

The Called

A series of profiles on clergy and religious



Father Paul Clark, J.C.L.

Hometown: Hanover, Pa.

Education: Conewago Valley Elementary School in Hanover, New Oxford High School, McDaniel College in Westminster, Md., St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, Pa.

Assignment: Judicial Vicar for the Diocese of Harrisburg and Pastor of St. Matthew Parish in Dauphin

Tell me a little bit about your childhood.

I grew up in the southern tier of the Diocese, along the Mason-Dixon line. My hometown is Hanover, Pa. I grew up in the parish of St. Vincent de Paul. When I was in seventh grade, we moved out of the formal boundaries of St. Vincent into the parish boundaries of the Church of the Annunciation. I went to Religious Education at St. Vincent from first grade through fifth grade, and then from sixth on, I went to Annunciation. At Annunciation, I think it was there that I realized, "Wow! Our faith is awesome." I had great teachers at Annunciation and that's where I then went to Mass.

We're form-able in sixth, seventh and eighth grade, preparing for Confirmation. Those teachers were awesome and they lived the faith, too. I saw that in them. I saw their good example.... My sixth, seventh and eighth grade teachers at Annunciation in Religious Education were women, and one was a Sister – Sister Maria May.

I think the seed of my vocation, of course, began at home with my parents. They were and they are today very hard workers. I'm a cradle Catholic. My mother's side is Italian, my father's side is German, and it is a super loving family. They're awesome parents. They're happy I'm a priest, they just don't get to see me so much. But definitely my vocation began in the domestic Church of the home. My mother is all about hospitality. You're always welcome at the table.

When did you start giving serious thought about the priesthood?

I started thinking really seriously about a priestly vocation at Annunciation. If you've ever been to that

church, it's beautiful, and beauty is attractive. In those grades, I was attracted to the Mass. My mother, at that time, worked at Double-day, a book publishing company in Hanover, and my father ran a restaurant. I had very busy parents, and sometimes they worked on Sundays. Here I am, probably after eighth grade, saying, "Ok, it's Sunday morning. Who's taking me to Mass?" So I walked. I walked up the hill, went across Main Street and went to Mass. It was attractive to me. It had an objective beauty and attraction to me.

How did your faith grow as you got to high school?

I never went to Catholic school until I entered the seminary. I went to Conewago Valley Elementary School in Hanover and then I went to New Oxford High School.... I wish I would have gone to Delone Catholic. I think a Catholic school education would have been great. But maybe it's good I didn't. God had his hand on this. I didn't have religion every day. In high school, I would have to seek out answers to questions I had about the faith, whether it be the saints or Mary. I'd have to go to the priest at Annunciation or St. Vincent's and ask the questions.

I was thinking in high school about priesthood, just as I was in sixth, seventh and eighth grade. But I was on the fence. My vocation was a boxing match with Jesus. Jesus was calling and I just put on the gloves to punch him away. In high school, as I was discerning, I didn't seek out priests or people in my life that would help me discern.

When did you decide to enter the seminary?

After high school, I made a bargain with God. I said, "God, I think

you're calling me to the priesthood, or you might be calling me, but I'm going to go to college." I went to Western Maryland College in Westminster, Md. – it's now called McDaniel College – and my thought was that if I did very poorly, then I knew I was called to the priesthood. That's how I went through three and three-quarters of my four years.

Then I graduated from college and I had almost a sickening feeling that, "Oh my gosh, I still have this." Because I commuted to college, I would serve daily Mass at the time for the pastor, Father Bernard Quinn. I saw the good that he was doing in the parish. Just being around him, listening to him, seeing how good he was to the parish.

I remember going to Father Quinn and I was still on the fence. He said, "What are you afraid of? They don't take the key and throw it away. Seminary is where you discern." I don't think I ever understood that I could come out of the married life or the single life, so I went to St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe.... I was ordained in 2003 to the priesthood by Bishop David Zubik, because Bishop Dattilo was very ill on my ordination day.

You are the Judicial Vicar and a pastor. Tell me about those roles.

The Judicial Vicar of the Diocese is the one who oversees the work and ministry of the Tribunal. We do more than decrees of nullity, or annulments. Anything Canonical in terms of the law in regards to the sexual abuse of minors by clerics, marriage law, permission for Catholics to marry non-Catholics,

permissions for wedding venues. Anything Canonical, I advise the bishop on.

St. Matthew's is the perfect fit for me. I'm at the Diocesan Center Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and sometimes on Saturday because I help with God's Plan for Love, marriage prep. Because I see in the Tribunal what breaks marriages up, a very important part of my ministry is to prepare couples who are getting married. We want them to know what married life is all about: fidelity, permanence, children.

Because of my ministry as Judicial Vicar, with marriage prep and as liaison for the St. Thomas More Society, I need a small parish. St. Matthew's is nestled between two mountains and has about 350 families. Going back to the parish in the evening and to have parishioners' support is a blessing.

What aspect of your ministry do you enjoy most?

One of my favorite things is ministry to the sick. When I'm in the hospital or visiting the homebound, I love to sit and chat with them. Especially when being with people who have been parishioners at St. Matthew's for a long time, to hear about what it was like back then, what they've done over the years. These are the people who made the parish what it is today, and to hear them talk about it is so fascinating. And then I'm able to bring them Our Lord in the Eucharist. Ministry to the homebound is something I take one entire day to do, but I wish I could do it more often. You leave there so uplifted. They're great witnesses to the faith.

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