

Calling

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Lee Staszak of Irondequoit said she was devastated six years ago when a priest she knew and respected was arrested for sexually abusing a physically helpless nursing home resident.

Staszak's grandparents had helped build St. Michael's Church in Rochester. Her grandfather died when Staszak, now 33, was 11 years old, and the Rev. Gerard Guli presided at the funeral Mass at the church.

In 1989, Guli pleaded guilty to first-degree sexual abuse and received five years probation.

"It jarred me to the core," said Staszak. "I thought here was a role model, a positive male role model, and this was someone who was real."

Jean Godek, 63, of Perinton said she has had only good experiences with priests.

Her daughter, Linda Plante, died suddenly 11 months ago at the age of 37. Plante was pregnant, recently had moved to Pittsford with her husband and young daughter and was about to join the Church of the Transfiguration.

Upon hearing of the death, the priest, Rev. Gerald J. Appelby, and pastoral minister from that church quickly arrived to comfort and help the family, Godek said.

"It was like God just sent them to us," said Godek, a member of St. Michael's Catholic Church in Mace-

don, Wayne County.

The Rev. Jim Schwartz, who is DeBellis' mentor at St. Louis Church, said one of the great satisfactions is connecting with people.

"I enjoy being a priest," Schwartz said. "It's a gift."

DeBellis grew up Catholic in Auburn, Cayuga County. He was popular, lettered in three sports and was captain of the football team. He worked in various states at various jobs, earned a philosophy degree from St. John Fisher College in 1983 and dated heavily.

"I enjoyed the life I was living . . . a high-society life — sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, basically," he said.

But his lingering feeling of uneasiness persisted and grew. "I would go out and sow my wild oats and go to church the next day and pray for crop failure," he said.

"Christ was always calling me, but I was always running," he said.

In 1990, he applied to the Catholic diocese, which includes Auburn. He will finish his studies in two more years, earning a bachelor's degree in theology and a master's degree in divinity from University of Toronto theological school.

He said celibacy is the requirement that keeps many men from becoming priests. "People wouldn't dedicate their lives if anyone could do it," he said.

"But we're called to be intimate with Jesus," he added. "With the sacrifice comes reward."

His seminary training deals with temptations and how to handle them. "To feel is not to sin," he said; "to consent is to sin." □