



CALLINGS

A NEWSLETTER ABOUT VOCATIONS

Call to religious life is a family affair

By Denise Konkol

To their family, Peter and Marion Etzel are brother and sister. To others, they're father and sister.

As a Sister of the Divine Savior and the president and provincial leader of her religious community, based in the residence on the Divine Savior Holy Angels High School campus, Sr. Marion, 62, answered the call to her vocation when her brother Peter was only 3. Fr. Peter, 51, started thinking seriously about answering his own call to the Jesuit priesthood at age 25. He entered at 30 and was ordained at 41. He now is the pastor of Gesu Parish in downtown Milwaukee.

Although a rarity that a single family would have not one but two members enter religious life, a closer look at the Etzels reveals a family deeply rooted in faith, so perhaps the scenario is not so surprising.

"Faith was important," recalled Sr. Marion. "My dad used to do lots and lots of things to help out in the parish, so did my mom. They both held leadership roles in the parish; the church was very important to them."

As members of St. Leo's and then Mother of Good Counsel in Milwaukee, the Etzels learned, along with their two siblings Ken and Bonnie, the joy received in serving others from their parents, Ray and Vera Etzel. "I just have such wonderful memories," said Sr. Marion. "In the early days, the sisters weren't allowed to drive, so dad would think of things like arranging for the sisters to come with us for a ride during the Christmas holiday for at least

one night to see the pretty lights, the house decorations, the Christmas trees. That gave such incredible joy to our family to make sure the priests and the sisters in our community were honored."

The close affiliation the Etzels had with the religious in their parish planted the seed of vocation in Sr. Marion at a very early age. "I had a unique vocation in that I knew from the time I was very young that I wanted to be a sister. I couldn't wait to be old enough to go and be with the sisters. I saw it as a wonderful adventure and wanted to do it," said Sr. Marion. She joined

the sisters after eighth grade in 1956, residing with them during the school year, and returning home for the summers.

Growing up in a family with a sibling in a religious order was only natural for Fr. Peter who noted, "religious vocation and religious life were part of our family life. Having a religious sister in our family was very natural. You sort of breathe the ambiance and culture of religious life."

Fr. Peter's call did not come for some time. He graduated from UW-Madison and worked in the sports department at the *Milwaukee Journal* before considering religious life. However, he recalled an experience at college, which impacted his views on faith.

"During the Vietnam war protests, I remember seeing priests from the Newman Center in the streets caring for students who had been tear-gassed or beaten up, and that was in 1971. Faith and religion, I realized, wasn't just something you did in church every Sunday, it was out →



PHOTO BY SAMI LUCERO

FR. PETER ETZEL, SJ AND SR. MARION ETZEL, SDS

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in society. Now I would term it ‘faith in action.’”

Fr. Peter’s call evolved first as a parishioner at Gesu who felt the importance of Sunday Mass, as well as attendance during the week.

Then after a breakup with his girlfriend, he felt compelled to step forward and talk with a Jesuit about what his calling might be.

“In the midst of a dark moment in my life, something was stirring,” he recalled. “I don’t believe God caused the breakup, but in the midst of it, something broke through and gave me the courage to go and talk to someone.”

The news wasn’t shared immediately with his parents, according to Fr. Peter. “I couldn’t talk about it for some time – I had a good job, and to risk that? I kept it between a couple of Jesuits and myself, and of course Sr. Marion. I had decided that once I could tell my parents, that would be the official go-ahead.”

“When it dawned on me that this might be happening in my family, I was so excited I couldn’t sleep,” said Sr. Marion. “Just the thought that God would’ve visited our home in this very unique way, not once but twice, that this privilege should be granted to our family – I was just utterly flabbergasted.”

The Etzel family was supportive, and Sr. Marion cited her parents with the

perception of their role as parents to allow all of their children to follow God’s plan for each one of them. “My parents said, ‘We want you to be happy and we’ll support you in anything you want to do,’” said Sr. Marion. “My parents really valued what would be God’s plan for their children.

