Rev. Msgr. Joseph V. Wardanski - 50 years

Msgr. Joseph Wardanski’s entry into the priesthood was anything but typical. He worked at a bank, trained to be an X-ray technician, and served as a bill adjuster at a department store before discerning his call. “Might as well give it a shot. He’s tried everything else,” Msgr. Wardanski’s aunt said when she heard of his decision to become a priest.

His priestly calling is the one profession that stuck for the past 50 years.

Msgr. Wardanski grew up attending St. Casimir Church, Erie. As a boy, he liked to pretend to say Mass at a toy altar. He started giving serious thought to the priesthood when Msgr. James Peterson gave a presentation at East High School.

“You felt that he was speaking only to you,” Msgr. Wardanski says. Msgr. Peterson would later serve as Msgr. Wardanski’s spiritual director throughout his seminary years and early priesthood.

At the time Msgr. Wardanski decided to become a priest, anyone over 18 was considered a delayed vocation. He thought it might be too late to study for the diocesan priesthood, so he almost joined the Franciscans or the Sacred Heart Fathers. Father Steve Miachinski persuaded him differently.

Msgr. Wardanski was ordained to the priesthood on May 27, 1957. He thrived as a parochial vicar at St. John the Baptist in Erie, St. Peter Cathedral in Erie, and St. Callistus in Kane for the next six years. In 1973, however, he fell seriously ill.

“It was then that I realized how dependent I was on God and on his presence in my life,” Msgr. Wardanski said. He did not plan to return to the priesthood after his period of sick leave. Fortunately, two doctors convinced him to give it a try. A month later, he was assigned to be a chaplain at Saint Mary’s Home, Erie, where he served for the next 40-plus years. While there, he offered daily Mass, reconciliation and anointing of the sick to residents.

“They really displayed to me what the faith is all about,” Msgr. Wardanski says of the people at Saint Mary’s. “Even while they were approaching death, there was no fear; a lot of them were just waiting to go to God.”

Msgr. Wardanski retired in January 2017 due to poor eyesight, but he continues to celebrate Mass at the Bishop Murphy Residence for Retired Priests. He believes that the most important issue facing Catholics today is holding on to the faith.

“There are so many things in the world that are challenging the faith,” he says. “Seems like everything has become so materialistic and self-centered, even with the sacraments.”

To engage the next generation, Msgr. Wardanski says the church must exemplify the life of Jesus by “being kind, merciful, helping our neighbor, having empathy for the poor, the homeless, the sick and the dying…and never passing any judgment on other people.”

Msgr. Wardanski offers a reminder to everyone on their faith journey: “No matter what we do, God will always be there for us.”

Celebrating lifelong ministry

In early January, Msgr. Joseph Wardanski was honored along with Sister Margaret O’Brien, SSJ, upon their retirements from Saint Mary’s Home, East, in Erie. Sister Margaret held various positions at Saint Mary’s over a 30-year period, while Msgr. Wardanski served as a chaplain there for 40 years.

“We’re all family here,” Msgr. Wardanski said at the retirement luncheon. “Where have the years gone by?”

Sister Margaret enjoyed working with Msgr. Wardanski, too. “He’s very accommodating and he’s wonderful with the people,” she said.
All Father Lawrence Persico ever wanted was to be the pastor of a parish in his home diocese of Greensburg, Pa. He got that and more in the 40 years of his priesthood.

Today, nearly five years after becoming bishop of the Diocese of Erie, he still views his priesthood in simple terms: “I’m still a diocesan priest, but I got a new diocese. And I still consider myself a pastor, except I have a lot more parishes.”

Ninety-seven parishes, to be exact.

During his Erie episcopate, he has visited most of the parishes and schools in the 13 counties of northwestern Pennsylvania. He has even overseen the creation of a new Catholic school, Mother Teresa Academy, whose mission is to educate inner-city children.

His quick wit and down-to-earth style have helped him navigate the challenges of pastoral planning the past three years. Several parishes have merged and/or closed and some schools also have closed in response to declining numbers of priests and changing demographics.

“I always try to think as a pastor,” Bishop Persico says. “How would something be perceived in the parish?”

For the first 35 years of his priesthood, Bishop Persico served the Diocese of Greensburg in various capacities. Immediately after his ordination on April 30, 1977, he was appointed assistant pastor at Immaculate Conception Parish in Irwin, Pa. He remained there until 1980, when he was assigned to study canon law at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

After earning his licentiate of canon law degree, he returned to Greensburg, serving initially as administrator of a small parish near his hometown of Monessen, Pa. After only a month, he was assigned to be chaplain of Assumption Hall, a retirement home for the Sisters of Charity in Greensburg. During that time, he was assistant chancellor of the diocese.

