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**NEWS / LOCAL**

# 'Every day of priesthood a gift' for 40-year jubilarian

By Janna Reynolds, The Catholic Virginian / December 2, 2019



*Father Walter Lewis*

## Father Lewis credits family, cathedral for roots of vocation

Where one grows up and attends school can have a major impact on the person one grows to be.

The Cathedral of the Sacred Heart was instrumental in Father Walter Lewis becoming a priest of the Diocese of Richmond. He served Mass there, attended daily Mass as often as he could and graduated from the Cathedral High School, which was located three blocks from the cathedral, in 1971.

The priests Father Lewis knew best while growing up were those who passed through the cathedral, including Father William Pitt and Bishop Walter Sullivan.

"They were all so supporting, encouraging and eager to allow the gift of their vocation to touch others, and so I really did consider priesthood from a very young age because of the example of those men," said Father Lewis.

He will celebrate 40 years of priesthood on Sunday, Dec. 15.

After graduating from high school, Father Lewis studied business at the University of Richmond for a year before continuing studies at St. Mary's College in Baltimore from which he earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy. He then went to Rome to study at the Pontifical North American College, or NAC.

He said the greatest gift of the time he spent in Rome was being able to encounter people from so many different lands.

"I remember the first time I stood in the square for a papal blessing and heard all the different languages around me. The reality of a universal Church was so clear and so wonderful," he said.

Father Lewis studied Italian and Spanish while at the NAC.

After nearly three weeks of Italian lessons, Father Lewis approached one of the sisters at Bambino Gesù Hospital, a children's hospital located behind the university, and asked her to put him in a part of the hospital where no one else was serving.

The sister assigned Father Lewis to the oncology ward, a fact he did not realize for two weeks.

"All the children had cancer, hemophilia or other blood disorders. But the children were my best teachers," said the priest, explaining that the children only laughed when he spoke incorrectly instead of making fun.

"I was working with children in very, very serious situations," he said. "That was a very, very powerful gift."

Through working with the children, Father Lewis encountered Sofia Cavalletti, a founder of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Cavalletti had studied and lived with Maria Montessori – the founder of the Montessori theory of teaching that is based on self-directed learning.

"Because of (Montessori), Sofia believed there should be an equal way to teach religion and Scripture," Father Lewis explained. He said that Cavalletti gave half of her apartment in downtown Rome as a school for the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.

After studying at the NAC for three years, Father Lewis returned to the United States to study liturgy at the Catholic University of America. He kept in touch with Cavalletti.

"It was funny. When we were addressing invitations to my ordination, someone said, 'Is this really Countess Sofia Cavalletti?' And I said, 'Yes, it's really her.' She was very, very polished."

Father Lewis has served as associate pastor at Church of the Holy Spirit, Virginia Beach (1979-1982) and St. Andrew, Roanoke (1982- 1983); pastor at St. Anne, Bristol (1983-1995), St. Mary, Richmond (1995-2009) and St. John Neumann, Powhatan (2010); and administrator at St. Bridget, Richmond (2005), Good Samaritan, Amelia (2010-1018), and St. John Neumann, Powhatan (2010-2011). He has served as pastor of St. John Neumann since 2011.

He has also been involved in prison ministry for about 22 years. He says Mass every third month at the State Farm Correctional Center.

As pastor of St. Anne, Bristol, Father Lewis oversaw the expansion and renovation of the worship space. He then came to Richmond and helped with the construction of St. Mary School and Church.

The priest said his love of art and "experiencing the wonder of the architecture of the buildings in Europe inspired me to raise questions that led to beautiful structures in the diocese."

Father Lewis will celebrate anniversary by gathering for dinner with his father and siblings on Dec. 15.

"That will be wonderful," he said, and shared that he was "blessed to grow up in a family that really loved the Church and supported all that meant."

A celebration with his parish will follow "in January sometime" after the excitement of Advent and Christmas has settled.

Father Lewis said that he chose December as the time for his ordination because of the Scripture passages.

"My mother said to me, 'Are you crazy? Why are you doing this in December?' And I have asked myself that question many, many times," Father Lewis said with a laugh. "When you're young, you don't think about that. It was about a liturgical connection to John the Baptist."

Looking back on his 40- year vocation, Father Lewis said that encountering the lives of so many faithful people and celebrating the Eucharist bring him great joy.

"I cannot imagine what I would be doing that I would not be able to celebrate the Eucharist daily. That has really been the anchor and the center of my daily life as a diocesan priest," he said. "Every day of my priesthood has been a gift. When I look at peoples' faces, and they come to receive the Eucharist week after week, I am grateful to God for the opportunity to serve him as a priest," he said.

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Local, News

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