

FR. BOB STIEFVATER:
AN ADVENTUROUS PRIESTHOOD

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As a young priest, vocations director Fr. Bob Stiefvater never anticipated the variety of challenges he would undertake. Today, he's fluent in Spanish, a language he didn't speak until five years after his ordination. He's served as a missionary, pastor and community organizer, and he's seen more of the archdiocese than perhaps anyone else, except the bishops.

Ironically, the vocations director had once given up on the priesthood after spending his high school and college years with the Redemptorists. It was a Jewish psychiatrist, his boss at the mental health hospital where he worked, who encouraged Fr. Stiefvater to reconsider the priesthood. "I thought he was very insightful," says Fr. Stiefvater. "And he did his follow up."

While his priesthood has been a steady supply of adventures, Fr. Stiefvater has remained grounded in his faith and supported by his peers. Ordained in 1977, he is one of eight classmates who have had season tickets to the Milwaukee Repertory Theater together for more than 26 years.

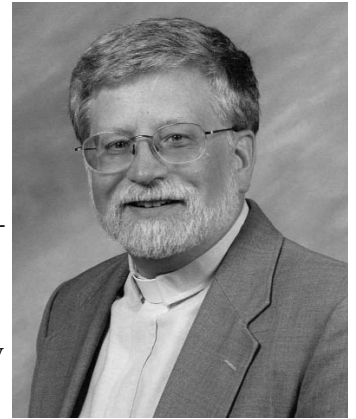
For more than 20 years, he has also belonged to a Jesus-Caritas priest support group, which meets monthly to pray and support each other. These friends and colleagues, along with daily Mass and prayer, have helped Fr. Stiefvater be ready for anything.

One of his biggest adventures came early in his priesthood, when he volunteered to serve in the Dominican Republic. He learned to speak Spanish during his three plus years there, became adept at community organizing and learned to be pastor of a neighborhood, not just a parish. Those skills set the tone for his priesthood for many years to come.

After his return to the United States, Fr. Stiefvater's first pastorate was at Holy Trinity/Our Lady of Guadalupe. Now bilingual and experienced in bringing a community together, he still had much to learn from his new parish.

Accustomed to animated liturgical celebrations of the Dominican Republic, Fr.

Stiefvater tried to rev up his more reserved congregation at his first Mass. "This little old lady came up to me after Mass and said, 'Father, we're Mexican here. We don't do that. If you want to do that, go to St. Patrick's, that's the Puerto Rican parish,'" he remembers with a laugh. "So I decided I really needed to understand the Mexican culture."



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That summer, Fr. Stiefvater traveled to Mexico with a parishioner family and spent five weeks working as a substitute priest and traveling in order to better understand the culture and his parishioners back home.

Even as a pastor, he got out to meet the people of his parish. "I tried during my first year to go and visit every single business in the area," Fr. Stiefvater recalls. "I tried every summer to either walk or ride my motorcycle down every alley. That's where all the action was."

Among other efforts, he became a charter member of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin. Maria Monreal-Cameron, president and CEO of the HCCW, says Fr. Stiefvater is still remembered well.

"He really is a man of the cloth," says Monreal-Cameron. "Fr. Bob is, and will

always be, one of my all-time heroes. He embraced our culture and traditions and can communicate with all types of people. He jumps in and just embraces the culture and its people.”

From parish priest, Fr. Stiefvater took on a completely new ministry – community organizer in the Hispanic community in Walworth County. That assignment came about when the pastors there discovered there were close to 2,000 Hispanics in the county, and they weren’t being served by any of the parishes. One of the pastors asked Fr. Stiefvater for advice on how to address the situation.

Fr. Stiefvater wrote a letter to the pastor recommending that instead of creating a new parish, the focus should be on integrating the Hispanic families into existing parishes. Unbeknownst to him, Fr. Stiefvater’s letter was passed on to the Priests’ Placement Board and treated as his application for a new post.

To face his newest challenge, Fr. Stiefvater upgraded his motorcycle and set up an office at the six parishes, each in a different city. Armed with a cell phone and laptop computer, he traveled throughout Walworth County, spending one day a week at each of the parishes and celebrating Spanish or bilingual Mass in three of the parishes on the weekends.

After three years in Walworth County, Fr. Stiefvater received another new challenge – vocations director for the Archdiocese. “There was such a negative sense about recruitment of seminarians at the time,” Fr. Stiefvater remembers. “It was considered such an impossible task, and I thought, ‘It’s our attitude that’s killing us.’”

In 1997, during his first year as vocations director, Fr. Stiefvater worked with a public relations person to put together a detailed marketing plan, which they followed scrupulously for three years. It included radio advertis-

ing, billboards and professional, full-color brochures and materials aimed at key audiences. Fr. Stiefvater also set an ambitious goal – recruiting 50 seminarians in five years. He wanted to stretch everyone and put people in a positive mindset.

While he hasn’t reached that goal, his efforts have significantly increased the number of seminarians. He’s helped create vocations teams at parishes and he regularly calls pastors to ask for names of possible candidates for the priesthood. He’s even enlisted the help of retired priests to make those calls to pastors.



Fr. Stiefvater makes it his personal mission to travel to spread the word about vocations.

“He loves the priesthood,” says Fr. Michael Witczak, rector of Saint Francis Seminary and Fr. Stiefvater’s classmate. “He wants to do whatever he can to promote this work and this life.”

As with his previous assignments, Fr. Stiefvater makes it his personal mission to travel to spread the word about vocations. He estimates he’s visited more than 190 of the archdiocese’s 219 parishes. In 2003, he offered 148 Masses in 42 parishes.

“I went to every single district last year alone, giving close to 80 vocations talks to different audiences. That just

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wasn’t done before,” Fr. Stiefvater says. “In the fall of every year, from Labor Day to the first Sunday of Advent, I camp out in a different region of the archdiocese.”

During a regional visit, Fr. Stiefvater lives in a local rectory and stays in touch with his office through cell phone and laptop. He gives talks to local school children, offers Mass, preaches about vocations, and talks with the priests about who they think might be good vocations candidates.

Jerry Topczewski, administrative assistant to Archbishop Dolan, says Fr. Stiefvater’s creativity knows no limits. In fact, he says, Fr. Stiefvater’s marketing plan has been a model for other dioceses and religions.

“He has gone anywhere and done anything possible to talk about vocations,” says Topczewski. “He’s tireless in his commitment to that goal. Because of Fr. Bob, we have the first real network of vocation ministries at the parishes.”

Fr. Stiefvater finds his vocations work immensely rewarding. “I’ve been in this job long enough now that we’re ordaining priests that I invited in. I’m very proud of them and what they’re doing in the archdiocese.”

Looking back, Fr. Stiefvater says, “If I were asked what my priesthood would be like, it would not have looked at all like this. It has been really exciting work.”

So many men have dedicated their lives in service to God and His people in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee that we cannot adequately recognize all their good works. Still, we want to share with you stories of some men whose contribution, sacrifice, vision and commitment may otherwise go unnoticed or underappreciated. Through this series, *IN HIS FOOTSTEPS*, we profile some of those clergy who have enriched us as Catholics and have helped shape our faith community and our world. *IN HIS FOOTSTEPS* installments also are available at www.archmil.org. Your feedback is welcome. Send your comments to Kathleen Hohl at hohlk@archmil.org or 414-769-3453.