

Long path, strong commitment to priesthood

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The following was the second article introducing Catholic Herald readers to the four men who were ordained priests of the Milwaukee Archdiocese this year. Four were ordained Saturday, May 15, and the fifth was ordained July 17, at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Milwaukee.

To 15-year-old Chuck Wrobel, being a lifeguard in Arkansas was the dream job. He hung out at the pool in the sun and watched pretty girls. It wasn't until about five years later that he reflected on the fact that, as a lifeguard, he was responsible for people's lives.



Now, some 25 years later, he admitted to similar awed feelings as he approaches his ordination as a priest of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, on Saturday, May 15. Just as he did years ago, Chuck will hold people's lives in his hands, this time, as a priest and caretaker of their spiritual lives.

"My desire is that I can bring hope to people, that I can bring people closer to God," he said in an interview with your Catholic Herald. "I hope they can understand the importance of developing their own relationship with God, through Eucharist, through prayer, through helping others, and if I do not tell them with words, I hope they will be able to see through my life. Actions will speak louder than words."

While Chuck, at age 44, is entering the priesthood as a second career vocation, it comes as no surprise to his family. He graduated from St. Norbert College, De Pere with a bachelor's degree in art, and went to the University of Central Arkansas to earn a bachelor's degree in physical therapy. For the next 15 years, he worked as a physical therapist around the country including Massachusetts, Texas, Ohio and eventually Wisconsin.

"Even though he had quite a career as a physical therapist, when he turned the corner and turned a page in his life and entered the seminary, none of us were surprised," admitted his dad, Larry Wrobel, a retired standards engineer at Speed Queen in Ripon who now lives in Florida with his wife, Brenda, and works at Disney World. "Many of us in the family were like, 'What took you so long?'"

The Catholic faith was an integral part of the Wrobels' family life and even as a youngster, the idea of priesthood crossed young Chuck's mind.

Larry recalled one time, when Chuck was in high school, that he and his late wife, Faith, spoke to their son about priesthood.

"He admitted he was thinking about it, even then, his early years, but he was not ready to pull the trigger," said Larry.

While he didn't enter the seminary, Chuck remained close to the church and found ways to live his faith through volunteering, participating in mission trips, involvement in the Teens Encounter Christ (TEC) program and in his parish as a cantor, choir member and RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) catechist.

Chuck had what he described as a “religious dark period” after he graduated from St. Norbert College, where he fell away from the Catholic Church for about six months. Turned off by the pastor in his Arkansas Catholic church, he attended a Church of Christ and found great preaching and great music.

“It was very appealing to me as a young adult, but eventually, within six months or so, I realized I was not getting everything I needed. Something was missing, and that was the Eucharist,” he explained. “I knew I had to go back to the Catholic Church, no matter what the priest was like. I had to have Jesus, and I returned to the Catholic Church with a greater appreciation of my desire for the Eucharist.”

Chuck returned to Wisconsin to work in the physical therapy department of St. Nicholas Hospital, Sheboygan. He joined Holy Name Parish, Sheboygan and became involved as a cantor, member of the choir and RCIA sponsor.

“I started helping with the Life Teen program at St. Dominic (Sheboygan), and that’s when I started feeling something more inside of me, that I was supposed to be doing something more,” he explained. To that point, Chuck said he had expected one day to be a father.

“My sister was born when I was 16 and I had a taste of what being a parent was like. I had dressed her, fed her, put her to bed, and all through college felt that was what I wanted to do, to be a parent,” he explained. But when, at age 36, he was unmarried and without any prospects, Chuck said he began thinking his life might have a different plan.

He went to see his pastor, Fr. James Connell, to discuss the diaconate with him, and instead, Fr. Connell asked whether he had considered the priesthood.

“It just made sense,” said Chuck of the priesthood. “I was open to whatever at that time. If the right person came along ... but that hadn’t happened but I was open to whatever was supposed to be – and then I got smacked in the head,” with the idea of priesthood, he explained.

Chuck entered the seminary to determine whether he had a vocation.

“I entered not knowing if I was supposed to be a priest, but to discern, and if it didn’t work out, I’d go back to being a physical therapist,” he said.

After 20 years of living on his own, seminary life was a tough transition.

Chuck Wrobel, who said he spent a lot of time in the kitchen while at Saint Francis Seminary, will be ordained a priest of the Milwaukee Archdiocese on Saturday, May 15. An avid baker, Wrobel made and decorated wedding cakes for his siblings and his father, Larry Wrobel. (Catholic Herald photo by Ernie Mastroianni) “It was a challenge. When I came to the seminary, I had been working for say 15 years, and I knew how to do everything in my department – I was the go-to person there. When I came here, I knew nothing. No one came to me, no one asked me questions at the time and I felt my experience didn’t matter,” he said.

Yet, over the years in the seminary, as one of the older students, he’s assumed a leadership role and believes he was able to “shed wisdom on things and be a good example for the guys here.”

Family members note that Chuck played a similar role for them for years.

He’s a good leader and a good listener, according to Larry. “He has a logical mind, a step by step approach to situations and as far as working with children and young adults, youth groups, he’d be absolutely fantastic in any of these capacities,” he said.

His older brother, KJ, an administrative law judge in Arlington, Texas, agreed.

“Comparing him to us three boys, Chuck was always the most patient. He handles things at a nice level and he’s probably the most pacifist of all of us,” he said, recalling only one time when he saw Chuck boil over with anger. The swim team went out for pizza after a meet and someone, unbeknownst to Chuck, had loosened the top of the salt shaker.

“I still don’t know why he did it,” explained KJ, but for some reason, Chuck held the shaker over his mouth and when the cap came off, he ended up with a mouthful of salt. “It was really funny, and that’s the one time that I’ve seen him really mad,” he added.

KJ remembers receiving an e-mail from his younger brother letting him know he was pursuing priesthood.

“It surprised me, knowing how much he enjoyed doing the physical therapy thing, but none of us were 100 percent surprised,” said KJ. He added that the family is thrilled with his decision.

“I will say, we’re thrilled with everybody’s accomplishments,” he said of his family. “It’s amazing that Chuck is doing this and I think it’s great he is using the gifts he’s been given.”

Another family member who will be proudly watching is Chuck’s aunt, Cyndie Chiuminatto, his mother’s sister, a member of St. John Vianney Parish, Brookfield.

His mother would have been thrilled, said Chiuminatto of her sister who died 16 years ago after a brief struggle with cancer.

“It seems like such a logical fit,” she said of the priesthood and her nephew. “While it may have taken him a while to get there, he understands exactly what kind of commitment he’s making and the responsibility this is. He’s not going into it lightly and when he came to (the decision) he had to come to it 100 percent.”

Describing her nephew as “down to earth, grounded in common sense with a great sense of humor,” Chiuminatto expects he “will bring a great deal of joy, peace and comfort to whatever parish he serves.”

For Larry, his son’s ordination “is one of the most marvelous things to hit our family in many years. I’m excited for the church, excited for him,” he said.

Confident that his son will be a faith-filled priest, Larry noted that “Except for my first wife, I’ve never met anybody ever, who just lives and breathes faith the way he does. (Faith’s) the only person I ever met in my whole life who had more of a grasp of faith than Chuck, and he’s a close second to her,” said Larry, adding that his late wife would be ecstatic knowing her son will be ordained soon.

“No doubt she had some help in getting him there,” he said.