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Priests celebrate friendship

BY GLORIA LaBOUNTY / 0 SUN CHRONICLE STAFF

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One came from a preparatory seminary high school in Connecticut, and one from Durfee High School in Fall River.

Both were bound for the priesthood when they struck up a conversation on their first day at St. Mary's College in Kentucky.

A friendship formed that lasted through their college years, their training at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, and their ordination at St. Mary's Cathedral in Fall River on May 10, 1975.

Now pastors at neighboring churches, the Rev. William Boffa of St. Stephen's Parish in Attleboro and the Rev. Bruce Neylon of St. Mary's Parish in Seekonk are still steadfast friends and comrades in celebration this year of their 25th anniversary as priests.

They attended each other's recent celebratory Mass and reception, and well as those of other priests in the Fall River Diocese marking silver anniversaries.

That class of 1975 includes the Rev. Kevin Harrington of St. Lawrence Church in New Bedford, who previously was pastor at St. Joseph's Church in Attleboro and also served at St. John's in Attleboro and St. Mark's in North Attleboro; the Rev. Richard Roy of St. Joan of Arc in Orleans, who served at St. Theresa's in South Attleboro and St. Stephen's in Attleboro; the Rev. Arnold Medeiros of St. Patrick's in Wareham, the former pastor at St. Mary's in Norton; the Rev. Jay Maddock of Holy Family in East Taunton, a native of Attleboro whose home parish is St. Mary's in Mansfield; the Rev. Daniel Reis of Immaculate Conception in New Bedford, who served at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Seekonk; the Rev. Herbert Nichols of St. James parish in New Bedford.

Their anniversary celebrations were attended not only by fellow priests, but also by many of the people they had served over the years. That provided "a wonderful affirmation of the priesthood," Father Boffa said and one that makes it "worth going another 25 years."

It's been a life that from the outside may seem spiritually rewarding but lonely in its celibacy, yet these priests say it's a life filled with friendships and the fulfillment of parish families.

“ The priesthood is a wonderful gift,” Father Neylon said, and his friend echoes the sentiment.

“ It's a great life,” Father Boffa said.

A key ingredient has been their friendships. The two priests meet for lunch once a week, and several of the priests in the diocese get together regularly, spend days off and vacations together, call each other when they need to talk, and share in each other's family lives.

Father Boffa relates it to the bond of Jesus' 12 apostles that is still very much alive today in the priesthood, which he says is really a brotherhood.

It's a bond that is particularly important in these days when many priests are alone in their parishes and their rectories.

“ We learned to depend on one another more than priests used to,” Father Boffa said. “ It used to be that each parish was an island.”

Now, he said, priests from various parishes support one another, cover each other's churches when one is away, exchange ideas and team up for programs.

“ Knowing that someone is next door that you can rely on is important,” Father Neylon said.

Their separate but parallel paths began in childhood. Both felt called to the priesthood at a young age, partly because of their strong Catholic families, they say, and partly because of the encouragement of priests and nuns at their parishes and at the parochial schools they attended.

Father Neylon remembers the parish priests frequently asking the school boys if any of them would like to be priests. That questioning,” he said, made us think about a vocation.

They trained in the post-Vatican II days when the Church was coming out of transition. The style of the Mass had changed and so had some of the practices surrounding the sacraments. At the same time, greater roles were being offered to the laity, allowing them to serve in ways that were never possible in the days when these priests were growing up.

While their vocational calling led them both to Kentucky, they went there for different reasons.

Father Neylon had been assigned to the college by the Fall River Diocese, while Father Boffa went there as an independent student and on the advice of his pastor. He needed a bishop to sponsor him for ordination, and during vacations, he accepted the invitations of his classmates to visit their family homes in the Fall River area. After growing up in Connecticut near the shore, “ I liked everything here,” he said. “ I was very impressed with what I saw.”

He applied to the Fall River Diocese for sponsorship, was accepted, then later ordained with some of his classmates.

Trained in the new ways of the Church, this class was viewed by more veteran priests as “ coming out of seminary with the latest,” Father Boffa said, although they themselves did not feel that way.

Father Neylon remembers his first parish having three priests from different eras who were all trained very differently, while Father Boffa remembers being asked by his first pastor to forewarn him before trying anything new. Instead, he acknowledged the pastor's experience, and asked him to “ show me how to do it, so I will do it right. That pleased him.”

More than just church practices have changed since those beginnings. The challenge for priests today, they say, is helping people deal with the complexities of modern life and the confusion that brings.

“ Church was not an option when I was a boy,” Father Boffa said. “ Today church is an option.”

The nature of families and the problems they face have greatly changed, Father Neylon said, and while priests reaffirm the Church's teachings, they also try to be sensitive to people's situations and needs.

“ We try to reach out with kindness and compassion” rather than with judgment and condemnation, Father Neylon said.

People today form their own consciences, he said, but often don't know how to do that, and may no longer understand aspects of their faith, like what sin is. “ Some things get lost along the way,” he said, and people need the guidance of the Church.

“ We struggle with that as priests, with what we can do to help people form their consciences,” Father Boffa said. What priests encourage, he said, is “ an ongoing relationship with the Lord.”

With so much sadness in society, Father Neylon said, the Church can offer its message of hope that stems from the gospels.

It's a message they sometimes bring at the grandest of times, and at the saddest ones, and sometimes by going directly from one to another. Father Neylon remembers days when he went from saying a funeral Mass to officiating at a wedding, from anointing a sick person to celebrating a baptism, from saying Midnight Mass to going to the hospital to console a family that had just lost a loved one.

“ It's amazing how the pendulum swings,” Father Neylon said.

It can be a struggle at times, Father Boffa said, and priests know that “ tomorrow, you will be asked to do it again.”

That's why fellowships are so important, he said, “ to mourn our losses, and celebrate our joys. Sometimes, just a phone call helps.”

It's a life that has been “ a real joy for me,” Father Neylon said. “ I have had opportunities I never would have thought possible,” like working in a prison, in diocesan programs, in a number of parishes, and as a chaplain at Sturdy Memorial Hospital where he believes “ I learned to be a priest.”

Father Boffa, meanwhile, served as a high school chaplain, CYO director, camp and retreat house administrator, as well as at parishes that were very diverse in their nature and in their needs.

He views them all as “ opportunities to minister in ways I could never have imagined.”

Living a celibate life does takes grace from God, Father Neylon said. “ You ask God to give you the strength to live it out.”

While people view celibacy as being alone, Father Boffa said one thing he learned is that “ loneliness is a choice,” and that priests find fulfillment within their parishes, and within the brotherhood of priests.

“ A lot of priests learn what true friendship is,” Father Boffa said.

Those friendships have been “ a real strength for me,” Father Neylon said. Now when seminarians are assigned to his parish, he views that mentoring as a gift.

“ It challenges me to look at the priesthood, how I live my life, and what I can offer,” he said.

While they share the concern over the shortage of priests, they believe that more young men may consider the priesthood because of the shortage.

To those men who might be giving a vocation some thought, Father Boffa says, “ Welcome aboard.”

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