They would always tell us, ‘Even after we die, we’ll always be your parents and we’ll always pray for you.’ That gave me some insight as to how they saw their privileged role as parents.”

However, Sr. Marion noted not all parents offer the same message to their children who may be wrestling with the call to religious life. “Parents want to control and steer their children to professions or lifestyles that aren’t necessarily God’s plan,” noted Sr. Marion. Fr. Peter added, “Don’t be afraid of the voice that comes from within – pay attention to it and give it a chance,” he advised. “A vocation, if it is a true vocation – that voice won’t go away. That’s how I made my decision. I knew I had to give it a shot, and if it didn’t work out, I always had my profession to fall back on.”

As it turned out, the choices Sr. Marion and Fr. Peter made found fertile ground, and have served to strengthen the roots of their faith, founded years before in their own family tree. **E**

A version of this article first appeared in the *Milwaukee Catholic Herald*.

“Don’t be afraid of the voice that comes from within – pay attention to it and give it a chance.”

– Fr. Peter Etzel, SJ

Novitiate welcomes 5 Wisconsin Province men

ST. PAUL – There will be 21 novices in training this year at the St. Paul Jesuit Novitiate. Five of them will be first-year Wisconsin Province novices who will be joining five returning novices from our Province. The five first-year men are:



◀ **Patrick Douglas**, 29, is an Omaha native and a graduate of Creighton Prep. He moved to St. Paul,

completing a bachelor’s degree in social work and sociology at the University of St. Thomas. He has worked and volunteered in social justice ministries since then, including Holy Rosary Mission in Pine Ridge, South Dakota where he was assigned to be a counselor at Our Lady of Lourdes School in Porcupine. He has also worked in juvenile correction facilities, schools, and non-profit agencies offering therapy (both individual and group) for the victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse. In his free time Pat enjoys “reading, running marathons, napping, and bad ‘80s music” and has an interest in foreign languages.



◀ **Christopher Johnson**, 40, was born in Minneapolis. He received a B.A. from American University in Washington, DC with a major in economics and a secondary focus in an interdisciplinary

studies program covering communications, legal institutions, economics, and government. Until recently, he was an executive recruiter for nine years, the last six for his own St. Paul-based company. Prior to that he was a special assistant to the CEO of the National Association of Chain Drug Stores and served on the executive staff of the Boy Scouts of America. A lector and Eucharistic minister at his parish church, he enjoys reading, sailing and traveling – especially to New York City, Washington, DC, and Burntside Lake in northern Minnesota.



◀ **Michael Lex**, 22, is a native of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin and a graduate of both Marquette University High School and Marquette University in Milwaukee. At MU he earned a B.A. with majors in theology and social philosophy. During

his college years he held a variety of jobs including store clerk, janitor, and campus public safety worker. His other fields of interest include history and psychology. He has lent his singing voice to a liturgical choir and volunteered for Habitat for Humanity. An avid traveler, he has spent time in Ireland and participated in two World Youth Days – Rome in 2000 and Toronto in 2002. His interests included reading and video games. His main personal avocation, however, is the martial arts, which he has studied for 13 years.



◀ **Joseph Miller**, 23, was born in St. Paul, where he graduated from the University of St. Thomas with a B.A. in theology and Catholic studies and a minor in justice and peace studies. Throughout school he pursued interests in the

fine arts, particularly pottery, photography, and technical theater. He also served as assistant to the liturgy director. After graduation Joe worked as a campus minister at Creighton Prep. Twice he participated in the School of America protests in Fort Benning, GA, having already journeyed to Selma, Alabama as part of a college course. Joe learned some Spanish, German and French in high school and college, and retains some reading proficiency in both Spanish and German. He has traveled to Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Italy. Joe’s hobbies are biking, skiing and swimming.

Myths vs. facts about the priesthood

Fr. Warren Sazama, SJ

DIRECTOR OF VOCATIONS – WISCONSIN PROVINCE



Drawing on reliable national survey samples of priests, sociologist Fr. Andrew Greeley, Ph.D., has written a book that punctures a lot of the popular, unflattering myths about the Catholic priesthood in the United States.

