

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Fr. Robert Valit

Sponsored by the St. Michael's and St. Mary's Parish Councils

(Karen Moosbrugger, Interviewer)

It is always puzzling when you hear an interview of someone in the entertainment business who claims to be a shy person. Imagine an actor, musician, comedian, etc. who appears before hundreds or thousands on the stage and screen and yet is a self-proclaimed introvert. How does someone reconcile their essential nature with what they choose as their life's work when the two are so different?

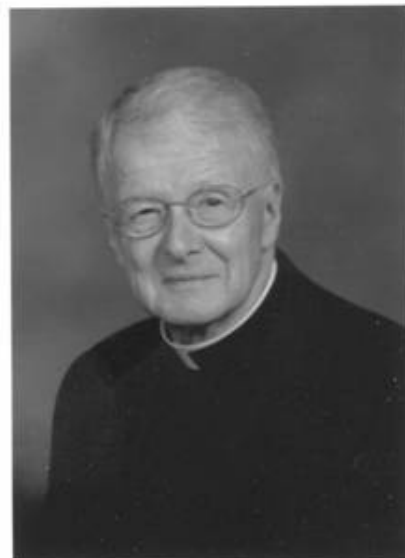
Case in point: Father Robert Valit, a self-proclaimed *extrovert* who for 22 years lived life in accordance with a monastic practice of silence. How did *he* reconcile this apparent incongruity? The answer is simply that his great love of God and of his priestly vocation has been his guiding force throughout every phase of his priesthood and continues to be so to this day.

On April 1, 1928, Robert Valit was born in Minneapolis. His father, also Robert, was a carpenter by trade, and had his own business as a building contractor. Louise, his mother, was a homemaker.



Robert and his sister, Norma, three years his elder, lived with their parents in South Minneapolis and attended public schools. It was not surprising to learn that his favorite subjects were English and Literature, considering the number of great authors he is fond of quoting in his homilies.

When Robert was in the fourth grade his family moved to St. Louis Park. Their home was adjacent to the Meadowbrook golf course which divided Edina and St. Louis Park. He went on to graduate from St. Louis Park High School.



The Great Depression and the Second World War were events that made an impact on him during his younger years. The economic climate of the Depression forced his father to close his contracting business, and go to work for others. During World War II, newsreels depicting footage of the war effort were shown in theaters and would contribute to Robert's heightened interest in politics at the time. While these national events were shared experiences for those growing up in his era, the events that shaped his spiritual life were somewhat less conventional.

In the fifth grade Robert went to Sunday school at a Methodist church where he was baptized that year. In seventh grade he went to a Congregational church, where he sang in the choir and . . . was baptized. Sometime later, he joined a Lutheran choir in downtown Minneapolis (not baptized there). It wasn't until the year after he graduated from high school that he was baptized into the Catholic church. As he is fond of saying, "I was baptized three times. I hope one of them sticks."

Soon after entering the church, Robert knew he was being called to the priesthood. His dad's side of the family, being Catholic, thought it was wonderful. His mother "didn't understand it, but she adjusted." He headed off to St. John's University for two years of college.

It was at St. John's that he met his mentor, Father Godfrey Diekmann, an internationally renowned liturgist and theologian. Father Valit describes Father Godfrey, who also was to become his spiritual advisor, as a man who was very influential in his spiritual development. "I adopted his love of liturgy, and it is my great love."

In July of 1950, Robert Valit entered New Melleray Abby, a Trappist monastery outside of Dubuque, Iowa, and became a professed monk. The Trappist life, as he describes it, is a cloistered, contemplative life. There is emphasis on prayer, liturgy, spiritual reading and study, and the day-to-day self-sustaining work of the monastery. With the exception of occasional conversation with superiors, an atmosphere of silence was the rule. On April 4th 1961, Father Valit was ordained a monk priest in the chapel at New Melleray.

Not long after his ordination, the Second Vatican Council eased the practice of silence to allow conversation at certain times and in certain places. Nevertheless, after 22 years in the Trappist

order, Father Valit realized that, although he valued a life of prayer, he felt a strong desire to be among the people. After being properly dispensed as a monk, he returned to the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis in 1972 to become a diocesan priest.

Because he came from outside the Archdiocese, Father Valit was required to go through a five year period called 'incardination' before he could assume the duties of pastor. And so he served as associate pastor at St. Anne's parish in North Minneapolis, St. Margaret Mary in Golden Valley, and St. Columba in the Midway area of St. Paul. While at St. Margaret Mary he also served as the chaplain for North Memorial Medical Center.

Regarding the many relocations that are part of the life of a parish priest, Father Valit says "The physical aspect of moving is always hard. The rest depends entirely on how one is received and made to feel welcome. My personal experience is that people love their priests." His advice to parishioners who are getting a new priest? "Pray for them, smile, and be nice."

