

All eyes on Father Bill Local priest overcomes hardship to see new light

“God grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change.”

BY LAURA PRATHER
Staff Reporter

Amen. Father Bill Kottenstette has uttered this word close to 1 million times throughout his 35 years as an ordained priest. And as he rocked back and forth in his chair, slowly and subtly grazing his right hand along the corner of his large, L-shaped office desk, he softly recited his favorite prayer.

“God grant me the serenity to accept what I cannot change ...” he said.

Beside a small, but loud, clock on the wood-paneled wall behind him, hung a simple crucifix. Next year, Kottenstette will celebrate his 50th anniversary of being in the seminary as well as his 20th year in Kirksville.

Kottenstette, dressed in all black except for his white clerical collar, has had several other positions during his time in the priesthood. He has taught in schools in the Kansas City and St. Louis areas, was the dean of students at St. Regis High School, his alma mater in Denver, Co., and coached girls' basketball and volleyball. He said he enjoys teaching because it pairs well with his religious vocation.

“I try to use my homilies to do two things: one to educate and the other to motivate,” Kottenstette said. “So I really do see myself as a teacher.”

He said his gift of teaching is one reason he enjoys his position at Truman's Newman Center so much and why he has been there for 12 years.

“This is an environment I feel comfortable in,” he said. “... I think it's a natural fit for me.”

Along with serving as Newman's pastor, he actively works at three other local parishes in the surrounding area: St. Aloysius in Baring, St. John's in Memphis and St. Joseph's in Edina. He said he gave 11 masses a week on average last year, but he cut back this year due to health complications.

I am able to do this

Kottenstette said the thought of entering the priesthood became concrete his junior year of high school.

“It wasn't something I ever talked about to anybody, but I can remember going out on a date with this girl from East High School,” he said. “We were walking around somewhere and she said, ‘Are you going to become a priest?’ And I said, ‘Why in the world would you ask me that?’ She said, ‘I don't know, I just think you could be a pretty good priest.’”

Kottenstette attributes his decision to his family's strong Catholic faith and the influential Jesuit priests he had in school.

The next 14 years were long and tough. In high school, Kottenstette steadily received bad grades and frequently visited the dean's office after getting in trouble. After graduating high school, Kottenstette entered St. Stanislaus seminary in St. Louis, Mo., where he began studying for the priesthood, in which time he earned two master's degrees — one in Spanish and one in philosophy.

He said that when he entered the seminary, people from his childhood, especially his high school friends, doubted that he could make it through all of the schooling. But Kottenstette said

he took it as a challenge and lived up to it by applying himself and building up a work ethic. The time finally came when he was ordained into the priesthood in his hometown of Denver.

“The memory I have is protrating myself on the ground before the Bishop,” he said. “... I can remember well lying there face down on the floor. Probably that's the most powerful memory of ordination.”

For the first few months, Kottenstette said he mainly said home Masses because he liked the feeling of celebrating the holy sacraments with his close friends and family members. But he said he will never forget the first public Mass he celebrated because it was a wedding in Spanish and the bride fainted during the ceremony.

“I thought, ‘If I can get through this, I can get through anything,’” he said.

Kottenstette had no idea how true this statement would be. For about 30 years of his life, from his senior year of high school until he was discharged from the priesthood in 1981, the now seemingly composed and genuinely happy man struggled with alcoholism.

Along his bumpy road, Kottenstette voluntarily admitted himself into treatment programs numerous times but always fell back into his old ways.

“I thought I did the programs like I was supposed to,” he said. “But I can look back now and say, ‘You know, I never really did because I was there because I wanted to be. And what a big man I am to be able to do this.’”

Once he was released from the priesthood, Kottenstette was on his own with little money and nowhere to go. To stay off the streets, he said he usually found enough day labor to pay for a small room and liquor.



Erin Givarz/Index

Father Bill Kottenstette, who will celebrate his 50th anniversary in the seminary next year, stands in front of the construction of the new Newman Center on Monday.

