The Vocation Office of the Diocese of Pittsburgh Marks 70 Years
Rev. Michael R. Ackerman

This past January the Vocation Office of the Diocese of Pittsburgh marked its 70th anniversary. According to The Pittsburgh Catholic, on January 29, 1948, Father Ferris J. Guay was appointed the first director of vocations by Bishop Hugh C. Boyle. Father Guay was tasked to implement a program fostering vocations to the priesthood for the diocese while maintaining his responsibilities as parochial vicar at St. Brendan Church in Braddock. The initial approach to this endeavor involved a two-pronged effort. Guay was to be the “recruiter,” responsible for individual meetings with prospective seminarians and for reporting to the bishop. He was also the liaison to the newly established Diocesan Vocations Committee, which included members of the religious communities that served the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Father Thomas J. Quigley, the diocesan superintendent of schools, was responsible for engaging elementary and secondary schools in classes, liturgical celebrations, and appropriate means for reflecting on God’s call.

While the idea of having a specific vocations office was emerging around the country, the idea of the need to promote vocations was certainly not new. Pope Pius XI in his 1935 encyclical, Ad Catholici Sacerdotii (On the Catholic Priesthood), vehemently stressed that the promotion of vocations was paramount to the survival of priesthood. Later that year, the Serra Club was founded in Seattle, Washington, to promote vocations and vocations awareness, and Serra International was founded in 1938. Pope Pius XII continued the vision of his predecessor and established the Pontifical Work for Priestly Vocations in 1941.

Buoyed by the return to peacetime and a burgeoning school population numbering close to 150,000 students in over 200 Catholic grade schools and 54 high schools in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the conditions were ripe for vocation promotion. Father Guay took to his task with enthusiasm. Aside from traveling to parishes and promoting membership in the Serra Club, which began in Pittsburgh in 1943, the highlight of vocation promotion was the April Vocation Month celebration. According to archives in the Pittsburgh Catholic, some 3,000 gathered for a Holy Hour for Vocations with Bishop John F. Dearden at St. Paul Cathedral in 1955.

Following the sudden death of then-Monsignor Ferris Guay on February 14, 1958 at the age of 43, the role of vocation director
passed to Father Joseph H. Knorr, then the vocation assistant. Father Knorr, a native of Resurrection Parish in Brookline and ordained in 1956, continued much of the work that he had undertaken with Monsignor Guay. The April Vocations Month Holy Hour remained as the major centerpiece of the vocation effort. Knorr also asked seminarians to contribute articles and reflections on priesthood for the Pittsburgh Catholic, including one by a student at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Donald Wuerl (later Cardinal Wuerl of Washington, D.C.), that was published in April 1962. On December 24, 1964, Father Knorr was reassigned by Bishop John J. Wright to a new position as the diocesan director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and the Catholic Missionary Aid Society. His replacement was Father Hugh M. Gloninger, then assistant at St. Bernard Parish in Mt. Lebanon, who would hold the title of Vocation Director until June 1, 1971.

During Father Gloninger’s time as vocation director, the Second Vatican Council enacted two documents that were to have a profound influence on the formation of priests: *Presbyterorum Ordinis (On the Ministry and Life of Priests)* on December 7, 1965, and *Optatam Totius (Decree on the Training of Priests)* on October 28, 1965. Both documents stressed the need for holiness and piety in the formation of priests, the importance of family life for fostering vocations, and the need for excellent seminary training both for academic and pastoral needs. In light of this, Bishop Wright, who had attended Vatican II and been involved in crafting much of the aforementioned documents, opened Pittsburgh’s minor seminary, St. Paul Seminary, on the grounds of the former St. Paul’s Orphanage in August 1965. From this point forward, the vocation director’s mission shifted toward recruiting men to St. Paul’s Orphanage in August 1965. From this point forward, the vocation director’s mission shifted toward recruiting men to St. Paul Seminary. Father Clarke began to use mass media in innovative ways to promote vocations, and sponsored a number of ads on WTAE and KDKA radio to highlight priesthood and the need for men to respond to God’s call. He also established the “Come and See” weekend at St. Paul Seminary, and sponsored open houses at St. Paul’s to encourage men to explore the possibility of priesthood and service to the Church. Father Clarke’s simple approach to vocation was highlighted well by an October 2, 1987 article in the Pittsburgh Catholic on how to promote vocation awareness. He stated, “I tell them [young people] that as baptized Christian men and women they already do have a vocation. They should be responding to it now, where they are in life.”