After his incardination, he became pastor at St. John the Evangelist in Little Canada for two years. Following that, he was assigned to St. John the Baptist in Dayton, near the town of St. Michael, for five years. Finally, he served four years as pastor of St. Peter in Forest Lake. All three of these churches had elementary schools, which Father Valit describes as "a great source of vitality for a parish."

Feeling that he did not have an appetite for the administrative work of a pastor, and knowing that he was happiest doing what he loved to do, namely, administering the sacraments, Father Valit returned to life as an associate at Our Lady of Grace in Edina for 8 ½ years. Upon his decision to retire in 2000, he was asked by his close friend, Father Michael Skluzacek, to come to Stillwater and help at his parishes of St. Mary and St. Michael. What's the best part about being a retired priest? "I do the things I love to do, I don't really do anything I don't want to do, I never go to a meeting, and I get paid!"

Reflecting on his full and varied life as a priest, Father Valit notes that it is a vocation not without its challenges. The task of preparing homilies and the occasional loneliness can be difficult. But the rewards are abundant. He remembers a particularly meaningful moment following the tragic funeral of a 16 year old boy who drowned in a lake in front of his home. After the funeral mass the boy's father told him, simply, "You made me feel good."

To those considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life, he would want them to understand how beautiful religious life is, but to also be open to discernment and to spiritual direction from those in authority. The role of the family in fostering vocations through parental encouragement and example of religious practice is very important.

To those who want to grow in their faith, Father Valit emphasizes celebrating the Eucharist "with understanding" and finding time for prayer each day.

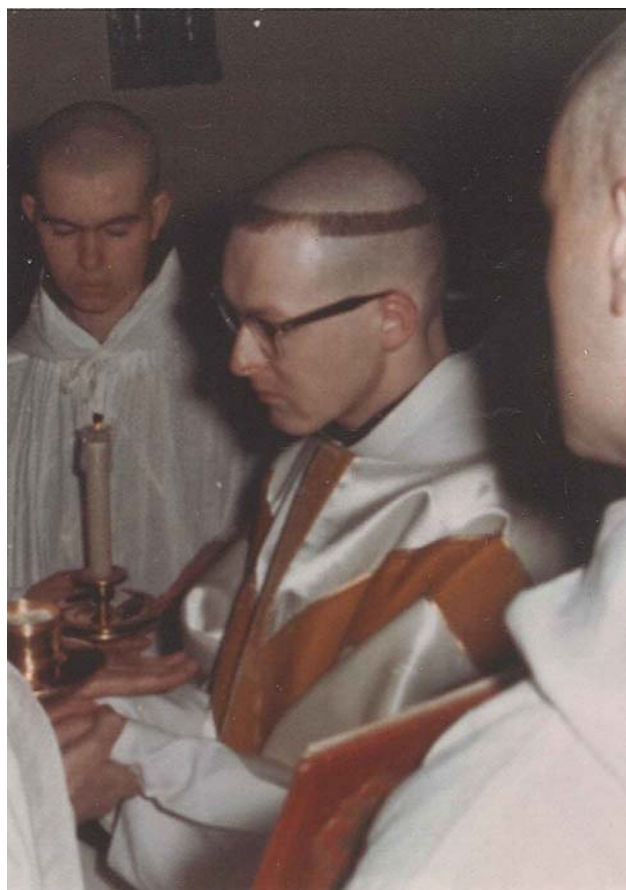
And to those who want to build strong marriages and families he stresses the importance of participating in marriage prep and taking the commitment seriously. He advises couples that communication is vital, prayer life is vital, and couples must have the humility to seek outside help if there is a need for it. "The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother, and the most important thing a mother can do for her children is to love their father."

Here are some things you might like to know about our dear retired priest: His favorite saint is St. Bernard of Clairveaux, a 12th Century Cistercian abbot who is the most important of the saints of the Trappist order. St. Thomas the Apostle is his confirmation saint. Psalms 63 and 95 are his favorite prayers, and his favorite scripture reading is the hymn beginning the second chapter of Philippians. He has a passionate love of classical music and enjoys dining out with friends and attending concerts.

As he nears the 50th anniversary of his ordination next April, I asked Father Valit if there is something he would like people to know about him. He didn't hesitate – "I love the priesthood, I love the Eucharist, I love people, and I'm very grateful for the affirmation I receive from people."

*So I look to you in the sanctuary
to see your power and glory.
For your love is better than life;
my lips offer you worship
I will bless you as long as I live
I will lift up my hands, calling on your name.*
– from Psalm 63

Karen Moosbrugger
St. Michael's Parish Council
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Fr. Valit at his ordination, his hair cut to show that he is a member of the choir.