

January 13, 2005

Seminarians have more in common than vocation



FROM MARRIAGE TO PRIESTHOOD

- A group of seminarians at Sacred Heart School of Theology belong to a special support group for widowers. A total of 15 widowers were enrolled at the Hales Corners seminary last semester. Pictured above, many holding photos of their wives and families, are, bottom left to right: Eric Weisman, Bill Wiegand, Jim Pemberton, and Mike Millard. Top left to right Sam Woods, Fr. Tony Cureton (ordained in December), Wally Dant, Michael McLain, and Charles Huck. (Catholic Herald photo by Sam Lucero)

By Sam Lucero
Catholic Herald staff

HALES CORNERS -- Each month, a group of widowers from Hales Corners gets together for a social outing -- perhaps a Brewers baseball game in the summer or a trip to Holy Hill in the fall.

These monthly gatherings call the men to remember their wives and to support each other in their new lives -- as seminarians preparing for the priesthood.

Known informally as the Sacred Heart School of Theology's widowers club, the group currently consists of

15 men from around the country. Sacred Heart is a national seminary, operated by the Priests of the Sacred Heart, specializing in second-career vocations.

Unlike their traditional counterparts who go from college to the seminary, these men, ranging in age from 50 to 71, have raised families and spent most of their lives employed in various professions.

The thought of widowers with children and grandchildren studying for the Catholic priesthood may seem foreign to some, but according to these seminarians, they wouldn't be

preparing for ordination if it weren't for the women who nurtured and loved them for so many years. They also believe their family experiences will assist in their ministry.

During an interview with the *Catholic Herald*, nine of the widower-seminarians spoke about their earlier lives as husbands and future lives as priests.

"It's just amazing how much influence our wives had on us being here through the things that they did while they were here," said Sam Woods of Stockton, Calif., whose wife, Claudia, died Oct. 24, 2000.

"If it weren't for them we wouldn't be here."

"Being married before and being widowers is going to be a great benefit to us in ministry," said Mike McLain, 54, one of three widowers studying for the Diocese of Superior. "I'm sure you probably heard people say, 'How does a priest know how I feel?' These (aspiring priests) will know how they feel because we've been there and I think that's going to be an important part of our ministry."

According to Peggy Boyles, director of public relations at Sacred Heart School of Theology, the widowers' support group has been in existence since about 1993. The camaraderie the men experience while on their monthly outings or enjoying a meal at the seminary cafeteria is a gift they say helps them in their seminary studies.

"We like telling stories about our families," said McLain. "We brag and nobody sits there and says, 'Oh God, he's at it again.' We're directly interested in each other. That, and the fact that we have a common goal -- God-willing, we're all going to make ordination." McLain's wife, Chris, died Aug. 6, 2001.

While the social aspect of the widowers club makes for many memorable laughs, it's the spirituality that binds the men together.

"When we say the rosary as a group for our wives, and when we have the Valentine's Day Mass, it helps us all to keep in touch and it's a bond between us," said Bill Wiegand, 68, whose wife, Ruth, died Oct. 13, 2001. "But it's also a bond between our wives."

The Valentine's Day liturgies are one of the year's highlights for the men. Afterward the men go out for dinner -- something their deceased wives may envy, joked Wiegand. "I can picture our wives looking down

on us saying, 'Why didn't you do that at home when we were with you?'"

Another important date for each seminarian is the day his spouse died. A list of these dates is shared with the other widowers. "It's kind of nice to remember the other guys in prayer," said Chuck Huck, 50, of Crookston, Minn., whose wife, Valerie, died in November of 2000. "You can make a comment to him when you're in the hallway, let him know we're thinking about him. That really helps -- knowing that somebody else is sharing in your pain that day."

Discerning a vocation to the priesthood is often influenced by family and friends, said several seminarians. They remember being told by others that they would make good priests.

"It's amazing how God uses humans as his messengers," said Jim Pemberton, 71, whose wife, Joy, died Feb. 15, 2001. "We've all said that people came up to us and asked, 'Have you thought about the seminary?' I know in my case I'm saying, 'Why would you say that?' Then when two or three different people would say the same thing, you sort of sit back and say, 'Is there more here than I'm seeing? Is there something a little deeper here than just a friend mentioning something?' And so you begin to give it some serious thought."

In other cases, some people did not know the option was available to widowed men.

"They don't understand that it is a possibility," said McLain. "But then they look at it again and say, 'You have such wonderful gifts to bring to the parish.' It's an interesting way. God calls us and it's up to us to respond."

All but one of the men interviewed is a father and grandfather. These men said their children have been supportive of their new vocation.

"When I talked to each of my children it was like, 'It's about time,'" said Huck, who has five boys, two girls and seven grandchildren. "They already talked amongst themselves" about their father as a priest. "There's support from the kids themselves and in some sense it is a source of pride for them."

Wally Dant, 65, whose wife Barbara died in January of 2002, has three boys, two girls and 18 grandchildren.

"One thing that was kind of neat, they brought me to school and checked me in," he said. "All my life I'd been checking them in. When I talked to my kids about it, I don't think they were surprised."

The widowers agreed that the friendships they've made in the seminary are relationships that will continue long after their anticipated ordinations.

Fr. Tony Cureton, 60, whose wife Brandie died 10 years ago, completed his seminary training in December. He returned to Gaylord, Mich., where he was ordained Dec. 18. As a send-off, the widowers took him out to supper.

"While we're there, just sharing and listening, I just felt this warmth in my heart," said Cureton. "That sharing that we had at that meal was definitely one of the things that I will remember this semester. It was one of the highlights for me of this whole semester. It's because what we share in common. It touches places inside of you that don't have words to express."

For members of the Sacred Heart School of Theology widowers club, their goal is to make one more trip down the aisle. This time, however, they'll do it as priests, not husbands.