

FR. CHARLIE WESTER –
A LIFE OF SERVICE

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Fr. Charlie Wester has been a priest for 45 years and served eight parishes in communities from West Bend to Racine – and he wouldn't trade a minute of it. "I always feel that I'm on the receiving end, that I'm getting more than I'm giving," says the pastor of St. Mary Parish in Mayville and St. Andrew Parish in Leroy.

He says he finds true inspiration in being able to help people and invite them into a relationship with the Lord. "The most rewarding experience is when people invite you into the depths of their lives and allow you a glimpse of how God is working through them," says Fr. Wester.

Noreen Welte, director of the Office of Parish Councils and Planning for the archdiocese, describes Father Wester as "one of the most positive priests out there. He has a terrific sense of humor. He's very open to change – he just grows with it and that has served him really well."

Fr. Wester credits his decision to become a priest to his family. He grew up in a strong, faith-filled environment. "It was always promoted in our home as a possibility. As a kid I'd say, 'Someday, I want to be a priest.' And that was affirmed," he explains.

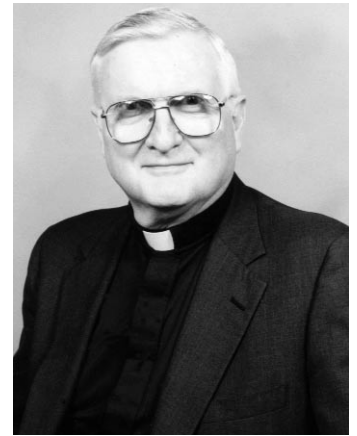
He attended the seminary for high school and college and he remembers in his sophomore year, his dad asked him an important question that demonstrated his family's love and support "He asked me, 'Are you sure you want to do this? Because we wouldn't want you to do anything if that wasn't what you felt called to do.'" Fr. Wester's answer was "yes," one that he hasn't wavered from since.

As a student, Fr. Wester says, one teacher stood out as an inspiration for him. Fr. John Beix, who taught history, was active in the pre-Vatican II Catholic Action movement. The movement was meant to encourage lay people to participate in the work of the hierarchy of the Church.

"He challenged us to begin thinking about social issues and the role of lay people," remembers Fr. Wester. "He had

a tremendous influence on my outlook and view of the Church and the meaning of Church."

Fr. Wester says his experience with Fr. Beix and Catholic Action made his transition to Vatican II much easier. "It seemed so natural," Fr. Wester explains.



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Early in his career, Fr. Wester saw the introduction of Vatican II while serving at a parish in West Bend. "I really appreciate Vatican II for opening up the Word of God, the Scriptures to us. I appreciate the whole idea of the introduction of the laity into the life of the Church," he says.

He then served in Delavan for a time. In the late 1960s, at the urging of Fr. Bob McCormick, his pastor, he took an assignment in campus ministry in Whitewater. That, he says, was the most exciting time of his priesthood because so much was going on – the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, among others.

"It was his challenge to me that led me to campus ministry," recalls Fr. Wester. "He said, 'I think you're getting sort of bored here. I'm not trying to get rid of you.' He helped me to make that decision and he was a very wonderful role model."

Fr. Wester says being on the Whitewater campus presented “an exciting, rewarding, wonderful opportunity to build a whole different kind of faith community. It was a suitcase campus, but we had three campus Masses with 900 to 1,000 people every weekend.”

After close to eight years on campus, Fr. Wester moved to St. Catherine Parish in Milwaukee as an associate pastor, then took his first pastorate at St. Joseph Parish in Waukesha. He later served at Holy Redeemer in Milwaukee and St. Edward in Racine before taking his current pastorate at St. Mary in Mayville in 1993. Five years later, he added St. Andrew in nearby Leroy to his duties as pastor.

“The merging of the parishes with one pastor went smooth as silk,” says Deacon Willis Heideman, administrative/pastoral assistant at St. Mary’s. “He moved his residence out to St. Andrew’s to let them know he was there.”

Deacon Heideman says Fr. Wester is approachable and willing to share responsibility, which makes him stand out as a leader. “He gives responsibility and then lets people accomplish the task. He truly loves people and cares for people. He is available to people and opens himself up to them.”

The deacon, along with many others, says Fr. Wester is a gifted homilist. “He’s very human, like everybody else, and he uses illustrations from his own life and how he faces the same temptations everybody else does.”

St. Mary’s Parish secretary, Mary Jo Bartelt, says that people come from miles around to hear Fr. Wester’s homilies. “One parishioner says that if it weren’t for Fr. Charlie’s homilies, her husband would not have become a Catholic. People who have visitors in town will make sure they have Fr. Charlie for Mass so their guests can hear his homilies.”

Fr. Bill Burkert, pastor of St. Roman Parish in Milwaukee, agrees. “He’s a fantastic homilist and an easy going guy. He’s one of the friendliest people you’d ever want to meet. He always spoke in a way people could relate to.” Fr. Burkert served as associate pastor at St. Edward’s in Racine while Fr. Wester was pastor there. “He’s truly collaborative. He was so inclusive about the responsibilities of being a parish priest,” Fr. Burkert recalls.

Kyle Freund, a former parishioner and current Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, remembers Fr. Wester’s homilies well. “He was one of the first priests I knew who really gave homilies that I wanted to take home. Fr. Charlie’s enthusiasm and the way he addressed the topics really brought life to the community.”

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“I certainly think the priesthood has given me a wonderful opportunity to participate in all kinds of ministries,” Fr. Wester says. “My joy is preaching. I find that to be the most exciting part of my ministry – that and presiding over the Eucharist. Those are my two greatest joys.”

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Another source of inspiration for Fr. Wester is Jesus-Caritas, his priest support group. He’s been in a group since he served at Holy Redeemer in the 1980s. The group meets monthly “to reflect on the Word in our lives and to share our life experience in the light of the Gospel. It offers both support and challenge,” says Fr. Wester.

The group members challenge each other and ask how they are living out their faith or if they’re living a balanced life. “That’s a powerful part of my faith life.”

As he starts his eleventh year in Mayville, Fr. Wester says he might consider retiring next year, but he’s got such a wonderful staff, it would be a tough decision. “If you can develop a really strong pastoral team where people feel they can have a say in what happens and have responsibility, that’s good.” He adds that his staff and the volunteers are gifts that give the parish its vibrance.

“We’re keeping him, in case he’s thinking of retiring,” says Bartelt. “He’s eager and enthusiastic, and he’s always moving. He’s really easy to work with, he helps a lot of families, and gives generously to both churches. He’s the real, genuine article!”

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.