Titled *Priests: A Calling In Crisis* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), I think it is worth passing along some of the findings it discusses. They help shed a clearer light on a very timely issue for all Catholics – in fact, for all people interested in overcoming prejudice – and especially for those who are themselves considering a possible priestly vocation.

Much of what has been publicized in the media about Catholic priests is at crosscurrents with my own experiences of priests I know – Jesuits, other religious order priests, and diocesan priests included. Greeley shows how many of the prominent public voices commenting about Catholic priests in the media have based their statements not on fact, but on popular misconceptions, personal bias, and skewed data (for example, anecdotal or very unrepresentative samples such as priests in treatment).

He, on the other hand, taps into the actual life experiences of a broad range of real, live priests. Based on reliable sociological data, Greeley arrives at a number of conclusions that are consistent with my positive experiences of most priests. At the same time, he also addresses a number of legitimate concerns. I offer here a mix of a half dozen of his findings which I believe will give you a more accurate picture of American Catholic priests today.

❶ Priests are among the happiest men in the

world. They say they would become priests again, and life in the priesthood is better than they expected. They score higher in these areas than married Protestant clergy.

❷ The data indicate that priests, on average, are as mature and as capable of the intimacy of warm, deep friendships as married laymen. Moreover, priests are more likely to be satisfied with their work and their lives than are married Protestant clergy.

❸ Priests stay in the priesthood and are happy in ministry because they like their work and doing the things involved with priestly life. They tend to be religious altruists, not just social workers or social activists. While it is difficult for many people today to believe a man can be a happy, fulfilled, and mature human being without a female partner, celibate priests prove that this is not only possible but can also be a very rewarding lifestyle. Of course, those of us who are happy, celibate priests knew this all along.

❹ Most priests are celibate heterosexuals. Approximately one out of six priests is homosexual. Moreover, the vast majority of both hetero- and homosexual priests value their celibate commitment and live it faithfully.

❺ However, not all of what Greeley found in his examination of the research data about priests is flattering. Obviously not all is perfect about American priests and there is definitely room for growth. On the downside, Greeley's examination of the research indicates that too many priests can be insensitive to the laity and out of touch with the feelings and perceptions about their job performance as priests. For example, many Catholic laypeople report dissatisfaction with poor homilies, liturgies, and sub-par performances in pastoral counseling and working with young people. Moreover, Greeley believes that the walls of the clerical culture impede communication between priests and laypeople. While the brotherly bonds and friendships that priests experience among themselves are good, priests need to reach out, listen better to laypeople, and respond more sensitively to their perceptions, feelings, and concerns.

❻ Another negative finding in Greeley's examination of the research data is that priests are generally poor at inviting young, Catholic men to consider the priesthood. Nine out of 10 respondents who expressed some interest in the priesthood had never been approached by a priest on the subject. Greeley reflects that if only a small proportion of those young men had become priests, there would be no shortage of priests today. He also raises an interesting question: if priests are as happy and satisfied in the priesthood as the research data shows them to be, why are they not more actively encouraging vocations? Could it be because they unwittingly buy into the popular negative misconceptions of their calling?

All this depicts a view that shows Catholic priests in America are neither the superheroes of bygone myths when people tended to put them on pedestals, nor the villains that unfortunately much of the popular media broadly paints them as today. Rather they are generally altruistic men who are as mature as their lay married counterparts and who need to be more sensitive and listen better.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this column, Greeley's findings are very consistent with my experiences of my brother priests. In general, I find that most Catholic priests I know are good, happy, caring men. As I observe my experience of my married, lay friends and my brother priests, I see both groups having many wonderful qualities as well as limitations.

When I look at fellow priests, I see some true saints – generous, self-sacrificing, loving, holy men who inspire me. Certainly some are warmer and more pleasant than others and some are better at what they do, which is true in every walk of life. But by and large, most are good people who are neither obvious saints nor outrageous sinners. They do much good in the world in often ordinary ways. They have simultaneous generous qualities and blind spots.