“I finally moved back from St. Louis to Denver thinking that might make a difference, but why would it?” he said. “I was taking myself along with me.”

It wasn't until his teeth began to ache and fall out that Kottenstette began to consider all the bad effects of his addiction. To fix the problem at hand, he got his teeth pulled before realizing it would take several years to get dentures. That's when he got the call from his sister in Kirksville offering him a place to stay and dental work.

Because he had no money, he said he tried to be of help by painting their house and performing other small chores.

“I had to earn this,” he said. “I couldn't let anybody help me because they loved me. I had to earn it.”

Dying and rising

A big part of a priest's job is the homilies he makes for each Mass. Kottenstette said he begins looking at a Mass's readings and starts thinking about the homily about three days in advance. He said he has several help books he references to stimulate general ideas for the homilies.

“I want to get a beginning and an end because I really am a believer that the Holy Spirit takes care of the rest,” he said.

Kottenstette said he trusts that the Holy Spirit will work through him to deliver messages that the congregations need to hear.

When he gave his first mass, after re-entering back into the priesthood, his homily was so powerful that the congregation stood up and applauded after he had finished speaking.

“This thought came in my head and I'll never, ever forget it: ‘Oh my God, what am I going to do next week?’” he said. “And then this other voice, and I'm sure nobody else heard it but me, said ‘Don't worry, you didn't do anything this week.’”

This idea of powerlessness is similar to how Kottenstette felt when he finally overcame his struggle with alcoholism.

“Alcoholism demands surrender,” he said. “If you're going to get sober and enjoy being sober, have serenity, you really have to surrender to God. You have to get your ego out of the way. You have to become honest with yourself. You have to have a deep

sense of gratitude for everything you have.”

Kottenstette said the outcome of this personal battle is the greatest gift he has ever received.

“There's dying and rising, and you have to die before you can rise,” he said. “... There's nothing you can do to avoid the dying, you're going to die. And I don't mean your final death, I mean the little deaths all of us experience — the loss of a loved one, ... the loss of possibility.”

Kottenstette said that when he retires from the priesthood he probably will stay close to the Kirksville area because he has built such a strong base here.

“And I need that because I have to stay sober,” he said. “That's the first and foremost thing I have to do or else I'll lose everything.”

Another thing that will keep him here is the supportive environment that surrounds him, including his sister, friends and the Newman community.

“I like my work,” he said. “I don't get up every morning and say, ‘Oh my God, what do I have to do today?’ It's, ‘What am I going to do today, or what do I get to do today?’”

PRISM | Four students explain how they have dealt with challenges, stereotypes of their sexual orientation

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herself, avoiding trying to overcompensate to meet a certain stereotype. Her advice for others going through a difficult coming-out experience is advice she lives by.

“Make sure you're 110 percent comfortable with who you are before you start telling people who you might be or who you think you are,” she said. “It's just like if you kind of think you're a Cubs fan and you tell your friends you're a Cubs fan and they're Cardinals fans, they're going to say, ‘Oh no, you're a Cardinals fan.’ Just make sure it's something you've kind of thought about because I mean, it's you, the most important person in the world, right?”

I wonder if they're gay

Junior Theo Estes, Prism member and a drag show queen last year, said he finds it annoying when the media portrays homosexuality in a way that fulfills a social stereotype, falsely promoting what sexuality actually means for a person.

“I think it's a cultural problem,” he said, citing “Mean Girls” as an example of a movie in which the gay character is stuck in a mold. “Notice he's always around women, not allowed to have any sort of romantic interests.”

He said these types of characters give a simple-minded portrayal of homosexuality, preventing society from truly understanding and accepting the depth of gender and sexuality and providing stereotypes that people, especially those who have only recently come out, feel they have to fit into.

These stereotypes have crossed Estes' own path, quite literally.

“I was walking down the street with my friend — we weren't together, but we were just walking together — and someone said, ‘I wonder if they're gay,’” he said. “And I thought, ‘What a weird thing to ask, why should that even matter?’”

