

FAITHS

Career stretches from choir loft to pulpit

By JIM MANN
The Daily Inter Lake

The Rev. Robert "Bob" Hartman started with two cozy but withering churches in Bigfork and Somers and built them into a flourishing parish over nine years.

Now Hartman, 71, is retiring after 47 satisfying years as a priest.

"The time was right for growth in terms of the church, the attendance and the physical plant," Hartman said of his start as parish priest for St. Catherine's Church in Bigfork and St. Ann's Church in Somers. "Now we have about 270 families, about double what we had nine years ago."

But more important than numbers, perhaps, is how parishioners have grown to be an enthusiastic part of the church, Hartman said.

When he arrived, Hartman said, churchgoers were likely to sit in the dark unless he turned the lights on. That's no longer so.

"They've established a sense of ownership and commitment," he said. "They have formed as a church, what it means to be a church. It's not just going to church for them."

Hartman is proud of the leadership responsibilities parishioners have taken over the years. They've become involved with planning liturgies, Sunday school, choir and basic administration of the parish.

At one time, Hartman spent four months in the hospital for a



THE REV. Robert Hartman gets a hug from Marge LeDue after a weekday service at Bigfork's St. Catherine's church Thursday. Hartman is retiring after 47 years of service at St. Catherine's and St. Ann's in Somers. (Inter Lake photo by Robin Loznak)

hip replacement. Although a part-time priest was called in to lead Masses, parishioners assumed full responsibility for

administering the church.

"The past couple of years have been the easiest of my priesthood, because I've

established such a team," he said.

"They've just done a marvelous job of accepting responsibility and accepting the role of ownership. We are a prime example of what a collaborative ministry is."

Hartman has spent his entire career in Montana, starting as a choir director at St. Helena's Cathedral in Helena. He took his first assignment as a priest in Columbia Falls, and later returned to Helena to lead St. Mary's Church. From there, he went to Townsend and then to Bigfork.

Hartman is retiring to his home town of Helena because he still has many relatives and friends there. If it weren't for a heart condition and a recurring hip problem, Hartman said, he would not retire.

He said leaving Bigfork will be an emotional passage in his life.

"You can't work with people without establishing a bond," he said. "They're like family. You cry together, you pray together, you laugh together, you party together."

Parishioners at St. Ann's and St. Catherine's will celebrate Hartman's years of service over the next couple of weeks. A dinner will be held in his honor Sunday from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Elks Lodge in Kalispell. It costs \$10 a person.

A free dinner, open to the entire community, will be held Sunday, Feb. 13, at the Bigfork Elementary School cafeteria from 2 to 6 p.m.