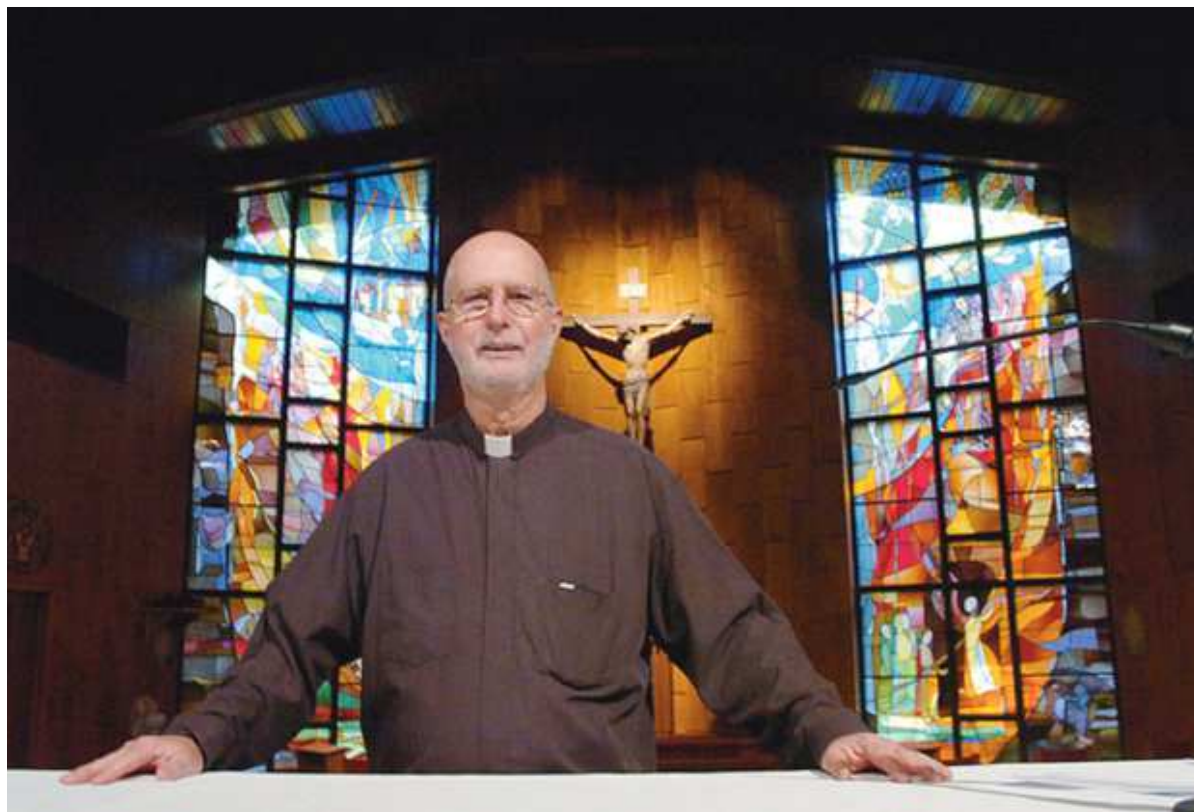


“God got the first choice”

***The Hour*, Norwalk, CT**

November 6, 2011

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Hour photo, Erik Trautmann

NORWALK -- If we're lucky, at some time or another in our lives there's one person who we know we can trust with some of our darkest secrets, and share in some of the biggest joys of our lives.

For hundreds, and maybe thousands of Norwalkers, the Rev. David Blanchfield is that person.

The pastor of St. Jerome's Catholic Church for the last 17 years, Blanchfield (known as Father Dave to many) has made his mark in the Cranbury section of town, and has become for many people a great friend, mentor, teacher, and spiritual advisor.

"The parish becomes your extended family," he said. "You have this wonderful community and you're part of the fabric. If you're a good priest people let you into their lives to a deep level."

