

AN INTERVIEW WITH Fr. MICHAEL JOSEPH MILLER

Fran Duncan, Interviewer—St. Michael's Parish Council

As I sat waiting in Fr. Miller's office prior to the start of our interview, my eyes passed over the flotsam and jetsam on his desk, past the crucifix and pictures of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and settled on a framed picture containing the following words:

Receive the Gospel of Christ
whose herald you are.
Believe what you read,
Teach what you believe,
Practice what you teach.

Not being familiar with the quote, I made a mental note to ask Fr. Miller to explain its significance. Just then, Father walked in and our interview began.

On May 19, 1965 Michael Joseph was born to Carl and Mary Jane Miller in New Prague, Minnesota, a small Scott County town 34 miles SW of Minneapolis. Michael would be the only son and middle of three children with Kim, 5 years older than he and Kayleen, 5 years younger. The three children were raised on the Miller family farm, seven miles SE of New Prague. Dad farmed the 230 acres, and the family income came from selling the produce and the milk from their 41 dairy cows. Mom was also a beautician and had a beauty shop in the farmhouse basement.

Faithful and devout Catholics, the Miller family belonged to St. Wenceslaus in New Prague. Michael Joseph attended St. Wenceslaus Grade School. His high school years were spent at New Prague where he graduated in 1983 with 264 other classmates. When I asked Fr. Miller what he remembered about the transition from Catholic Grade School to Public High School, he said he remembered that it was very odd that religion was not part of the day.

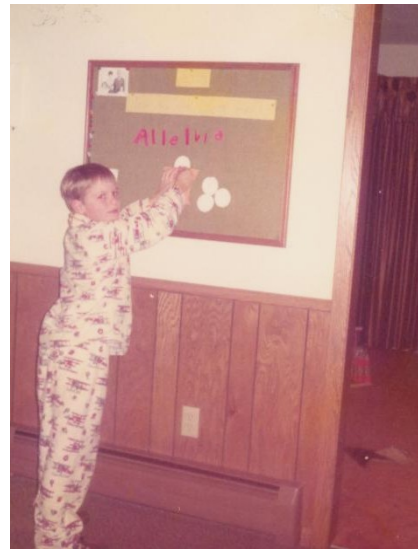
Being raised a farm boy, Fr. Miller was active in 4H as well as FFA. He recalled having different groups of friends - farm friends - his "very funny" friends. He was especially close to two buddies. One of them, Fr. Tim Deutsch, was influential in Fr. Miller's decision to enter the seminary. Fr. Miller and two other friends liked to create and draw their own cartoons. He says that he still has over 200 of them. They liked to make their own comedy videos using SCTV (Second City Television) for inspiration. In this way, he was honing the wit and dry sense of humor seen in him today.

After high school, Fr. Miller attended the University of Minnesota, Waseca campus. He received an Associate in Applied Science degree two years later. While at the U. of MN, he hosted his own radio show called "Miller Time." As sole creative source for the program, he came up with banter, bits, and contests that filled the 2 to 4 hours on air. He described the show as "a morning show in the evening." Now we know why Fr. Miller was such a natural entertainer when he took the microphone at our recent Fun Fest! With his AA degree in hand, Fr. Miller's life as a farmer was set. He went home to farm.

In the summer of 1986 while in New Prague, he started questioning the meaning of life. Always introspective, Fr. Miller likes to call this his "summer of wisdom." By 1987 he began to feel a call.

"I didn't know what it was. One of my close friends had gone to the seminary. I started reading the Catechism, praying the rosary. The reality of God was coming alive to me. I realized I was losing interest in farming," he explained.

In 1988, he and his friend Tim made a pilgrimage to Fatima. By that fall, he realized he wanted to pursue the priesthood. In February of 1989, Fr. Miller moved to St. Paul and started at the University of St. Thomas. However, a rocky road lay ahead. By that September he seemed to lose interest in the priesthood and his studies. As he told me



"Mike's 1st Communion Poster, 1973"

Note the similarity with the picture from his first Mass.

about this, he looked lovingly at the large, framed photograph of the Miller family farm hanging on his office wall, "I realized it was the harvest. I always loved harvest time!" he said poignantly. His friend, Tim, convinced him to give St. Thomas an entire year. Four years later, he graduated with a BA in Philosophy and a minor in History.

