specifically pray that it had to be a vocation to the religious life or the priesthood."

On the other hand, Paul believes that "if you're a faithful family, then the possibility of a Church vocation is always in the background. If there's no faith history in the family, I think it would be very difficult for a vocation to be considered."

On the Calendar

Come and See Weekends

St. Augustine's Seminary, Toronto, November 5 to 7, 2004

St. Peter's Seminary, London, November 26 to 28, 2004

These weekends are an opportunity for men who may be considering the priesthood to visit the seminary and meet seminarians and faculty. For more information, please contact Fr. Mark Gatto, Vocation Director, at (905) 528-7988 or frmark@vocationinfo.ca

Family Challenges and Opportunities

The 2002 North American Vocation Congress focused specifically on how to encourage vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life, but it also looked at the foundation from which vocations spring – family life. The Pastoral Plan published after the congress quotes Pope John Paul II as follows:

"Families are called to play a decisive role for the future of vocations in the Church. The holiness of marital love, the harmony of family life, the spirit of faith with which the problems of daily life are confronted, openness towards others – especially towards the poorest – and participation in the life of the Christian community form the proper environment for their children to listen to the divine call and make a generous response."

The Pastoral Plan acknowledges that modern family life "is under considerable strain" in North America. "It is marked by high divorce rates, social and economic instability, loss of contact with grandparents and extended family due to relocation and family breakdown, the reduced importance of religious practice and devotion as a shared family experience, and the impact of a society that prizes financial and personal gain over a life dedicated to permanent commitment and self-gift... Lack of family and peer support was identified... as a major obstacle to considering a religious vocation."

The plan identifies the need to "help spouses and parents understand their unique vocation as a call to build families in which life is received as a gift from God, in which love is lived out in the concrete demands of every day, and in which each member of the family is encouraged to be attentive to God's voice, giving it a full and generous response throughout life."

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