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NEWS

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Priest fulfills his dream of becoming funeral director

By PAUL QUIRINI- | Comments: 0 | [Leave a comment](#)

Rev. Bernard Turner isn't your typical college student. After all, not many students' course work includes funeral service management, funeral directing, history of funeral service, and embalming I and II. When he received his associate's degree in mortuary science during recent graduation ceremonies at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, however, Father Turner accomplished a goal he set for himself in high school.

He is also the first priest in the Albany Diocese to earn such a degree from HVCC and hopes his ministry to dying people and their loved ones will be enhanced by his study and knowledge of death.

"I wanted to help people at their weakest moments, because we don't handle death well as a society," he told The Evangelist.

Dreams fulfilled

The pastor of St. John the Baptist Church in Schaghticoke and St. Monica's Church in Johnsonville recalled how he wanted to pursue three paths after graduating high school in Vermont: radio broadcaster, priest and funeral director. The summer after high school, he went to Boston, passed the Federal Communications Commission exam and returned to Vermont as a broadcaster on a local radio station.

He achieved his next dream when he was ordained in 1977. At each parish he was assigned to, Father Turner became friends with the local funeral directors, which made it easier for both to deal with loved ones of those who had died.

"We worked together as partners to assist families going through this grief situation," he said.

Final goal

Father Turner was director of Diocesan AIDS Services in 1993 when Mary Coppola, who worked for diocesan Catholic Charities, mentioned HVCC's program in mortuary science. That was the first year HVCC was accepting part-time and evening students for the program, an ideal option for Father Turner, so he and Ms. Coppola entered. They have taken one three-credit course each semester for the past six years, beginning with science courses and ending with arts courses.

While some courses, such as funeral service management, embalming and merchandising, were unique to a mortuary science degree, courses in accounting, sociology and business law also were required, along with chemistry, pathology and anatomy. Father Turner was able to transfer his credits in homiletics, psychology of grief and ethics from the seminary, but he still was amazed at the variety of courses that were required to earn his degree.

"I never assumed it was that extensive," he said. "And yet when you really think about it, you need to know what you're dealing with."

Spiritual connections

One of the most fascinating courses Father Turner took was restorative art, which deals with reconstructing the body of the deceased. He learned, for example, that a person's face measures five widths of his or her eyes across and is divided top to bottom in three symmetrical sections. "God was a great artist," he said. Earning his degree has been "one of the most spiritual journeys because you have to look at life-ending issues," Father Turner said. He recalled looking at a cadaver and thinking, "All the parts are still here. The body doesn't function."

That moment made him realize that while a dead person's brain has stopped working, other parts of the body work after death, such as the circulatory system, which is used in the embalming process.

Mortuary science also examines the ways in which different religious denominations deal with death and how to arrange a funeral in adherence to specific teachings. "All faith expressions are to be respected," he said.

More to do

Father Turner, who graduated with honors, celebrated his achievement with family members and parishioners last weekend, but he still has work to do in becoming a full-fledged funeral director.

On June 9, he will take a six-hour exam administered by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards Inc. It consists of 250 multiple-choice questions in the morning and another 250 in the afternoon. He has been preparing through group study sessions for the past month.

Next, he will spend one year in an apprenticeship at a funeral home. He then will take the New York State mortuary law exam. If he passes, he will be given a license to work as a funeral director.

Priest first

Although he hopes to be licensed someday, Father Turner doesn't want people to get the wrong impression. He has no intention of giving up his full-time duties as a priest, nor will he interfere with the work of local funeral directors. Instead, he wants to complement them and serve as a resource for priests' funerals or at other times when there are specifics that need to be addressed.

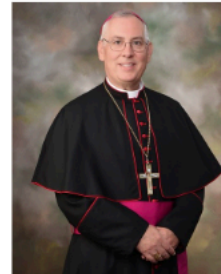
"The advantage I have now is seeing both sides. I deal with people on a pastoral level and a professional level," he said.

On a pastoral level, Father Turner hopes people won't confuse their priest with the funeral director-to-be. "I will never again ask them how they feel, because they'd think I'm looking for business," he joked.

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