They are, in a word, human. **G**



◀ **Jeremy Priest**, 28, was born and raised in Traverse City, Michigan. He enlisted in the Navy and served 14 months, mostly in Sardinia, Italy and partly in Navy Chaplain School. He later earned a B.A. in

theology from Marquette University where he was a founding member of Catholic Outreach and founder of the on-campus St. Robert Bellarmine Society chapter. He was studying to be a diocesan priest when his discernment process led him to the Society of Jesus. His interests include history, scripture, literature and the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. He participated in World Youth Day 1995 in the Philippines and says he has worked at “everything from bagging groceries to busing tables,” including door-to-door book sales, coaching high school football, cemetery lawn care, and bookstore management. **E**

9 men pronounce first vows in St. Paul

Three Wisconsin Province Jesuits were among nine second-year novices pronouncing first vows at the Church of St. Luke in August. All nine studied for two years at the St. Paul Jesuit Novitiate, which is shared by three provinces – Upper Canada (UC), Missouri (MO), and Wisconsin (WI). **E**



(FRONT ROW FROM LEFT) GERARD RYAN, SJ (UC); JOSELITO FORNIER, SJ (UC); PADDY GILGER, SJ (WI). REAR ROWS FROM LEFT: JOE HOOVER, SJ (WI); NELSON PALACIO, SJ (UC); DAN KELLY, SJ (UC); BEN BOCHER, SJ (WI); TREVOR SCOTT, SJ (UC); AND CHRIS SCHROEDER, SJ (MO).

For more vows photos go to www.jesuitswisprov.org

8 candidates try out Jesuit lifestyle

Eight candidates for the Jesuits recently took part in the Six Weeks a Jesuit program held in Milwaukee and Chicago from mid-June into early August. The program is designed to give the men a taste of Jesuit life by living in a Jesuit community and working in a Jesuit-related ministry during the summer. The experience helps them determine if becoming a Jesuit



might be right for them. All the candidates said the program was a very positive experience that was helpful in clarifying their vocational discernment process. **E**

UP COMING EVENTS

OCT 22 - 24

COME AND SEE WEEKEND at the Jesuit House of Studies at Loyola U. in Chicago. This weekend is for all inquirers interested in learning more about Jesuit life and training and in getting to meet young Jesuits in training. We start with a 5 p.m. Mass on Friday and end with lunch on Sunday.

DEC 18 - 22

COME AND SEE DISCERNMENT RETREAT at Creighton University in Omaha, NE. This retreat starts with Mass and dinner at 5 p.m. Saturday and ends with lunch on Wednesday. (Date is right after semester exams for many colleges.) The first day is the “Come and See” part where young Jesuits in training share their vocation stories and talk about Jesuit life and the vocational discernment process. The rest of the retreat (from after dinner on Saturday through lunch on Wednesday) is a silent, individually-directed prayer discernment retreat. You will meet with your Jesuit director daily, spending most of the retreat in prayerful silence. There will be daily morning and evening prayer, daily Mass, faith sharing, and a Reconciliation service.

FEB 18 - 21

DISCERNMENT RETREAT at the Jesuit Retreat House near Denver, CO. This retreat is at our retreat house in the beautiful foothills of the Rocky Mountains over the long Presidents’ Day Weekend. It starts on Friday afternoon and ends with lunch on Monday. This is a silent, prayer retreat on which you will have daily conversations with a young Jesuit in training and includes presentations on Jesuit life. This is a busy ski weekend in the area, so make airline reservations early.

Ongoing Vocation Discernment Groups

We have two discernment groups for men considering the Jesuits:

Milwaukee group

Contact Fr. Jim Flaherty, SJ at Marquette University (414) 288.5000 or james.flaherty@marquette.edu

Omaha group

Contact Fr. Dick Hauser, SJ at Creighton University (402) 280-3010 or hausersj@creighton.edu

There is no charge for these events, and we are happy to help with travel costs to and from these events if needed. Please contact Fr. Sazama, SJ.



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