

LIFESTYLES

Silent priest reaches golden milestone

Publicity haunts a man with blue eyes smiling

By SALLY HILANDER
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That the Rev. Paul Kirchen doesn't much care for publicity is a well-known fact on the Carroll College campus.

He says it invites self-glorification.

BUT THE PRIEST — whose name is probably familiar to every student attending Carroll since 1929 — is a natural target of interest.

Kirchen is a counselor, a teacher, a friend.

And today he celebrates the golden anniversary of his priesthood and his coming to Helena.

Which means publicity.

"I'm beginning to think I am some potato!" Kirchen laughed, his blue eyes smiling.

Then more seriously he explains why he prefers to keep a low profile and to pursue his mission of helping others quietly. "I do not wish to arrogate to myself," he says.

Kirchen — who pronounces his German surname more like "Keer-ken" than "Ker-chen" — was ordained in 1929 after having attended Sulpican Seminary in Washington, D.C., and came to Carroll College to teach Latin to other men seeking the priesthood. The college was just four years old.

THROUGH THE YEARS, he also has taught Greek and German, the language he spoke as a child in Cascade, Iowa. "Only the brave (students) take German," he says.

Kirchen has made several trips to Germany, the most recent in 1970. He studied there in 1959. "I could go back, but I'm too old," he says. "And besides, I have all the German I need here."

When Kirchen accepted the teaching job at Carroll College 50 years ago, "a student could come here in September and leave in June and never leave the building."

Within one building — St. Charles Hall on the

hill overlooking Helena — were classrooms, a chapel and the dining hall.

"Have the students changed?" Kirchen said, pondering a question. "That's kind of like asking whether young people are better or worse than years ago.

"I THINK THEY'RE basically the same. They know more. And they're more oriented toward doing things for other people. They have a great deal of concern for others in the world. They ask me what they can do for somebody else."

Kirchen counsels students. His tiny office in O'Connell Hall has a comfortable rocking chair and photographs of numerous young friends who've left the academic world for other things.

He strives to help them be better people morally and spiritually.

"That's the pitch," he says. "The world is shot through with moral corruption. It's important we be good men and good women."

Kirchen was asked to give the baccalaureate address for Carroll's commencement exercises last week. One would assume he'd given several in the past 50 years.

"JUST ONE," HE smiled. "I think they asked me because I've been here for so long they decided they better let me say something."

The priest offers these words of wisdom: "If you want to live long and lead a happy life, then like what you do. If I had it to do over again, I'd do just the same thing."

Today's golden jubilee celebration includes a noon mass at St. Helena Cathedral and a dinner. Kirchen said he is happy about visiting friends and renewing old acquaintances.

But as for the pomp and the publicity?

"If I had my way about the celebration....," he says, leaving his sentence incomplete.

"The Bishop said we were going to have it and I accede to his wishes."



The Rev. Paul Kirchen

(Staff photo by Gene Fischer)