In the fall of 1992, Fr. Miller entered St. Paul Seminary with 18 other young men on their journey to priesthood. Fr. Miller was aware of the "crisis in the church in the troubled post-Vatican II era" as he describes it. He had read **The Ratzinger Report** in 1989 and later in our interview would describe it as the most important book he ever read. If you were not "liberal" or "progressive", you weren't exactly welcomed with open arms at St. Paul Seminary at that time. Fortunately, 10 of the 19 young men in his class shared his views and were interested in defending the true traditions of the Church. With this class, the tide was turning. Thankfully, the seminary now is completely different.

His second year in the Seminary was not easy. The professors were turning up the heat on any who didn't share their interpretation of Vatican II. As Fr. Miller explained, "You had to be careful. You couldn't give them any reason to kick you out." He started his third year in Seminary by spending the fall semester abroad. In late August, Fr. Miller, who admittedly dislikes traveling, spent 10 days in Rome and then went to Jerusalem for the remainder of the semester.

Before going to Jerusalem, a date was set to auction off the dairy herd - September 15th, the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, and his dad's 62nd birthday. This hit him profoundly . . . "Selling the cows meant the end of our family farm as I knew it. There would be no going back - life as a farmer would no longer be an option for me." Thus began Fr. Miller's spiritual crisis. All he knew was that he was going through darkness, "a dark night of the soul." He read about them, but the experience was greater than he imagined.

The darkness was palpable as Fr. Miller described feeling so uncertain. No one there was much help. He was very close to going home, but his parents encouraged him to trust that they were all doing the right thing and that everything would be alright. "Here I was between Jerusalem and Bethlehem - in the land of the agony. And I was suffering deeply. There was a lot of uncertainty. But I kept praying." When I asked him how he was able to struggle through this, he said "Constant prayer and Triple Yahtzee!" He continued, "Then one day - October 29th - all of the darkness lifted. All of the certainty came back. I sensed a great light. From that point, it was full steam ahead."

On December 2, 1995, Fr. Miller became a deacon. His ordination as a priest took place on May 25, 1996. He was ordained by Archbishop Harry Flynn - the first class that Archbishop Flynn ordained. Fr. Miller

described that day with passion and emotion.

"It was a great day. Your name is called and you walk into the sanctuary a deacon, and walk out a priest. We are laying face down symbolizing 'laying down our life for Christ'. I remember feeling crushed from the responsibility but also being held up by God Himself and all the prayers." Fr. Miller said he knew he was changed. "I could now act as the person of Christ. He can act in me. He gave me the power – it is only something that can be received. I felt real gratitude."

His life as a priest began the next day when he celebrated his first Mass at St. Agnes in St. Paul, where he had sung in the choir for the previous seven years. Fr. Miller's description of that Mass was so vivid and beautiful I could almost hear the music. "The 60-member choir sang *Beethoven's Mass in C*, accompanied by 25 members from the Minnesota Orchestra and 4 professional soloists. The church was filled with family and friends – it was Pentecost with beautiful red vestments. It was the climax of it all!"

On June 19th, 1996, Fr. Miller began his first official assignment as associate pastor to Fr. Frederick Campbell at St. Joseph in West St. Paul. The church was very modern but that allowed Fr. Miller to concentrate on the liturgy. When asked what was challenging about his role as associate pastor, he focused on the burden of preaching. "Anyone can preach for a few weeks – but every week? I would pray that God would give me the words and the people the disposition to hear them."

The five years spent at St. Joseph gave a strong foundational context to his life as a priest. Not only was he blessed to learn from Fr. Campbell but when Campbell was made Auxiliary Bishop in March of 1999, Fr. Lee Piché became pastor of St. Joseph. "I learned so much from both of them. They were very pastoral – they applied their faith wonderfully. Both were great preachers. I would often sit in the back of the church to listen to their homilies. It was a very happy time."

