Msgr. James Barta: ‘The Lord’s command that we love one another remains with us’

By Dan Russo
Witness Editor

“By going to inactivity,” he reflected recently, “it’s just that you cut back on what you’re doing. The inactivity is really kind of bad for you. You’re going to age a lot more quickly. The Lord’s command that we love one another remains with us all circumstances under which you are busy. Retirement doesn’t have to do with busyness. It has to do with circumstances under which you are busy. There’s not as much ‘ought,’ and there’s an awful lot of ‘I want to.’”

Msgr. Barta retired from active ministry in 2009 and continues to serve as a chaplain for the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary and he uses his counseling skills to serve as a spiritual advisor to many priests, religious and laity.

Born in Fairfax, Iowa, in 1931 to parents who were farmers, Msgr. Barta and his four siblings went on to higher education at a time when it was uncommon. His younger brother Ardel is also a priest for the archdiocese. After high school, Msgr. Barta went on to Loras College for his undergraduate degree in classical studies, focusing on Latin and Greek.

“In our day, most of us were the first to go to college,” he recalled.

He was chosen as one of two in his class of seminarians to continue his major seminary education in Europe, being accepted to the Pontifical North American College in Rome.

“We sailed over to Rome,” he recalled. “We took a boat out of Canada.”

After ordination in 1955, he was assigned to St. Wenceslaus Parish, where he learned enough of a new language to hear confessions in Bohemian (Czech), due to the large number of immigrants from that region in Cedar Rapids at the time. The young cleric went on to graduate studies at Fordham University in New York, earning a doctorate in psychology in four years. He came back during the summers and while writing his dissertation to teach at Loras College, ministering to many students who, like him, were the first to receive a higher education.

“I was one of the priests in charge of Beckman Hall when it opened up (in the early 1960s), and in that entire building of 246 people, there was nobody who had a dad with a college degree,” he remembered. “There were some who had mothers who had degrees, almost all of them were nurses or teachers.”

Msgr. Barta also served as a psychological counselor, working with Msgr. Timothy Gannon (now deceased) and others to found one of the first outpatient mental health clinics in Iowa in Dubuque. He also aided at times with court cases, helping authorities to determine whether people were mentally fit to stand trial. He also used his expertise for many years to help evaluate seminarians and men or women applying for religious orders. He found a great link between faith, theology and psychology.

“You start out with God’s perception of us, and God’s perception of us is considerably more positive than our perception of us, especially today,” he said. “By studying these things in psychology, you say this is what God knows about us, and if we know that better, we can understand more about the mercy of God, the goodness of God and the relationships with God.”

After serving as chaplain to Clarke College and an academic dean at Loras (from 1977-87), Msgr. Barta was named by the board of regents as president of Loras College, a post he held until 1994.

At that point, he was tapped to serve as an episcopal vicar for the Cedar Rapids region, one of three that helped the archbishop administer the archdiocese. During his time in these roles, the church was experiencing major changes in the wake of the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s. Along the way, Msgr. Barta was on the forefront of involving laity in church leadership, both in higher education and in parishes.

“What I liked most about Vatican II was … the last document, ‘The Church in the Modern World,’” he said. “It began to reflect more of an understanding of what human beings are, and I think that’s what our Holy Father is trying to get us to see more of — what is this human being that God is dealing with and what is this human society that God is dealing with? It opened up all sorts of possibilities.”

In 1999, Msgr. Barta became vicar general, a priest who holds a top administrative position under the archbishop.

Beginning in 2002, after a scandal in the Archdiocese of Boston, the Archdiocese of Dubuque joined many dioceses in the nation in dealing with the clergy sex abuse scandal. During this period, Msgr. Barta played a role in addressing the abuse and installing a process for dealing with both accusers and accused. At that time, the church also implemented programs on prevention.

“I think the big thing is everything was hush-hush beforehand,” he reflected. “Now it’s not. … The most important thing is that if it looks like it’s a credible accusation, it goes to the civil authorities, because it is a crime.”

During his time as vicar, the archdiocese also completed several important building projects, including the construction of the Villa Raphael, the residence for retired priests where he now lives. Of all the varied roles Msgr. Barta has had in his life as a priest, being a teacher has brought him the most happiness, he reflected.

“That was the main thing — to be a teacher, and that is my biggest satisfaction that has come out of my psychology background,” he said. “(When teaching psychology I helped students) get to know themselves as human beings, and that was very satisfying.”

Msgr. Barta has been helping to raise awareness of the ArchdioceseOne appeal as part of his ongoing work.

“God says we’re supposed to love one another. … What it basically means is you’re supposed to be good for someone. You can do that until you kick the bucket,” said the priest.

The ArchdioceseOne appeal is for the benefit of retired priests, seminarian education, Catholic Charities’ immigration legal services ministry and repair of the Cathedral of St. Raphael. More on the ArchdioceseOne appeal can be found at ArchdioceseOne.org.