

Priests share their stories of hearing vocation call later in life

By LINDA BEHRENS
Contributing writer

At age 54, Father Steven Pautler was called to priesthood "later in life."

"I was always a service-type person," Father Pautler says.

He worked 32 years for Xerox Corporation. He started fixing copiers, eventually becoming a senior customer service engineer.

"I could always fix the copiers," he says, "but I had to fix the people, too, so they would be happy with my service."

Father Pautler says he felt called to priesthood, even when he was young. He was drawn to it. He was always active in the church and liked to assist at Mass being a server or lector. He was involved in high school and after school, including serving on councils and Knights of Columbus.

"You get active, go off to college, get offered a job," he says. "All of this prepared me for what God called me to do in my later years in life."

In 2004, he entered the permanent diaconate program and was ordained a permanent deacon in 2008. He served 10 years through his hometown parish, St. Boniface Catholic Church in Evansville.

"I enjoyed being a deacon in my parish. I also was a driver for Bishop Edward Braxton and visited many parishes and got a broader scope of the diocese," Father Pautler says.

"I felt comfortable in my life," he says. "I went to the same church, had the same job for 32 years. I bought my childhood home and lived in my same community."

In 2014, he felt things changing at his job.

"I thought, 'Not today, God, but someday,' in the back of my mind."

Meanwhile, he called the vocations office for the Diocese of Belleville and spoke with Father Nicholas Junker, who was the vocations director at that time.

In 2014 and 2015, they visited Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, which offers programs for older vocations.

In 2015, on the Monday of



Speaking on the topic of late-in-life vocations at the Serra Club's Regional Conference in October were Fr. Steven Pautler, Fr. Carl Schrage, Deacon Steve Kramer, and Fr. Joel Seipp. (Submitted photo)

Holy Week, he received a call from Xerox that his team was being outsourced. He was 54 and took early retirement.

"I went to Saint Meinrad monastery in Indiana for a week-long silent retreat," Father Pautler says. "I talked to God and asked God what he wanted me to do."

He explains, "I really didn't get an answer and went home indecisive."

That week at Sunday Mass at St. Boniface, his second-grade teacher and cousin, Teletia Pautler, was there, sitting in the front row.

"I talked with her, telling her what I was thinking," Father Pautler says. "She looked at me, her finger in the air, and said, 'I always knew, even when you were in first or second grade, you would be a priest someday. What took you so long?'"

He adds, "It was so heartwarming, getting that final call from someone who taught me about faith, religion and life."

In 2015 at age 54, Father Pautler entered the seminary at Sacred Heart. Fathers Carl

Schrage and Joel Seipp were in his class.

Because he previously was ordained a permanent deacon, his formation to become a priest was shorter. He was ordained a priest at age 58 on May 18, 2018, by Bishop Braxton.

Father Pautler was assigned to the Cathedral of St. Peter in Belleville as a parochial vicar for 18 months.

Today he is the pastor at St. Mary in Centralia and St. Lawrence in Sandoval.

"Every day, I pray and thank God for calling me to do this," Father Pautler says. "For someone my age, this just proves what a wonderful, marvelous God we have, that he can call someone in the last quarter of their life to serve as a priest. It just awes me."

He adds, "There are different ways to be called to a religious vocation. Each individual has their own unique and wonderful story."

Later in life vocations

Fathers Pautler, Schrage and Seipp, classmates at Sacred

Heart Seminary and School of Theology, presented a panel discussion at the Serra USA Central Region Convention "Journey of Faith: The Call and the Journey" on Oct. 8 at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville.

Their talk, Later-in-Life Vocations, also included Deacon Steve Kramer, director of recruitment, director of homiletics and associate professor of pastoral studies at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology.

Sacred Heart Seminary considers a mature vocation when the person is over the age of 30.

"A vocation is something God calls us to in a very specific manner," Deacon Kramer says. "You know when God is calling you because you are moved in a particular area, whatever it might be."

He adds, "Every person has their own story when God knocked them on the head and said this is where I want you to be. The question is whether or not you want to answer that call."

The school recently received a \$1 million Lily Pathways Grant, which allows them to offer specialty tracks to meet the needs of the bishops they serve around the country and Canada.

There are two seminarians from the Diocese of Belleville currently studying at Sacred Heart Seminary – Luke Fitzgerald and Robert Dodson.

"We have found that vocations over age 30 bring life experiences. They bring a degree of mercy because of their life experience. It's a true gift," Deacon Kramer says.

"Some may have been married, have kids and grandkids," he adds. "They may have multiple years of experience in business, education or the military. They all have a different understanding of the world and relationships."

He feels Church is better served having all different types of men as priests, whether young, middle aged or older. "They all bring different talents to the table."

For more information about Sacred Heart Seminary, visit shst.edu.

Are you being called?

Father Pautler offers these suggestions if you are being called to religious life, as a priest, deacon or woman religious.

First thing, he says, is to pray and discern.

Seek out a spiritual director and reach out to someone close to you, like your pastor.

Talk to people about celibate life. "Your faith is already built up. Now you must consider this change in lifestyle."

Going to seminary. "Realize you will be going back to school, so find ways to get your academic mind working again."

Participate in vocation events, such as the Meet and Greet Zoom events offered by Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology.

Contact Father Joel Seipp, the director of vocations for the Diocese of Belleville, for assistance in your decision process.

For vocations resources, visit the Diocese of Belleville's website at www.diobelle.org/vocations.