



# Vocatio

NEWSLETTER of the St. John Vianney Vocations Ministry of Savannah

April 2017



Monsignor William Oliver O'Neill was our guest speaker at the April meeting of the Savannah Vocations Ministry. He announced that he will be celebrating his 50th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood on June 4, 2017 and invited all of us to attend the Mass and reception.

Msgr. O'Neill began his vocation story by saying that he was born 3 months premature and his grandmother, Sarah Hennessy O'Neill, who lived with them, nursed him back to health. Growing up, he would sit by the fire with her every night as she played the accordion and sang hymns plus said her prayers aloud. He sang the words of the

## 50 YEARS A PRIEST

Article and photos this page by  
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hymn which she sang to him every night by the farmhouse fireside:

*"I love his altar where I kneel, my Jesus to adore.  
I love the saints of olden times, Oh may I love them more.  
Let foolish men say what they will, for I am a little Catholic,  
and I love my holy faith. I will be true to thee and faithful until death.  
Amen."*

She died on December 11, 1953 at age 82, when he was 11 years old. He missed her terribly when she died and

the memories of her had a big impact on him in his life. He still recites that prayer every day!

Many of his family members were already in the priesthood and four of them



were bishops in the late 40's and early 50's, including some in the foreign missions. His interest in the priesthood can be attributed to reading missionary magazines in school as well as listening to the stories at the annual parish mission told by missionaries serving in foreign lands. This always sounded so exotic to little "Billie Oliver".

Monsignor O'Neill told us, "They told stories about their life and work and the scarcity of priests in the far off lands of the foreign missions. To a young mind, this was an adventure to consider. Because my roots were deeply planted in the soil of Ireland and my great love of the Gaelic language and Irish culture, whatever priestly interest I had was ministering in some little rural village parish in Ireland.

"I was reared on a dairy farm in County Tipperary, Ireland. As the eldest son in my family, it would have been my father's expectation, as was the custom at that time, that I would follow in his footsteps and work that very same land which he and several generations before him had toiled. I was groomed from an early age to be a farmer.

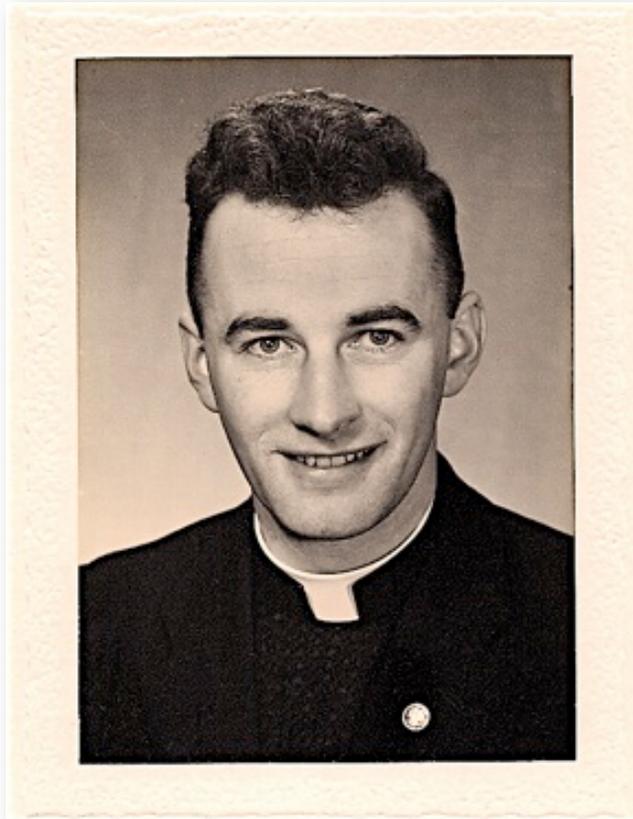
The 1950s laborious style of farm work did not attract me. But I was interested in a life connected with agriculture and farm animals. I wanted to pursue a career in veterinary medicine. I also wanted to

consider the possibility of the priesthood. To complicate my decision I was awarded an agricultural scholarship by South Tipperary County Council. To study for the priesthood would mean declining the scholarship. I decided to give the priesthood a try with the attitude of getting it out of the way if it was not meant to be. I would know after one or two years in a seminary whether or not I should continue. I entered St. Peter's College-Seminary in Wexford, Ireland in September 1961.

"While in the seminary, I heard an appeal about the need for priests in three dioceses in the United States of America. The dioceses were San Antonio in Texas, San Diego in California and

Savannah in Georgia. Should I follow my dream of being a priest in a little rural Irish village parish or volunteer for the foreign missions far away from Ireland and my family?

There was a much greater need for priests in those three dioceses than in Ireland. Initially I was interested in serving in either San Diego or San Antonio but after hearing Monsignor Bourke speak about the need for priests in the Diocese of Savannah to sustain the faith of the Irish people there who were descendants of immigrants from County Wexford, I decided to go to Savannah.





