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Priest in Politics Keeps Religion in the Forefront

By Helen T. Gott
Religion Editor

His fellow priests call him "the governor."

His parishioners have found he still is around when they need him.

And members of the Jackson County Legislature treat him as any other legislator (one recently invited him to have a beer.)

Five weeks after taking his seat as the 6th District legislator, the Rev. John Giacomelli is "thrilled and happy" in the position. He is the first priest to hold a political office locally.

But the assistant pastor of St. Thomas More Catholic Church admitted in an interview this week he sometimes finds himself "running both ways."

When first approached about running for office he felt a priest has enough to do. Then he thought, "Why shouldn't a priest be involved in politics? Politics deals with people." And Father Giacomelli is concerned about people.

Declaring firmly his church work comes first, the priest said he views his political career as an extension of his ministry. For him it is a means to be more effective in helping more people.

"Sometimes if you go and speak to some official as a priest," he said, "they tend to think, 'why don't you go back to your church,' but if you go as a legislator they know you can get something done."

He could think of no instance in which his religious vows would conflict with his duties in the legislature, stating simply he would have the same principles if he were not a priest.

"One of my purposes is to uplift morality," he said, "and I feel you can do a lot to uplift morality through the legislature."

He mentioned specifically his opposition to abortion and concern about the drug problem and conditions in nursing homes.

Father Giacomelli indicated he knew that being both priest and politician would not be easy.

In the parish he preaches, serves as vice-principal of the parish school, teaches, visits hospitals and nursing homes and sometimes gets calls in the middle of the night to help a young person who has gotten involved in drugs or crime.

In the legislature he serves on three committees—Health and Welfare, Correction and Justice and Public Works. He also has been reading up on issues that come before the legislature and going throughout the 6th District meeting his constituents.

"Being a legislator keeps him a little busier," the Rev. John Huhmann, St. Thomas More pastor, said, "but it hasn't kept him from performing his duties in the parish."

Father Huhmann believes the people in the parish are

proud of Father Giacomelli even though they were not fully in accord with his running. He thinks the priest received more popular support after the controversy arose over his residency qualifications.

Father Huhmann said he personally was "rather neutral" about Father Giacomelli's candidacy. "but this was something he felt he wanted to do, and I didn't oppose it."

Some personal sacrifices have had to be made. For instance Father Giacomelli said his golf game has suffered, and he loves handball but seldom can fit it into his new schedule.

The added responsibilities also has required a more intensive prayer life, he said.

"I pray before I make political decisions," he said. "Even before I took this step (into politics), I prayed and asked for guidance from the Holy Spirit. I didn't think I would win—neither did anyone else. It was the first time a priest had run."

"The night of the election I went to bed. When they woke me and told me I had won, I felt this is what the Lord and the people wanted."

He stressed the fact that he is not a professional politician and referred to an article in *The Star*, following his election, which stated "he still shows signs of political naivete that make him refreshing."

Harold (Doc) Holliday, Jr., of the 5th District, said Father Giacomelli has been accepted by the other legislators. He said the priest is always present at the legislative and committee meetings and in a short period of time has become as informed on the issues as any other legislator.

Father Giacomelli said people have told him, "We need honesty and truthfulness in politics; just be yourself; don't change."

But he said he has found that many of the preconceptions

people have about politicians are not true.

"Some people think all politicians are crooked," he said, "but I really feel they are working for the betterment of the people. I have really been impressed by the legislators, and people need to get away from these stereotyped views of politicians."

Father Giacomelli said he has not felt uncomfortable in the legislature, and the other legislators have not seemed to feel uncomfortable around him.

"I think I get along with them," he said, "because I try not to make any judgments. . . . I don't feel I have to go in there and preach. I think you preach by the way you live."

"I think I will make my mark," he stated, "and that of course is the mark of Christ."

Father Giacomelli said that when he told his mother of his intentions to enter politics she told him: "You know who you are, what you are and what you have to do, so do it."



REV. JOHN GIACOPELLI