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Msgr. Barton celebrates 50 happy years as a priest

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By Barbara Hughes Special to The Catholic Virginian

In anticipation of the 50th anniversary of Msgr. Raymond Barton's ordination to the priesthood on May 14, his sister Therese Barton-Bayse and I visited him at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Nursing Center in Virginia Beach, and reminisced about the past.

He is one of five children, two of whom are deceased. His oldest sister, Della, lives in New Jersey and Therese resides in Virginia Beach. Msgr. Barton was ordained a priest at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond on May 14, 1966, where he also celebrated his first Mass.

When asked what he enjoyed most about being a priest, Msgr. Barton's face lit up as he replied, "All the people that I know and love."

The response made his sister smile as she recalled the many family and friends who came from around the country to honor him at his retirement party in 2011. The event was held at St. Nicholas parish in Virginia Beach, where he had retired that June.

According to his sister, Therese, their mother was delighted when her son decided to become a priest. She made it known that he had been dedicated to God almost from birth.

Upon being discharged from the hospital, her parents took their new baby boy to visit the Daughters of Charity in Lynchburg, the city where he was born. The nuns were delighted and proceeded to take Ray to the chapel where they placed him on the altar and offered him to God.

As his little sister, Therese admits to feeling sad when she learned that her brother was going off to the seminary after graduating from high school.

"He was the best dancer at Holy Cross High School," she laughed. "He taught me how to dance and I was looking forward to going to the school dances with him."

But, as she explained, "Ray loved being a priest and he was thrilled when their father came into the Catholic Church several years after he was ordained."

Over the course of his priestly ministry, Msgr. Barton served as parochial vicar at St. Michael in Annadale and the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart in Richmond and was pastor at Sacred Heart and Blessed Sacrament in Norfolk, Holy Comforter in Charlottesville and St. Nicholas in Virginia Beach.

He was on the faculty at St. John Vianney Seminary from 1968 to 1973. However, because of his passion for ecumenism, most people tend to associate Msgr. Barton with Church of the Holy Apostles in Virginia Beach where he was the first co-pastor in what has been, and continues to be a unique ecumenical setting.

Under the leadership of the late Bishop Walter F. Sullivan, Msgr. Barton was appointed co-pastor of the Roman Catholic–Episcopal community where he served from 1975–1989 with an Episcopal priest, Father Donald Gross.

Many of the early parishioners remember Msgr. Barton with great fondness.

Lee Startt, one of the founding members of Holy Apostles, described the priest as being "heaven sent."

"He was so pastoral and in fact changed my life," Mr. Startt said. "When the doors of Holy Apostles opened, it meant that my wife Bonnie and I could worship together.

"Sundays became a source of joy rather than a source of division."

Both he and his wife, as well as their daughter and her children, remain active at Holy Apostles today.

During a sabbatical leave in 1992–1993, Msgr. Barton attended Washington Theological Union where he received a Master's Degree in Ecumenism.

With his batteries recharged, he became the Ecumenical voice for the Diocese of Richmond and spoke on the topic in parishes around the Diocese.

As the Vicar for Ecumenism and Interreligious Affairs, Msgr. Barton gathered a group of like-minded clergy and laity from around the Dioceses to form an Ecumenical Commission that met on a regular basis. One of the members, Bobbie Gerold from St. Gabriel Parish in Richmond, regards Msgr. Barton as one of her "ecumenical heroes."

"No one was a better bridge builder with the ecumenical community than Msgr. Barton. People from other religious traditions continue to ask about him," she said, adding that "his presence is truly missed."

The annual LARCUM (Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, United Methodist) Conference remains a testament to Msgr. Barton's dedication to the spirit of Christian unity.