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Faith led local monsignor to a life of service

By Ed Langlois



Msgr. Arthur Dernbach in his flat at St. John Vianney retirement residence.
Sentinel photo by Ed Langlois

BEAVERTON — After 28 years in Catholic schools and an equally lengthy stint in parish life, he's a man with no trace of bitterness. Msgr. Arthur Dernbach, 83, would be a priest all over again. He really means it.

"The need is always there," he says of the mission. "Christ could perhaps have saved the world by himself. But he didn't. He wanted men and women to work with him."

A century ago, his father bought a working man's hotel at Second and Main in downtown Portland. Loggers and merchant seamen stayed there between jobs. During the Depression, the woodsmen would pay their bills with used logging gear.

The Dernbach family — with 10 boys and five girls — belonged to St. Stephen Parish in the Hawthorne district. It was a teeming household bound together by Catholicism.

Young Arthur attended St. Stephen School and in 1940 went on to the new Central Catholic High for boys. The tuition was \$50 per year. He worked weekends cutting lawns or stuffing

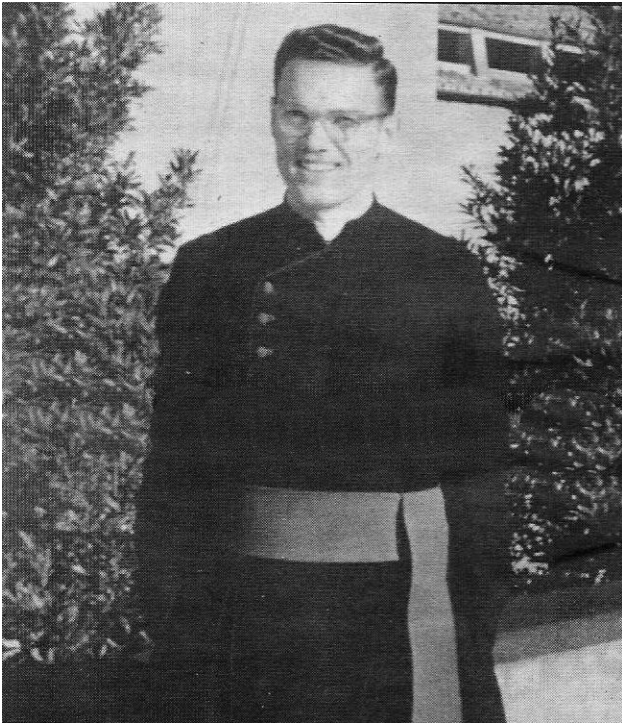
pages into the Sunday Oregonian for \$1 an hour. During the summers of those war years, he worked as a substitute firefighter and a longshoreman. When classes were in session, he had time to become student body president, play football and basketball and go on dates.

Central Catholic's principal, Father Francis Schaefer, would tap him on the shoulder and say in a crisp, clipped voice: "Art, you'd make a good priest. Why don't you go to seminary?" Like most American boys during the era, he was more intent on going to war and becoming a hero. After graduation, he enlisted in the Navy just as the war was ending. He sailed to Japan and served on the crew of a supply ship supporting occupation forces. He saw a nation that had been "pulverized."

The time in the Navy "settled" him, he says. He prayed the rosary regularly and read from a small New Testament stowed with his gear. He paused over the words of Jesus: "I will make you fishers of men." His life's path became clear.

The wavy-haired sailor recalled that chief among his role models in life were priests like Father Schaefer and Father Albert Carmody, pastor of St. Stephen Parish. He recalls Father Carmody as a combination of high intellect and hands-on energy. The priest often could be seen operating the parish's press, printing bulletins and other Catholic literature.

Along with many other World War II veterans, Art Dernbach began college seminary at Mount Angel in 1946. He embraced the Benedictine motto, "ora et labora" ("work and prayer") as applicable to everyone. After college, Archbishop Edward Howard sent him to Rome for advanced seminary studies at the North American College. He relished the experience of the universal church and got to know the Eternal City well during the long vigorous walks he was required to take with classmates, all while wearing cassocks. He was ordained in Rome at the end of 1953.



Back in Portland, he was assigned to teach chemistry and general science at Central Catholic. Archbishop Howard wanted his young priests to give education a try and in that way perhaps encourage more vocations.

While some men found teaching was not for them, the youthful Father Dernbach took to it, remaining on the faculty for 13 years. He then was sent to Medford to serve as principal of St. Mary High School. He held that post for seven years and witnessed the good effects of co-education.

Like many young priests in the 1940s and 1950s, he saw the vernacular in liturgy as a way to bring the faith more deeply into the hearts and lives of the people. He also supported early movements for creating a sense of mission for the laity by virtue of their baptism. It comes as no surprise that he embraced the Second Vatican Council, which started when he was 36.

In 1974, he was called back to Portland to serve as the archdiocese's director of education, overseeing Catholic schools as well as parish catechetics. By 1978, Central Catholic needed a new principal, and he got the nod. He made news in 1980 when he allowed girls to enroll.

Though some older alumni protested, the move invigorated Central Catholic, which now has more than 800 students.

"I've always admired those who've made sacrifices for Catholic schools," he says. He's particularly impressed by today's parents, who need to pay more now because women religious no longer staff schools at a pittance. Throughout his school ministry, Father Dernbach helped at parishes on the weekends and served as a chaplain in a hospital and convent.

"If you're a priest and a teacher, it's a good life but a busy life," he says. By 1983, he felt called to parish life. That led to 14 fondly-recalled years as pastor of St. Thomas More in Portland, which has a school. Over the years, Msgr. Dernbach has made sure his homilies are "rooted in the everyday lives of the people."

In 1997, he accepted an assignment to St. Boniface Parish in Sublimity. The people and the history appealed to him. He started collecting historical data, a project that Henry Strobel and a committee took up and turned into one of the best Catholic archives in the state.

For the past nine years, he has lived in the St. John Vianney Residence. The Beaverton apartments for retired priests are named after an early 19th-century French pastor who spent untold hours in the confessional and worked well into old age. The saint is a fitting patron for the monsignor, who not only administers the retirement community, but still fills in at parishes around the region and often says Mass for the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon. In addition to that work, he still prays every day, reciting the psalms and scripture in his worn, red breviary.

In 2008, he was named a monsignor by Pope Benedict, an honor fostered by Archbishop John Vlazny. He does not flaunt the honor, but still refers to himself as "Father." He's quick to volunteer for inglorious duty, like changing light

bulbs or raking leaves in the small apple orchard at the priests' residence.

This priest-educator, whose lanky frame is now a bit bent, dreams of a church that reinvigorates the faith of its youth. He sees the current Catholic Youth Organization as a good example of what can happen via sports, camps and dances.

“Even though families have kids at Catholic schools, the families are not active enough in parish life,” he cautions. “It’s not just a parish problem, it’s a cultural problem.”

One of the chief duties of priests, he says, is to direct people from the short view to the long view. With a sincere twinkle in his eye, he says, “People should ask themselves, ‘Where will I be in 200 years?’”