

Faith has sustained Msgr. Evatt for 25 years in priesthood

By PAUL A. BARRA

AIKEN — Msgr. Thomas A. Evatt, pastor of St. Mary Help of Christians, celebrates the 25th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood this year. The force behind his longevity is his unswerving faith.

“One of Father Tom’s marvelous strengths is his true belief in what he does,” said James A. Schmidt, a Mass coordinator at one of the eight weekend liturgies at St. Mary’s. “When he holds the host up, you can tell he really believes in what he’s doing.”

The silver anniversary priest agrees: “I do believe.”

Msgr. Evatt said that opportunities to practice his faith plus the chance to share sacramental moments with parishioners are the aspects of his vocation that he likes best. He likes weddings, baptisms, even funerals, when he can use his training and his gifts of spirituality to help people through intimate times. What he dislikes about his work is the administration.

“Fortunately, we have competent councils here, and I don’t feel I have to worry about finances and such. But I would tell someone considering the priesthood as a vocation to work at being flexible, because you never know just what you’re going to do day to day,” the priest said.

Msgr. Evatt brings other strengths to his work as a parish priest, according to Dr. Schmidt and others. He is an excellent homilist and a strong singer. Louis J. Spano, an usher who has been a parishioner at the large Aiken parish since 1954, likes his pastor’s honesty.

“He doesn’t pull any punches. He tells it like it is,” Spano said.

Msgr. Evatt is a big fan of the permanent diaconate program and, in fact, serves as academic coordinator for the one in the Diocese of Charleston. He has a deacon in training at St. Mary now, Bob Pierce. Pierce works closely with the pastor and has noticed that the importance of the sacred liturgy to the priest has not affected his own sense of self-importance.

“Monsignor’s just a joy,” Pierce said. “He takes everything seriously, except himself.”

Bobbie Chick, a member of the parish for 40 years, said that the pastor, who has been there for seven years, has “made a wonderful priest for St. Mary’s.”

Thomas A. Evatt was born in Rhode Island but raised in Greenville. He was ordained by Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefler at St. Joseph in Columbia on Dec. 18, 1976, after graduating from St. Mary’s College in Kentucky and Christ the King Seminary in Aurora, N.Y. He served where he was ordained and at St. Joseph in Charleston and Prince of Peace in Taylors. In 1982, he was made a pastor, first at St. Cyprian in Georgetown, then at Precious Blood in Pawleys Island and St. Mary in Summerton. He was pastor of Stella Maris on Sullivan’s Island when Hugo hit in 1989.

“The extent of the flooding hit me when I discovered that the presider’s chair had floated from the altar to the back pew,” he said of the coastal destruction caused by Carolina’s most infamous hurricane.

He was assigned to the Upstate a few years later and served his home parish, Our Lady of the Rosary in Greenville. In March 1994, he came to Aiken and hopes never to leave: “I love this parish.”

He also loves one of his collateral assignments, director of Continuing Education for Priests.

“It’s one job I thoroughly enjoy, because I can minister to my brother priests,” he said.

For most of his 25-year priesthood, Msgr. Evatt has served on the diocesan Presbyteral Council. He was also involved in youth ministry for many years. Seminarians regularly summer at the big rectory at St. Mary, and their host is optimistic about the status of vocations now, observing an upsurge of quality candidates after years lean in numbers. He quoted an old Scottish saying about the cavalry coming to save a decimated army: “I hear the pipes blowing over the hill.”

St. Mary’s School, with 320 students already enrolled for next year, is a source of pride for the parish, he said. Despite the enormous expense of such education to parish and parent alike, Msgr. Evatt believes in Catholic education — if pursued for the correct reason.

“The primary purpose is to pass on the faith, that should be the reason parents send their children to a Catholic school. And only after that, for a better education and better discipline than public schools,” Msgr. Thomas Evatt said.

As Lou Spano said, this jubilarian doesn’t pull any punches.