I was ordained with my classmates in the College Chapel on June 4, 1967 and left Ireland for the USA on August 25, 1967.

He arrived in the USA with 9 other priests from Ireland in 1967 and Bishop Frey sent *himself* and 4 others to New Orleans to attend the Pastoral Institute. Afterwards he began his first assignment at St. Mary's on the Hill in Augusta with Monsignor Bourke. His stay at St. Mary's was short lived, as Bishop Frey, mindful of his desire to engage

in missionary work, assigned him to Immaculate Conception Church, an African-American parish in downtown Augusta. After three years, he helped consolidate 3 small parishes there and served as the

associate pastor of the newly consolidated Holy Trinity Parish for the next 4 years. In 1975 he became the Pastor of Holy Family Parish in Columbus where he spent 13 happy years and came to Savannah in 1988 to become the Pastor of Blessed Sacrament Parish where he served for the next 8 years.

The big shock in his life came in 1996 when Bishop Boland asked him to become the Rector of the Cathedral. "I thought he was joking," Msgr. O. reflected, "I'm not a cathedral guy. But Bishop Boland explained that we needed to do a major restoration of the cathedral and that appealed to me."

It proved to be a very rewarding experience which will stand for many years as a testimony to his dedication to the church.

He reflected on his relationship with Bishop Lessard which was not always smooth. But after becoming Rector, Monsignor and Vicar General, Lessard remarked, "There was something wrong with your wiring when you were a young priest. When were younger I didn't know what to do with you. But now I realize you are amazing."

After that they became very good friends. Monsignor O'Neill concluded his talk by reflecting, "Over the past fifty years I have asked myself many times — what if I had been a farmer, a veterinarian, or a priest in a little rural Irish



parish? It is what it is! What is allotted can't be blotted. So I give thanks to God for my fifty years of priestly ministry in the United States of America and a long way from Tipperary. I give thanks for the five bishops of Savannah whom I have served, and for the priests, deacons and religious and especially the many wonderful parishioners in the six parishes where I have ministered, and for friends in New Orleans where I was assigned during my first year in the United States who helped me as a newly ordained immigrant priest to adapt to a new culture. What if I had not become a priest? I would never have known so many wonderful people who



You are joyfully invited to attend the Transitional Diaconate Ordination of Chris Nassel and Patrick May on Saturday, May 27th at 10:00 am in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah.

Bishop Gregory Nartmayer will celebrate the Mass and preside at the ordination. These men will be consecrated to be sacred ministers for the worship of God and for the sanctification of all people.

Please pray for these men as they prepare for their ordination and their ministries as deacons.





## Prayer and Holy Hour for World Day of Prayer for Vocations

by Fr. Pablo Migone

Sunday May 7th was the 54th World Day of Prayer for Vocations. This day is a public and universal response to the call of Jesus to “pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into his harvest.” Anticipating this day of prayer by reflecting on the missionary dimension of our Christian calling, Pope Francis wrote last November that, “commitment to mission is not something added on to the Christian life as a kind of decoration, but is instead an essential element of faith itself. A relationship with the Lord entails being sent out into the world as prophets of his word and witnesses of his love.”

On this day we pray not only for men and women to respond generously to the Lord’s call to dedicate their lives as priests and religious, but also that every baptized Christian may live out his or her vocation as a missionary disciple. Pope Francis asks for prayer so that all can “regain fervor in preaching the Gospel and ... encourage young people to take up the path of Christian discipleship.” It is from a community of faithful Christian disciples where the preaching of the Gospel is vibrant that vocations to the priesthood and religious life arise. The words of Jesus in the Gospel remind us that we all have a responsibility to pray so that faithful disciples may hear God’s call and respond to it in love.

Though all are called to be evangelizers, the Church recognizes the unique role played by priests and religious who dedicate their

entire lives to the mission of the Church, which is the same mission of Christ. In his same message from last November, Pope Francis calls the faithful to develop a profound friendship with the Lord, particularly in Eucharistic Adoration to “implore from on high new vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.” He continues reflecting that “the people of God need to be guided by pastors whose lives are spent in the service to the Gospel. I ask parish communities, associations and the many prayer groups present in the Church, not to yield to discouragement but to continue praying that the Lord will send workers to his harvest.”

Responding to the Lord’s command and the invitation of the Holy Father, the Saint John Vianney Vocations Ministry of both Savannah and Augusta organize holy hours for the faithful to gather and pray specifically for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. On May 7th, the Vocations Ministry of Savannah held a Holy Hour for Vocations at Blessed Sacrament Church on Victory Drive in Savannah.

Pope Francis ends his reflection recalling the courage of the Blessed Mother to place her youth and enthusiasm in God’s hands. He prays and invites us to pray, that we all may be “granted that same openness of heart, that same readiness to respond ‘Here I am,’ to the Lord’s call, and that same joy in setting out, like her, to proclaim him to the whole world.”