



Free Press Photo by JYM WILSON

The Rev. Raymond Provost takes his wash off the line. The Winooski priest, 77, today is celebrating 50 years in the priesthood.

## Winooski Cleric Celebrating 50th Anniversary as Priest

By MARSHA YOUNG

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The Rev. Raymond Provost, 77, of Winooski retired 11 years ago but he is still a full-time priest.

Today he will celebrate his 50 years in the priesthood at St. Francis Xavier Church in Winooski, where he gave his first Mass the day after he was ordained June 6, 1936, in Montreal.

"A priest never really retires. He is a priest of God forever," he said. "A priest has to be a psychologist. He has to be everything. To comfort the afflicted, to console those who are down."

The 5-foot-7 priest is a frail 150 pounds and has had a number of bouts with various illnesses. But he is energetic and in a recent interview at his Weaver Street home, he talked with fervor about his years as a priest in Vermont.

"Preaching is very hard. It takes a lot on the heart," he said, sitting in a black chair in the corner of his living room.

After he retired as pastor of St. Ambrose Church in Bristol in 1975 because of health reasons and fatigue, he returned to Winooski. For

the past 11 years, he has been spending his time praying, offering Masses at St. Francis and helping Our Lady of Providence Convent. The convent is across the street from his house, which has been in his family for many years.

A day does not go by without someone's dropping by to say hello or stopping in for some talk and advice, he said. He recalled many visitors, many the subject of sad stories.

Once, a young woman came in to talk to him, he said. Her eyes were red and watery.

"You're taking drugs?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. After that meeting, he was called and told the woman had committed suicide, he said.

"That isn't the first case," he said. "The priesthood is that after the other."

"You've got to bear the burden of others. It makes it hard."

He has given last rites to the dying and blessed the bodies of accident victims. He has been called to bless sick pigs and chase cock roaches out of an apartment.

"He's just a priest who can't say

no," said Monsignor Raymond Adams of St. Mary's Church in St. Albans. "He's a tremendous priest in the image of Jesus Christ, giving and serving. He never thought about himself and his own convenience. It's always the needs of somebody else."

Provost said he has talked wayward Catholics back into the church and has persuaded people to be baptized and to make their first confessions.

"One of the things that strikes me is that young people turn to him very easily," said the Rev. John Ledoux, pastor of Winooski's St. Stephen's Church. "Young people stop in to his residence to say hello and talk about problems. He doesn't frighten them off."

The happy times are the weddings, the baptisms, the big banquets and big dinners, Provost said.

"You give and you receive. It's doing good to others. That's the great consolation. It takes so little to show love," Provost said.

His parents came to Winooski from Canada. Provost, one of 12 children, attended Winooski's parochial school, St. Michael's High School and College at Winooski Park and the Seminary of Philonthy and the Grand Seminary in Montreal.

After his ordination, he served in many parishes in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington: St. Amadeus in Alburg, St. Sylvester in Graniteville, St. Mary in Springfield, St. Paul in Barton, St. Anthony in Sheldon Springs and St. Ambrose in Bristol.

"He was a builder. He built the new church in Bristol. He built the rectory in Sheldon Springs and remodeled the church there," said Ledoux, who has known Provost for 26 years and followed him as pastor in Sheldon Springs.

"He had a great sense of humor. He would work that into his sermons. He would interject lighter things and zoom it right at home to people," Adams said.

When Provost retired and returned to Winooski, he helped Adams at St. Stephen's, where he was pastor until 1981.

Adams said, "He was like a right arm to me."

Because Provost helped at St. Stephen's and St. Francis, Adams said, "He was really a bridge between the ethnic makeup of the city of Winooski."

Whether he is a bridge between two churches or a builder, Provost said, "A priest is only a priest forever. The priesthood is a vocation. It's not a profession."

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