

Local Spiritan priest fulfills sense of adventure

By **MATTHEW PEASLEE**
Associate Editor

The Few. The Proud. Father Bill Christy is in rare company.

As a 17-year-old, the western Pennsylvania native answered the call to serve when he joined the Marines after graduating high school in 1982. He attended Holy Ghost Preparatory in the eastern part of the state before joining the naval infantry.

"I wanted something of service with a mission greater than my own self," Father Christy said. "I wanted to be amongst the people of the world — to learn about them and know them. I also wanted that sense of community and camaraderie. As a teenager, that to me meant joining the Marines."

After five years in the Marines, he joined the Spiritans — the Congregation of the Holy Spirit — at Duquesne University.

"Joining the Marines was my full start into becoming a Spiritan," Father Christy said. "I found all of what I wanted in the Spiritans, to answer a call of telling the good news."

Father Christy studied theology in Chicago with a deep focus on being a missionary, religious priest. He was ordained in 1992 and embarked on a journey to Tanzania, East Africa. In the Archdiocese of Arusha, an area without many paved roads, electricity or running water, he worked for 15 years as a missionary priest.

He called it "camping for kingdom."

"The big challenge of course is to enculturate the Gospel," Father Christy said. "To allow the Gospel to be known in that local culture, not only to be translated by word but in images. That takes deep knowledge of the people in their own culture. We have to delve into the traditional knowledge of faith and people to find the expressions that communicate the Gospel effectively."

Father Christy thought this was his life's work. His first great love was being a missionary in Africa, but in 2004 he opened himself up to something new back home at Duquesne.

"It has been a great joy," he said.

Numerous members of the Spiritan congregation are present and deeply in-



Father Christy

involved in life on the Duquesne University campus. Currently, Father Christy is one of 22 Spiritans either working as administrators and faculty, or they are pursuing advanced degrees. Father Christy, who was baptized at St. Bonaventure Parish in Glenshaw, is in his second stint as a campus minister at Duquesne. He is also the Spiritan councilor for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

In 2007, Father Christy was back out in the world evangelizing to aborigines in the Diocese of Broome in Australia. He was there for three years then served stints at parishes in New York City and Chicago. Since October 2013, he has been ministering to college students on the campus in Pittsburgh's Uptown neighborhood.

"Very busy weekends are part of being a college campus minister," Father Christy said. "You are working on student time. A lot of our ministry fits into the patterns and the lives of our students."

He specifically mentioned the 11 a.m. "early" Mass and the 9 p.m. Mass available to students in the campus chapel — something not normally available in a typical neighborhood parish.

"We have regular liturgical life on campus in the celebration of the sacraments," Father Christy said. "We also have a large element of outreach, trying to live out our call to be active in the world and to bring that gospel message in full effect into our lives. Faith formation is the work we do

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In fostering vocations, Father Christy encourages all students of any faith background to discern their own path in life. He is involved in Duquesne's vocation discernment group that is open to everybody — not just those discerning religious life or the priesthood.

The discernment group, which meets every Wednesday at 6 p.m. in the Laval House on campus, provides an opportunity for men and women to gather weekly to reflect on God's grace and action in an individual's life and their call to participate in God's work through the Church. The group offers a prayerful, supportive atmosphere to help those considering a call to pursue a religious vocation and a chance to learn about a variety of vocations.

The group prays together and for one another as vocations are discerned, encouraging one another to let God's Word lead us to a deeper faith.

"The two elements you need are community and prayer," Father Christy said. "Those two elements are what keep you grounded and call you forth."

Congregation founder helped foster vocations; legacy lives on today

The Spiritan Congregation began in France in 1703. Claude Poullart des Places assembled a small band of impoverished fellow seminarians to form a community dedicated to the Holy Spirit, under the special patronage of the Virgin Mary. The Holy Ghost Congregation was born. Their aim was to support students with little means on their way to the priesthood.

The intention was that these priests would in turn serve the poor people of rural France and people in missions overseas. Poullart des Places was still a seminarian when he formed the group. He was ordained four years later at the age of 28 and passed away at the age of 30.

His legacy lives on in the congregation through its service to those in need. The Holy Ghost fathers, or the Spiritans, became recognized by the church for going places that no one else wanted to go and for living simply in deep faith.

The Spiritan Congregation has a story that spans more than three centuries, criss-crosses continents in war-time and in peace, and features the selflessness of thousands of priests, brothers and lay persons who have forgone society's aspirations to power, prestige, and wealth. Rather, they made and continue to make profound sacrifices to minister to the poor and disadvantaged.

The Spiritan commitment to serving the disadvantaged led to the founding of Duquesne University — then a secondary school — as a school for the immigrant poor in Pittsburgh. In 1911, the college became the first Catholic university-level institution in Pennsylvania. It is the only Spiritan institution of higher education in the world.

Duquesne serves God by serving students through a commitment to excellence in liberal and professional education, profound concern for moral and spiritual values, maintaining an ecumenical atmosphere open to diversity and service to the church, the community, the nation, and the world.