Father Clarke served as director until October 28, 1991, when Father Edward J. Burns assumed the title. Father Burns (now bishop of Dallas, Texas) has the distinction of serving as vocation director on two occasions, from 1991 until 1997 while he was successively vice rector and then rector of St. Paul Seminary, and then again as rector of St. Paul’s from August 18, 2008 until March 9, 2009 when he departed to become the bishop of Juneau, Alaska. Father Burns continued many of the practices of Father
Bob Clarke’s time, but he also added his own touch as well. Father Burns pushed parishes to promote the 31 Club, an effort of Serra International to promote vocations, and made an effort to encourage men of all backgrounds to consider if their life was fulfilling. Although the numbers at St. Paul Seminary plateaued at around a dozen men, Burns emphasized the quality over the quantity of applicants and seminarians.

On October 27, 1997, Father David J. Bonnar became the rector of St. Paul Seminary while simultaneously being appointed by Bishop Donald Wuerl as the Director of Pre-Ordination Formation and Director of Priestly Vocations. Father Bonnar implemented some innovative ideas including vocation commercials on KDKA that aired during football games as well as throughout the course of regular broadcasts, and the seminary’s first website. He promoted the idea that every parish have a vocation council which would serve a Diocesan Vocation Council. He advocated Sunday parish visits for seminarians to parishes, and he even established poster contests in the parishes and deaneries to promote interest in priesthood and religious life.

Following Father Bonnar’s tenure, the Diocese of Pittsburgh turned to a co-director model for vocations and promoted Father Thomas J. Burke and Father Thomas A. Sparacino to the Office of Vocations on October 7, 2002. The approach of the Burke–Sparacino era mirrored the early years of the office. Father Sparacino was tasked with developing high school programs and visiting Catholic schools and youth groups, while Father Burke was given college and post-college ministry. The affiliate program, gatherings such as Theology on Tap, Young Adult Holy Hours, and Adoration, and even retreat experiences encompassed what was a holistic approach to vocation awareness. Sparacino and Burke worked in conjunction with Father James A. Wehner, the rector of St. Paul Seminary, who succeeded them as vocation director for six months, from February 4, 2008 until August 18, 2008.

After the brief interim return of then-Monsignor Edward Burns to the Office of Vocations, the role of director passed to Father Matthew R. McClain on April 20, 2009. Father McClain served in the office for a brief time, but was well suited for the task due to his subtle humor, dynamic homilies, and pastoral parish visits.

On March 9, 2010, Father Joseph M. Freedy became Director of Priestly Vocations. Freedy, a former college quarterback, used his athletic ability to institute Quo Vadis Days in the diocese in 2012 – a four-day camp focused on priesthood, fraternity, sports, and sacraments. He also effectively branded the office using the domain name, PGHPriest.com, which permitted dynamic content, videos, and communication to be established for a mobile, fast-paced society. Other initiatives accomplished under Freedy’s leadership include the Vocation Conference “Called by Name,” a College Christmas Discernment Retreat, a high school silent retreat, and a renewed vigor for high school retreats and workshops on prayer. After seven years, Father Freedy left the Office of Vocations, and Father Michael R. Ackerman assumed the position on May 30, 2017, which he currently holds.

The Office of Priestly Vocations, while changing its strategy, has never changed its approach to vocation. It is quite simply to allow men to encounter the living God and his plan for their lives. Although society has become hectic and focused on the immediate, there is no substitute for spending time in prayer, adoration, and reflection on God’s purpose for us. Future events for the office include vocation retreats and workshops, parish visits with seminarians, vocation conferences and fairs, and the continued development of online and media resources to meet the growing needs of the diocese, and those who consider a priestly vocation. The number of priestly vocations continues to be an issue for our diocese, and others across the United States, but the quality of applicants has never been higher. The priority will be, as it always has, to remind people of their Baptismal call to serve God and the Church, and to allow men to ask the question of how they can serve God. This has sustained our diocese for 70 years, and with God’s help it will continue to do so.

Endnotes:

1 “Father Guay Named Vocation Director,” The Pittsburgh Catholic, January 29, 1948, 1.
2 The encyclical is available at the Vatican website, accessed August 10, 2018: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19351220_ad-catholicici-sacerdotii.html.
3 In 1950, Bishop Boyle directed that April be devoted to “a very special promotion of vocations to the priesthood and religious life” with a Holy Hour for Vocations conducted on “Vocation Sunday” at St. Paul Cathedral. Father Guay announced that priests and sisters would visit parish schools to promote vocations. “Vocation Month” to be Observed,” The Pittsburgh Catholic, March 30, 1950, 1.
4 “3000 Jam Cathedral for Vocation Holy Hour,” The Pittsburgh Catholic, April 28, 1953, 1.
5 “When Do Seminarians See the Light?,” Pittsburgh Catholic, April 12, 1962, 8. The future cardinal was then a Basselin Scholar at the Theological College, the national seminary administered by the Sulpicians and affiliated with the Catholic University of America.
8 Daniel Roos, “The Laity Also Have Vocations,” Pittsburgh Catholic, April 19, 1962, 12.