

Young Priest Uses Faith as Anchor in Secular World

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By BARBARA SNYDER
In a Vail, Colo., bar during a recent vacation:
She: "What do you do for a living?"

He: "Pray."
He is as likely to be biking around his Cheektowaga parish as administering to the sick. Two days a week he takes a break from early morning masses, teaching religion, preparing sermons and hearing confessions to work out at the Nautilus Fitness Center.

The Rev. Ronald B. Mierzwa is a thoroughly modern priest. This bearded, 30-year-old six footer sees himself as a "professional" single and a man who has a private dimension to his life in addition to his ministry.

In a way he's saying priests are people, too, single people who vacation, go out drinking

with friends, celebrate holidays, and comfortable, kind of like Father Ron. get lonely and need "warm fuzzies" — just like the rest of us.

His office in Our Lady Help of Christians Rectory is warm

A HANDSOME man, he has a passion for Agatha Christie

novels, a warm smile, a quick wit and a refreshing candor.

"People have funny, weird ideas about priests," he said. "They distance you, put you on a pedestal."

Young priests, especially, are shadowed by a host of "shoulds" — he should love kids (he does), he should be enthusiastic (but should remember he's not yet tempered by experience) and he should, somehow, be neuter.

The last one galls him:

Abstaining, he said, does not render him asexual.

"I did not give up being a man because I became a priest," Father Ron said. "There are certain things I do not indulge in, but I am still attracted to people; I still enjoy companionship."

A priest is single, with delicate distinctions. "I am very much a part of the single world in that I am not married," he said thoughtfully. "But I am a priest, and priests are celibate."

There are many paths to being a warm, sensual, intimate, affirmative and receptive human being, he said.

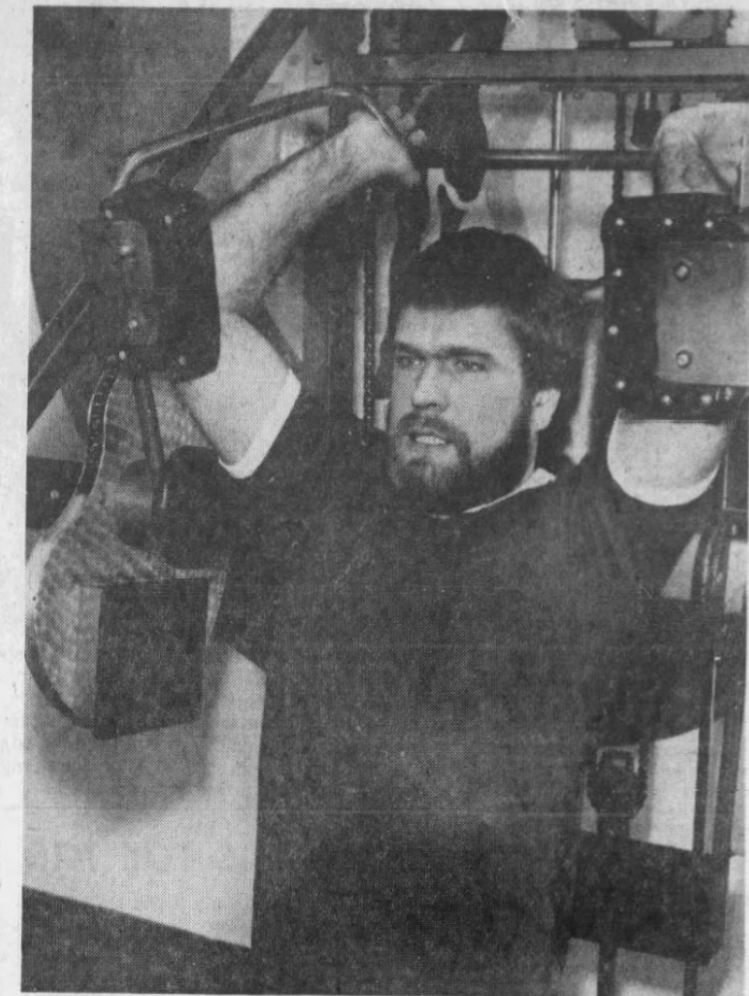
Sharing the momentous occasions of people's lives — a couple's marriage, a baby's baptism, the death of a parent — gives him the opportunity to give and get from lots of people in lots of diverse ways.

Yes, Father Ron has woman friends, some clerical, some not.

And yes, at times he has encountered the bane of the young, good looking priest, the "forbidden fruit" syndrome that seems to make him more attractive to some women.

"IT DOES happen occasionally," he shrugged, but when it does, he faces it head on with a strong — but gentle — "let's sort of cool things."

Studying for the priesthood during the turbulent '60s, Father Ron saw some of his re-



THE REV. RONALD B. Mierzwa takes time off from his pastoral duties to work out twice a week.

spected teachers leave the priesthood for marriage.

He neither condones nor condemns this. He just doesn't see it as an option for himself. Even if priests were allowed to marry someday, he's not sure he would. "Being single gives you a great deal of latitude," he said.

His easygoing attitude toward the priesthood and its sticky issues probably stems from the opportunity to study, at 14, at the Diocesan Preparatory Seminary.

That allowed him to return

home every evening to play Little League baseball, backyard football and join the general shenanigans carried on by a boy with three rough-and-tumble brothers.

"I was a neighborhood kid," he laughed. "I grew up black and blue."

HE ALSO went to the North Tonawanda High School prom. That may not fit neatly into the image of a semiharian, he said, "but I was thrilled. I felt it was an integral part of adolescence."

Some of his problems as a

single are universal — holidays, for example.

Now and then on Friday nights he sits in the rectory "with nothing to do and nobody to do it with" and wonders, "What am I doing here?"

Yet the frantically searching that often mark the secular single world are absent in Father Ron, who uses his faith as an anchor.

And that's a suggestion he would like to pass on to his single counterparts: "I think they could find meaning in deep faith, a faith that could help them survive."

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