Judging by the turnouts at the Sunday masses, the many people who stay after to greet him, and the many community events that Blanchfield attends, he must be pretty popular. October is perhaps best known for pumpkins and Halloween costumes, but it was also National Clergy Month. For many of us, Sundays are a day of rest and relaxation, but it's one of Father Dave's busiest -- and most enjoyable of his week. Starting at around 8 a.m., he shares the mass load with two other priests, preparing the Eucharist and giving homilies that explain the day's scriptures and how they translate to people's lives. It can also be an emotional job. After the masses, it's not uncommon for him to preside over a happy wedding and then switch gears to say a funeral mass.

"You're being yourself in the moment, responding to the joy of the wedding or the sadness of the funeral," he said. "It's about who you are in the moment."

During the week, he's a busy guy as well. Up around 5 a.m. he prefers to start his day with a walk at Riverside Cemetery, followed by Mass at 9 a.m. From there, it's usually Bible study before heading in for some office work. And he's always on call -- even though he has days off, he never knows when he's going to get a phone call from the hospital asking for him to come pay a visit to a sick or dying parishioner.

Dressed in his traditional priest uniform of all black and a white tab collar insert, it's hard to remember that he is, at it's most basic, the CEO and CFO of a business that has a budget of \$750,000. He's responsible not only for overseeing daily operations, but it's usually him cleaning it up when something leaks or a light bulb breaks -- that's the part of the job he doesn't like.

"I have the burden of being ultimately responsible for everything," he said. "I stay a pastor because I have a vision of what a parish can be, so I am willing to do all the stuff I don't like about being a pastor."

Born in Hartford on January 18, 1944, Blanchfield grew up the oldest of four children, the son of a stay-at-home mother and the father of a salesman. He was a pretty typical young man as an avid lover of hiking and the outdoors, he was actively involved in the Boy Scouts and swam competitively. The oldest of four children, he attended grade school and part of high school at St. Joseph's Cathedral Grammar School in West Hartford before graduating from Conard High School. Perhaps one of the things that sticks out the most from his high school years was is Latin teacher, Anita Flannagan.

"She was spectacular," he said. "She was vibrant and made Latin and mythology interesting."

He had been exposed to religion and the Catholic Mass at a very young age. In addition to the masses he attended every day in school, his father made a deal with him that he could borrow the car if he took his grandmother to mass every day. That had a huge influence on him that and the fact that in the 1960s the Catholic Church was experimenting with a kinder, gentler Mass style that had the priest turned toward the congregation and involved them in a more personal style. By his third year as a philosophy major at Holy Cross College in Massachusetts, he had an idea of where his career would take him.

"By senior year at college, I pretty much knew I would be a lawyer or a priest," he said. "I figured God got the first choice."

It was 1966, and he applied to the Archdiocese of Hartford to be a priest. From there, it was off to the seminary in Albany, NY and lots of classes in scripture, canon law, church history, and a class called Homiletics, which taught him how to preach. Three years later, his faith was tested when, at a summer job he became a pool director and Red Cross Instructor and fell in love with a woman he met there. He made a decision to leave the seminary, but as fate would have it, the relationship ended.

"I kept feeling the pull to priesthood and decided to stop fighting," he said. "I fought celibacy because I wanted my own family. But you get back so much more than you give up. Besides, I'm such a worrier by nature so being a parent would have put my stress level off the scale."

After more school, and armed with a masters in theology Father Dave was hired by Mercyhurst College in Pennsylvania to teach theology, where he stayed for 11 years, publishing in theology journals and serving as campus minister. Later he earned a doctorate in ministry at Catholic University, and finally, in 1982 he was ordained a priest in the Diocese of Bridgeport.

Before coming to Norwalk, his first assignment was pastor at St. Mary's Parish in Ridgefield, an active parish that had several weddings on the weekends and an active high school population. He then served briefly at Stamford Catholic High School and St. Gregory's in Danbury before being named pastor at St. Jerome's in 1994. Since arriving, he has overseen a complete renovation of the church's interior, as well as helping build up the high school parishioner program and other parishioner groups. He and the three priests he lives with at the rectory on Half Mile Road even adopted a rescue dog named Murphy.