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## FR. PATRICK HEPPE: FACILITATOR OF CONSENSUS

Fr. Pat Heppe jokes about his summer job years ago delivering bait from Canada to shops around Milwaukee. “I was an international night crawler hauler,” he says laughing. He jokes, too, that he went to DeSales Seminary High School because his hometown Slinger High School didn’t have a swimming pool. He’s got a great sense of humor but his sense of faith is even stronger.

Now pastor moderator at Holy Family Parish in Fond du Lac, Fr. Heppe says he first thought about the priesthood in junior high when one of the nuns put a seminary brochure on his desk. He says growing up on a farm, plus the many jobs he had over the years, all helped him discern his vocation. In addition to the bait job, he worked in a gas station, as assistant house manager for the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, in the office of Catholic Family Life Insurance, and as an orderly in the psychiatric department of Lutheran Hospital. “Those are all kind of discerning experiences and I enjoyed them a lot,” Fr. Heppe recalls.

Ordained in 1977, Fr. Heppe has been a parish priest for much of his career, and finds it to be his calling. After ordination, he spent six years at St. Peter Claver Parish in Sheboygan. From there, he worked for Saint Francis Seminary as vocations director for “Call to Ministry,” a program for high school students. For four years, he traveled all over the archdiocese and led retreats for high school students.

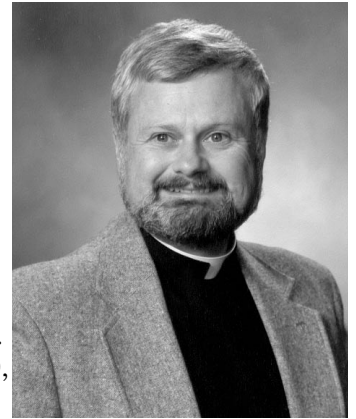
“But I’m a parish priest at heart,” says Fr. Heppe. “I missed parish life.” He spent the next two and a half years as associate pastor of Our Lady of Good Hope Parish in Milwaukee; then the priest placement board suggested St. Joseph Parish in Fond du Lac for his first pastorate.

Fr. Heppe remembers the priest from the placement board telling him, “I’d like you to go to St. Joe’s because it’s you. It’s got your gifts and talents.” And it was a great match, says Fr. Heppe. “They were interested in all the same things I was interested in – lay ministry; prayer and worship;

getting people involved; women in ministry – it was just great.”

He joined St. Joe’s in 1989, and in 2000, all six

Catholic parishes in Fond du Lac merged into one – Holy Family Parish. It was not an easy process, and it most definitely took a team effort. The whole process was more than a decade in the making.



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His first day in Fond du Lac was also the first meeting of a committee looking at collaboration among the schools. That process led to the creation of the Fond du Lac Area Catholic Education System (FACES) three years later, which oversaw all of the Catholic elementary schools in Fond du Lac.

“Their focus was quality Catholic education, and they wanted to do it better,” Fr. Heppe says. “It was a rough beginning. We went through system administrators like water. But the teachers never missed a step and the parents were thrilled to death.”

Through the FACES process came an effort to look at parish collaboration. Fr. Heppe says the people involved had a retreat one Sunday, without the priests, and each small discussion group picked coming together as one parish as their first or second choice.

There was hesitation at first, and things have been rough at times, but Fr. Heppe is pleased with the result. He sees benefits, such as more resources to do things they were previously unable to do.

“We have a parish manager who takes care of day to day operations like it’s never been done before,” Fr. Heppe says. “We have a director of social ministry, a pastoral associate, a youth minister, and a director of stewardship, which we never had before.”

For example, Fr. Heppe points to the parish’s work in prisons and nursing homes. “We’re mentoring inmates in prisons. Our nursing homes are able to have liturgy every other week. We have a communion service in every nursing home and every community based residential facility. Those are things that we could never do.” He also points to sister relationships with parishes in Nicaragua and Chicago as examples of things they couldn’t have done before the merger.

Ellen Mercer, a parishioner at Holy Family, says Fr. Heppe’s approachability and openness benefit the faith com-

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Mrs. Mercer credits Fr. Heppe with making the merger process a little smoother. “Change is difficult, even under the best circumstances. Because he is a collaborator and sensitive to what others are going through, the merger was a much less painful process for me than it could have been.”

While the merged parish still faces difficult, painful decisions about closing and replacing church buildings, Fr. Heppe is optimistic about the future. He’s confident parishioners will “work together to make the Gospel message alive and well in the best possible way they can.”

Fr. Michael Witczak, rector at Saint Francis Seminary and a classmate of Fr. Heppe, says, “He’s a real people person, full of energy and enthusiasm and creativity. He has the ability to be really positive about what’s going on. His work in Fond du Lac has been an excellent example of his ability to paint a positive vision and bring people together to accomplish that vision.”

Fr. Heppe’s enthusiasm seems to come from his love for the people of God. He says that Sunday liturgy gives him the greatest sense of satisfaction as a priest. “It’s energizing, it’s inspirational, and it’s uplifting. It’s without a doubt one of the neatest things I do as a priest. All the sacraments have a certain grace, but there’s a whole grace of ordination that puts you in the right place at the right time to say the right thing, and you’ve got to let God work through you.”

Vocations director Fr. Bob Stiefvater, another classmate of Fr. Heppe, says of his friend, “He’s the son of a politi-

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cian and he’s got it in his blood. He’s very good at getting people to work together.” The friends are two of eight classmates who have had season tickets to the Milwaukee Repertory Theater together for more than 26 years. “Pat keeps that going. He takes the initiative,” says Fr. Stiefvater. “We joke about him being the bishop of Fond du Lac, and if anybody in our class were to become a bishop, it ought to be him.”

Fr. Heppe says people have asked why he became a priest. “But the more important question,” he stresses, “is why do you stay a priest? The staying has to do with the message of Jesus and the people of God coming together. The message Jesus gave us 2,000 years ago is even more important today. It’s a privilege and an honor to be able to reflect on that message with the people of God.”

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](http://www.archmil.org). Your feedback is welcome. Send your comments to Kathleen Hohl at [hohlk@archmil.org](mailto:hohlk@archmil.org) or 414-769-3453.