

Brothers mark 60 years of service as priests

Sitting near the chapel at Regina Senior Living in Hastings, Minnesota, Fathers Martin and Leonard Siebenaler – brothers in life and in the priesthood – have many stories about growing up on a dairy farm during the Great Depression and their years serving as parish priests. The brothers, who are both celebrating 60 years of priesthood in the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese this year, are retired – sort of.

Together through school, seminary, priestly life and now retirement, the brothers talked about their current joint venture: sharing chaplain duties at the care facility where many friends and family live, including their younger sister and brother.

“We kind of play off each other when we’re with people,” Father Martin said. “I remember something, he remembers something, and we just keep going back and forth. People enjoy hearing our priestly experiences.”

Although Father John Siebenaler, their younger brother, was unable to join the conversation due to poor health, the other two members of the priestly threesome described their path to priesthood, ministry and their close, faith-filled family, now partly reunited in retirement.

Early life

The three priests are the oldest of nine children who grew up on a small farm near New Trier, Minnesota, about 30 miles south of St. Paul. Along with cows, the family raised poultry, hogs and crops. Though a year apart in age (86 and 85), Father Martin and Leonard’s parents started them in school together at St. Mary’s school in New Trier (now closed). Father John,

the youngest of the three, joined them two years later. The Siebenaler children walked to school barefoot, carrying their shoes so they would last longer.

The brothers served Mass at St. Mary's Church under the direction of a stern but devout German priest, who told them stories and grew their interest in the priesthood. Because the brothers served at Mass so often, their parents bought a bicycle for them to share to make the trip to the church.

The call

The boys not only received vocational inspiration from their pastor, but they also got encouragement from their parents and the Sisters of Notre Dame, who taught them in school. Two of the Siebenaler sisters pursued religious life, and one, Therese, was a religious sister for 10 years. Three of their great-aunts were religious sisters, and a great-uncle was a diocesan priest. "Mostly, it was the example of my parents that helped us grow in our faith," said Therese, who also lives at Regina Senior Living.

Martin and Leonard entered the preparatory seminary in St. Paul after eighth grade, with John following two years later. Pre-Vatican II seminary training in the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese consisted of six years at a preparatory seminary followed by six years at a theological seminary.

"We were young but we said, 'Let's give it a try,' and we were encouraged by the pastor," Father Martin said. "We were good altar boys, and reliable, and he thought we'd be good priest material." Before the two oldest boys left for seminary, their father took them aside and gave them a blessing, dedicating them to the Sacred Heart.

Three sons leaving for seminary meant the family lost three farmhands, but the young seminarians came home to help on the farm and work jobs in the area each summer, Father Leonard

said.

The family enjoyed their vacations, Father Martin said. “We had all the news of what we learned, and we’d share, and the family enjoyed that.”

Fathers Martin and Leonard were ordained for the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese along with 15 others in February 1959 – three months before finishing their seminary studies – because of a priest shortage, Father Martin said. Hours of hearing many young baby boomer’s confessions prepared them for parish assignments, Father Leonard said. Those assignments took them to different corners of the archdiocese, where they managed staffs, administered the sacraments, taught and planned building projects.

The brothers had adventures, too, such as when the Sunday-collection counters were robbed at gunpoint at one of Father Martin’s parishes, or when a chalice thief was foiled by an alarm that Father Leonard had wired up to a tree to his bedroom. Father Leonard also counseled a teen in jail after she’d shot her home economics teacher in the neck over a bad grade. And Father John made the city newspaper after anointing a dying nurse who had been stabbed outside a nearby hospital.

Parish life was busy, but the brothers arranged to have the same day off so they could golf together or visit the family, they said. One of their aunts who was a religious sister prayed for good weather for their weekly golf game. “That was for Monday, and then we switched to Tuesday and we forgot to tell her,” Father Martin said.

Still active in their 80s

In 2002, Fathers Martin and Leonard retired near Hastings, Minnesota, not far from where they grew up, and served at local parishes for a number of years. Father John’s health declined, and he moved into memory care at Regina Senior

Living.

Father Leonard became ill and moved into the center in 2017. As Father Leonard recovered, he and Father Martin took on chaplain responsibilities when the facility's chaplain left.

Fathers Martin and Leonard each offer a weekday Mass and alternate presiding at Sunday Mass at the care center, where roughly 75% of the 200 residents are Catholic. The brothers also administer other sacraments and preside at funerals. They hope a full-time chaplain will take over soon.

Service is a way to give back to family and friends, Father Martin said. "They supported us all these years as young men in grade school, seminary ... now we're retired with them, and we can still appreciate each other and even serve each other now."

Rose Mary Lorentz, a relative by marriage who lives at Regina, said residents appreciate having priests who are on their level. "They're just like us, and yet they're holy, and you can talk to them about anything," she said. "That's what makes them very special to us."

Father Leonard said he's proud of the men pursuing priesthood today. "My thought is hopefully the Church will rebound and go back to where people are really proud of it."

The two brothers are happy to be celebrating 60 years of priesthood. "It's rather unique, I think, in the archdiocese, that brother priests have reached 60 years of consecrated priestly life," Father Martin said. "I'm kind of surprised that we lived this long. We feel pretty good about that."

Perseverance in their vocations has been one of the brothers' great blessings, Therese said. "I'm grateful that they had the health and perseverance to serve for that long of a time. They want to work until they drop. They keep going."

Susan Klemond writes from Minnesota.