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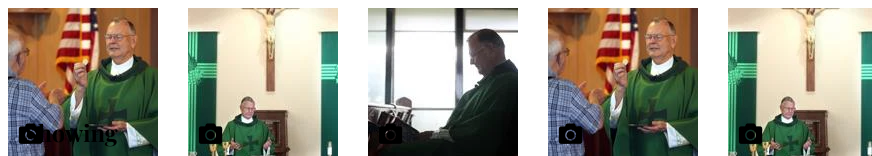
TOP STORY

Life Story

Retiring priest grateful he received the call

By Ken Newton | St. Joseph News-Press

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Father Roderic Giller gives communion during Mass Tuesday morning at St. Charles Catholic Church in Troy, Kan. Mr. Giller will be retiring soon from the priesthood.

The light in the confessional, one of those motion-activated devices, had gone on the fritz. Father Roderic Giller stopped his conversation with a fellow priest to repair it.

“It’s kind of a compulsion,” he admits. “You see something that needs fixing, and you want to fix it before you move on.”

The fixing comes as a matter of course to Father Giller. The basement of the St. Joseph Parish rectory in Wathena, Kan., includes a stockpile of tools, plenty of which the priest has put to use for minor maintenance. In a small Catholic church, a collar doesn’t exempt you from manual chores.

The moving on proves a trickier matter. The pastor has managed diocesan reassignments in the past, several of them. It hurts to leave, but God guides your path to other welcoming places.

This time, Father Giller says, it feels different. In July, he marks 51 years since his ordination. And he leaves his pastorate in Wathena and Troy to enter community life at St. Benedict’s Abbey in Atchison.

It seems fresh in his memory, that walk he took the first day of his first assignment. He ministered at St. Benedict’s Parish in Kansas City, Kan., and taught a senior religion class at Bishop Ward High School.

Two miles separated these locations, and the new priest used the walk to calm himself.

“I don’t know a thing,” he kept telling himself. “What am I going to tell these kids?”

Suddenly, Father Giller felt it would be all right. He didn’t need all the answers.’

“I was going there to meet the kids where they were and where I was,” he recalls.

Over the next half-century, the priest depended on prayer and presence, common sense and compassionate spirit to get him past the rough spots.

One of six children, the future priest was born in St. Joseph and baptized at St. Francis Xavier Parish. His mother and father had good jobs at Standard Oil, but the Depression-era economy put them both out of work and cost them their house. They moved for a time to Hiawatha, Kan., then to Atchison, where Roderic’s father thought the children could get a better Catholic education.

The priest cites providence in events moving him toward his eventual vocation. He had the second-best grades in his class at Maur Hill Prep; the student with the top grades had turned down a scholarship to St. Benedict's College because he wanted to go into farming.

When the priest called asking Roderic if he wanted the scholarship, the boy had never entertained the idea of going to college. He had considered being a truck driver, but this seemed like a good opportunity.

Also, he joined the Navy Reserve in St. Joseph, and an early exercise put him aboard a destroyer escort sailing around Lake Michigan in particularly high seas.

"I decided God gave a man legs to walk around on solid ground," he laughs.

After college and four years training for the priesthood, Abbot Thomas Hartman of St. Benedict's sat down with the newly ordained Father Giller and asked about his vocational preferences. Would he like to continue his graduate studies, maybe teach in college?

His inspirations had been parish priests, and Father Giller said he wanted that life. The priest never regretted his choice.

"Working with people is the most challenging thing, yet the most rewarding thing," he says.

The parish work pushed him to experiences not always associated with priests. Sure, he comforted people in hospital rooms and prayed with them at their lowest moments.

But he also drove buses for the Catholic schools in Atchison, and he finds himself on occasion phoning a tech support center when the office accounting software misfires. When his parishes had schools, a stronger Catholic culture developed but also money pressures.

All the experiences forged his ministry style.

“I try to be myself,” Father Giller says. “I just try to be charitable, and I try to be a good listener. Jesus is the model and the example, the way and the life.”

With homilies, he also arrived at a comfort zone. Rising most days before 5 a.m., he spends the early hours reading and in prayer. Where the priest once wrote his sermons and stuck to them slavishly, he now lets the spirit direct his words.

“It’s in there, so let the Lord bring out whatever he wants to bring out,” he says, then adding with a laugh, “The good news about that, too, is when you can’t think of anything to say, then you shut up. People appreciate that.”

Father Giller turns 79 in September. He has three jobs lined up at the abbey, so word of his “retirement” seems misdirected. More like a “change in occupation,” he says.

“Everybody needs a reason to get up in the morning. Everybody needs to be needed, and everybody needs to serve,” the priest says. “It seems to me that the critical thing for every human being is to know what they’re called to in life.”

The St. Joseph native got called to the priesthood. And he remains grateful for the call.

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