

NET experience helped Deacon Kitzhaber discern priesthood

By JOSEPH O'BRIEN
Catholic Times Correspondent

GREENWOOD – Before Christ can send out His fishers of men, He often has to catch their attention. He caught Deacon Keith Kitzhaber's attention with a net – that is, with the Minnesota-based National Evangelization Team.

Deacon Kitzhaber will be one of three men ordained at St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral, La Crosse, on June 28.

The deacon gives a good deal of the credit for his hearing the call to the priesthood to his experiences with NET, which travels around the country providing Catholic sacrament-centered retreats to high school students.

A parish son of St. Mary's, Greenwood, Deacon Kitzhaber graduated from Greenwood High School in 1993 and in 1995 from University of Wisconsin-Wood County with an associate's degree in science. In 1996 he began working toward an electrical engineering degree at UW-Platteville.

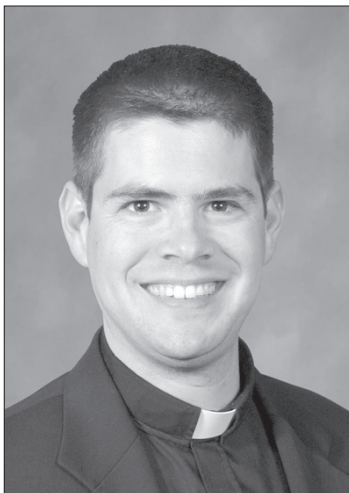
But a year later he took a year sabbatical from his studies to join NET Ministries as they served young people around the country. The following year, he returned to his studies and in 2001, received his engineering degree and began working in Madison with a civil engineering firm.

Deacon Kitzhaber, however, said the year with NET was crucial. During that time he first sensed that he might be called to the priesthood.

"I began to recognize something in these priests I met while on the road," he said. "It really began to look like a legitimate option for me; I could relate to them."

Deacon Kitzhaber said that while he didn't reject the idea of a priestly vocation outright, he put it in the back of his mind as he continued his studies.

"I wanted to make sure that I could finish my degree," he explained. "I wanted some certainty that I was not running away from my vocation to engineering.



Deacon Keith Kitzhaber

It turned out fine, but after receiving my degree, there was something in the back of my mind saying that this wasn't what I was supposed to be doing."

It turned out that "something" was the call from God he had heard while serving on NET. Deacon Kitzhaber said he found time in his career to explore the priesthood. He began attending vocational retreats in the Madison Diocese and conferred with priests and vocation directors.

"It wasn't that I thought I was going to be a priest at this point," he said. "It was that I wanted to look into it further."

It wasn't long before he decided to give seminary life a try. "My question to God at this point wasn't, 'Will You show me whether I'm supposed to be a priest?'" he said. "The question was, 'Will you show me whether I'm supposed to be somewhere else?'"

Entering the Pontifical College Josephinum, Columbus, Ohio, in 2003, Deacon Kitzhaber graduated in 2008 with degrees in philosophy and theology. In June 2007, he was ordained a deacon at his home parish by Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI.

Among the other contributing factors to his vocation, Deacon Kitzhaber points to his solid formation at home – and the faith which his father and moth-

er, Bernard and Patricia Kitzhaber, successfully passed along to him during his adolescence. He counts family rosaries during special occasions and nightly prayers as among his dearest memories growing up. The Kitzhabers are also parishioners at St. Mary's.

As one of nine children, Deacon Kitzhaber had many examples of his faith to draw from as he made his way in the world.

"A big part of growing up was sharing and getting along," he remarked. "Sharing beds, sharing rooms – it was cozy."

As a priest, Kitzhaber looks forward to being a steward of the sacraments – especially reconciliation and the Eucharist. He's also looking forward to being a steadfast witness for Christ.

"I have some friends who aren't particularly religious," he explained. "There's something that draws them to the priesthood. It's not me, but a fascination with the office. They ask me questions – and so for me this is an opportunity to bring the message of Christ to them. That's kind of exciting."

Prayer is also something Deacon Kitzhaber will make a main focus of his work. And thanks to his family and experiences with NET, he's already got a head start.

"When you join NET, you go through five weeks of training," he explained. "The first three weeks you just learn how to pray. This was extremely important for me. Prayer time every morning was between 7:30 and 9 a.m. At first, I wondered what I was going to do in that time. But after three weeks, when the bell would ring, I felt like I was just getting started. Scripture really came alive for me, and I would spend a long time in prayer – and time would just fly."

Father Woodrow Pace, pastor of St. Mary's, Neillsville, will be Deacon Kitzhaber's vesting priest during his ordination. His first Mass – known as a Mass of Thanksgiving – will be celebrated at 8:30 a.m. in his home church on June 29.

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