In 1984, he became vice chancellor, a position he held for five years before being named chancellor. For many years, he also served as a judge for the Marriage Tribunal.

In 1987, he was appointed chaplain of St. Emma Monastery in Greensburg, while continuing in the Chancery Office.

He wore a number of different hats, but took on the pastorate of St. James Parish in New Alexandria, Pa., where, he says, “I fell in love with the place.”

“The parish made a big difference in my life,” Bishop Persico says. “I was working with real situations with parishioners. I got to be part of their lives and I enjoyed being around everyone. It was a wonderful experience for 14 years.”

Eventually, he was named vicar general of the Greensburg Diocese, but remained committed to parish life at St. James. Pope Benedict XVI had other plans for him, though. On Oct. 1, 2012, he was ordained the 10th bishop of the Diocese of Erie.

True to his simple roots and the strong faith of his parents—the late John and Helen Persico—he took as his motto: “Truth in Charity.”

“We always have to speak the truth, but the truth can be said in many ways,” Bishop Persico says. “It has to be said in love, in charity. You never shrink from your responsibility as a Christian or as a clergyman to speak the truth, but it always has to be encapsulated in love.”

In his five years as head of the Diocese of Erie, Bishop Persico says he has grown to believe more and more in the necessity of prayer. He is particularly concerned with nurturing vocations to the priesthood and religious life and instilling in people the concept of lifelong faith formation.

“We have to continue witnessing and evangelizing,” he says. “Those of us who consider ourselves to be full-fledged, active Catholics have to look at ourselves and ask, “How am I reaching out to those on the fringes and making them a part of our family?”

Spoken like a true shepherd. †
THE PEOPLE AND CLERGY OF THE SHARON DEANERY SEND

Prayerful Congratulations

TO BISHOP LAWRENCE PERSICO
ON HIS 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF PRIESTLY ORDINATION.

May God give him a deep faith, a bright and firm hope and a burning love which will ever increase during his priestly life. Mother Mary, Mother of Priests, take to your heart your son who is close to you because of his priestly ordination, and because of the power which he has received to carry on the work of Christ in a world which needs him so much. Be his comfort, be his joy, and be his strength. †
Sr. Linda Fusco, SSJ - 25 years

A mother and grandmother, Sister Linda Fusco, SSJ, celebrates 25 years as a Sister of St. Joseph this year. A late vocation, she entered the Sisters of St. Joseph from St. Joseph Parish, Sharon, at age 41. At the time, she had a 19-year-old son. Today, she is a grandmother.

“My son was very supportive of my decision,” she says. “Not many people can say, ‘My mother is a nun.’”

Born in New York City, May 30, 1950, she was baptized and received her first sacraments at St. Ann Parish in New York. In 1966, her family moved to Farrell, where she graduated from Farrell Area High School. She attended New Castle Business College and received a diploma for executive secretary studies. She worked for a period of time as a secretary, sales clerk, bookkeeper, and in sales and accounting.

“Since about 1980, I wanted to be part of a religious community,” she says. The Sisters of St. Joseph provided inspiration through their mission of unity. Having attended several meetings, she learned more about the community’s
charism and spirituality and became an associate member.

In 1991, she felt called to something more. On March 1, 1992, she entered the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1998, she earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education from Erie’s Gannon University, where she received the Paul Dobruchin award for love of learning. She professed her final vows on Sept. 22, 2001.

Sister Linda taught at Blessed Sacrament School, Erie, for 20 years. She also served on the Diocesan Vocation Committee beginning in 2007. She attended the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago for various workshops related to vocation ministry. Sister Linda is an active member of Fariview’s Holy Cross Parish where she serves as a lector.

Other ministry work has included teaching religious education at Our Lady of Fatima and St. Ann parishes, both in Farrell, and at St. Joseph Parish in Sharon. While at St. Joseph, she was a member of the liturgy committee and a lector. For several years, Sister Linda was a member of the board of directors of Dwelling Place, a house of prayer in Sharon.

For Sister Linda, prayer and reflection are essential components of a healthy life.

“I do the Ignatian Examen each evening, which is a wonderful way to reflect on how I have experienced Christ during the day,” she says. “Ongoing spiritual direction allows me to share these things with another who guides me to understand where God continues to call me to growth.”

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, J.C.L.

Congratulations on your 40 years of dedicated service to the people of the Diocese of Greensburg and the Diocese of Erie.

The Most Reverend Edward C. Malesic, J.C.L.
and the people of the Diocese of Greensburg
Sr. Severiana Morales, RGS - 25 years

Born and raised in Tierrafría Cortázar, Guanajuato, Mexico, Sister Severiana Morales, RGS, had no idea that her ministry would eventually bring her thousands of miles away to Erie. She simply trusted in God’s plan, just as she does today.