Then on April 19, 2001, Fr. Miller received a call from the Archdiocese personnel board saying that someone was taking his place. The reality of the life of the priest was brought home to him. As he has recently written in our bulletin, "We go where we are sent to toil in a vineyard that is not our own." He felt unready – he didn't want to go.

In a meeting with Archbishop Flynn, he confided his concerns. In fatherly tones the Archbishop recounted a personal story. The Archbishop became a Diocesan priest so that he could stay in New York. In fact, he refused to join the Franciscan order with three of his friends because they could send you anywhere. As it turned out, all three of the friends never left New York while Archbishop Flynn was sent far afield. The Archbishop remembered driving from New York on his new assignment and looking up at a prison – wishing he were the person in one of the cells. He then counseled Fr. Miller not to be afraid – he was ready.

Of the nine parishes open to him at the time, Fr. Miller chose Delano. On July 6, 2001 he started as Pastor of St. Joseph's and St. Peter's – churches with names of two of his four favorite saints. At the time he did not know that in the future he would become the Pastor of St. Mary's and St. Michael's – names of his other two favorite saints. Delano also had a school and he came to realize that "a parish isn't complete without a school." While the transition was difficult – Fr. Miller remembers how hard it was that first Mass to not see one face he knew – he did share some things we can all do to make a new priest feel welcome:

Be willing to repeat your name – often
Be active – show up at Mass and the other sacraments
Give your time to the parish
Don't be quick to judge
Strive to discover the gifts of the new priest – every priest has different gifts.
Finally, remember God is sending you this priest for a reason.

For the next seven years and three months he had "the joy and burden of shepherding the flock of Christ" in Delano. On November 4, 2008, Fr. Miller joined us here in the St. Croix Valley.

When I asked what advice he would give to children who may be thinking of the priesthood or religious life, he offered, "Say a little prayer . . . 'God if you want me to be a priest, then I want that' – it all comes from Him. Don't look at it as a weird event – it's a normal thing. God has a calling for everybody. Pray that you can hear what that is."

He continued with this advice to encourage strong families. "Never forget the love that caused you to marry. Show affection to one another – let your kids see it. Be good parents – it is both a responsibility and a privilege. Finally, practice your faith. You will make it real for your children because it's real to you."

Fr. Miller's goal for our parishes is to complete the work begun by Fr. Skluzacek and Bishop LeVoir and to make it grow. I wanted to know how we could support our pastor. He quickly gave a few suggestions.

"Live your faith! Defend priests during these difficult times. Find out what the parish needs – especially with finance. I have to spend so much energy on financial matters. And a nice word or note is always appreciated." With obvious gratitude, Fr. Miller then read a note of thanks he had just received from a parishioner.

The time allotted for our interview had been generously extended and I was regretting that it was coming to an end. Was there something else he would like people to know about him, I asked. With the same openness and spontaneity as for all previous questions he responded, "I share their difficulty and their joy. I am human and want to be treated like they want to be treated. I've been called to be a man of faith – I try to do my best."

As I shook his hand to leave, I looked over his shoulder at the picture on his wall depicting the bucolic family farm in New Prague. I was not surprised by Fr. Miller's choice of a favorite scripture reading. He mentioned John 14:1-7 - having faith that Jesus was preparing a place for us. He explained by saying, "Home is important to me . . . knowing there is a home that I won't have to leave."

As soon as I left, I realized I had not asked Fr. Miller the meaning of the quote on his office wall. Once home I looked it up. On the day a man is ordained as a deacon, the bishop hands him the Book of the Gospels and says the words I had read on Fr. Miller's wall:

Receive the Gospel of Christ,
whose herald you have become.
Believe what you read,
Teach what you believe, and
Practice what you teach.

I realized then that the man I had just interviewed, Fr. Michael Joseph Miller, was living these words!

Fran Duncan, St. Michael's Parish Council



Fr. Miller celebrating Mass after Ordination, May 1996