Estes grew up in Carthage, Mo., a town of fewer than 12,000, and went to a school with prominent Christian values. His dad and stepmom worked as a counselor and teacher in the district. Both he and his twin brother, who also is gay, faced challenges when coming out to others about their sexuality.

“I went to a school where sex ed was taught by youth pastors, and my eighth grade teacher would read us Christian inspirational stories,” Estes said. “Some teacher came up to my stepmom and said, ‘How can you live in that house with those two disgusting homosexuals?’”

Estes' parents also criticized him and his brother for their homosexuality, and Estes found himself giving his father an ultimatum when he left for college, threatening to never speak to his father again if he couldn't learn to accept his lifestyle.

“It was one of those things that a lot of people criticize me for doing, but it got the point across, it made him reevaluate,” he said. “... Since then it's gotten a lot better.

... I think that he felt like he could put me back in the closet.”

My aunt's a lesbian

Freshmen Sophie and Anna (whose names have been changed to provide anonymity) found their own words to describe their sexual orientations in ways that arguably dodge social stereotypes.

Sophie said she refers to herself as bisexual because she is attracted to both men and women. Her girlfriend, Anna, uses similar terminology, but both said bisexual does not and will not fully describe them and could give a clichéd impression of who they truly are.

“It comes out of the concept that we feel that whoever you fall in love with, no matter what their sexuality is,” Sophie said. “I only use it as the terminology of bisexual or lesbian to try to explain it to someone.”

Anna describes sexual orientation as existing on a spectrum in which one end represents heterosexuality and the other end represents homosexuality. She said she thinks people can sometimes fall somewhere in between two extremes. Sophie maintains that, whether using jargon from psychology, theory or biology, sexuality remains hard to explain.

“The concepts that we came up with, those are kind of what you use to explain to yourself because you're kind of confused

about what you feel, what you're told you should feel yourself,” she said. “We don't have all the answers for our sexuality.”

Their own ways of explaining their sexuality have not always satisfied others, and they still face those who misjudge them, especially people in their own families.

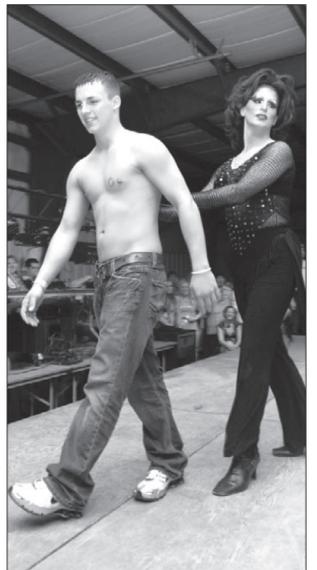
“My aunt's a lesbian,” Anna said. “... It was nice to have that person to talk to. ... I tried to come up to them [my parents] three times, and they tried to beat the gay out of me. ... They said it was just a phase.”

She said she still finds it difficult believing that her parents cannot give her the support she needs, especially when they provide her support with other issues. Sophie said her own parents are Charismatic/Pentecostals and that they follow their religion so closely that they told her she would go to hell if she didn't change who she was.

Working through these challenges required an in-depth look at religion and truth, but realizing why some parents make it so difficult for homosexuality to be accepted socially was a significant step in reaching a level of explanation with which Sophie could be content, she said.

“Parents set the culture atmosphere you were raised in, ... they know you like no one else does, and they have this image of who you should become,” Sophie said about why the relationship between gay children and their parents comes with stress.

Without parents, without controversy



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
A dance attendee received a special invite to the stage from a drag queen.

about social norms, without cultural debate, the Prism dance allowed Sophie and Anna to enjoy themselves in an atmosphere of sheer openness.

“I liked feeling comfortable getting up on stage with Sophie and being able to dance with her like I would with my ex-boyfriend at a high school dance,” Anna said. “... And feeling completely comfort-



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