As a young child attending her home parish of Iglesia Nuestro Señor Del Hospital, Sister Severiana remembers her mother always encouraging her to keep a close relationship with God and to remain attentive to the needs of the church. Tragically, when Sister Severiana was only 12 years old, her mother died.

“It was a whole year of painful grieving of such a great loss, but when I turned 13 years old I consecrated myself to God and to the Blessed Mother,” she says. “I said to them that from that day on they would be my parents.”

Sister Severiana started teaching religious education at the age of 15, attending workshops every month and organizing ongoing preparations for catechists in her home parish. Through her involvement with youth group activities and retreats, she had the opportunity to meet religious sisters.

“Just by listening to them a few times they inspired me, and it was then that I felt that I wanted to be like them,” she says.

Sister Severiana received God’s call to religious life when she was 17. After three years of discernment, she entered the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (previously known as the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity).

She professed her simple vows in 1992, in Wheeling, W.Va., and her final vows in 1995 in El Paso, Texas.

In the 25 years since taking her first vows, Sister Severiana’s ministry has taken her to cities and towns all across the country. She served at San Juan Day Care Center in El Paso; Holy Name Seminary in Madison, Wis.; St. Cecilia Parish in Wisconsin Dells, Wis.; St. Andrew’s Retreat House in Newburgh, N.Y.; and the community of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Carrollton, Ohio.

Sister Severiana has spent the majority of her years of religious life in Erie. She first came to Erie for her novitiate in 1990. Since then, she has dedicated herself to parish ministry, particularly with the Hispanic community. She became involved with services for the Hispanic community at St. Patrick Parish, and from 1994-99, helped with religious education and the choir at St. Stephen Parish. From 2002 to the present, she has been the local coordinator for the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd at Gannondale.

In 2005, Sister Severiana was designated the coordinator of religious education at St. Stephen Parish, where she continues to minister today. In addition to coordinating the religious education program, Sister Severiana serves as a pastoral minister to the parish’s Hispanic community. Her responsibilities include taking Communion to the sick, performing translations, assisting migrants and visiting families to offer spiritual guidance.

Sister Severiana says her close relationship with God, coupled with the guidance and advice of her spiritual director and the sisters in her community, have helped her to continue answering the call to religious life.

“Walk each day with Jesus, because without Jesus on our side, we cannot accomplish our goals,” she says. †
Sr. Josephine Vuodi, FSO - 25 years

Sister Josephine Vuodi, FSO, says her main ministry has been “to love the Lord and to serve his people wherever I am sent.”

God certainly has sent her many places. Born in Stuttgart, Germany, she was the fourth child of Italian parents. Never once in her childhood did she consider consecrated life. Yet, she felt something was missing.

As a high school student, Sister Josephine often would come home from swimming practice, go to her room, and spend periods of time deep in thought.

“The recurring thought that haunted me was: ‘There must be something more. What is it?’ I remember begging God: ‘If you really exist, show me.’”

This was the beginning of her understanding that the “more” she was looking for was God. The Lord answered Sister Josephine’s prayers by sending people into her life who helped her encounter Jesus and the sacramental life of the church.

Religious sisters inspired her with their joyful witness to the faith.

When she was 23, Sister Josephine joined The Spiritual Family The Work in Austria. She professed simple vows on Oct. 25, 1992, and permanent vows on Jan. 18, 1998.

During her years in Austria, she cared for the elderly in a hospital and nursing home. She then resided in a community of The Spiritual Family The Work in Rome, where she undertook various duties within the Generalate of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa.

Sister Josephine also spent a year working at a home for the elderly in Munich, Germany. Later, she moved to Jerusalem, where she served for five years as secretary of the Christian Information Center.

In 2004, she moved to England to work at The College in Oxford, Littlemore, where Blessed John Henry Newman lived and was received into the Catholic Church.

After years of service in Europe, Sister Josephine’s ministry brought her to the United States in 2008. She became the pastoral minister at St. George Parish in Erie, where she served for nine years. Sister Josephine currently is regional and local superior and council member of her community.

As she celebrates 25 years of consecrated life, Sister Josephine continues to find inspiration in God’s grace and mercy, the sacraments, the lives of the saints, her religious community, and the experience of the church as a family of God. She views God’s call as a continuous, daily invitation.

“Wrapped in the daily routine, we can forget that we are created by God, that we are persons made for relationship, and that there is spiritual longing in our life that needs to be nurtured in order to make our daily living meaningful and permeated by a wisdom that is not of this world,” she says.

Despite daily distractions and challenges, Sister Josephine says devoting time and energy to the spiritual life is necessary to recognize the divine actions of God in our lives.

She references the Lord’s words to the prophet Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you” (Jeremiah 5:1).

“This tremendous statement of the Lord was true for Jeremiah, and God repeats it to each one of us,” she says.†