

*Question:* Who were the people who encouraged you in your vocation?

*Answer:* Mostly the girls that I dated... *just kidding.* -- Father Ted Stoecklein

## Priests shared joys, challenges in year-long feature

During the "Year for Priests" – June 19, 2009 through June 19, 2010 – the *Southwest Kansas Register* ran a weekly "question and answer" feature with every priest in the diocese who was willing to participate. The idea behind the feature was to put a human face on those men who have done the extraordinary by offering their lives entirely to God in service of His people. We saw through their answers their fears, their challenges, their joys, and often a sense of humor, which, if judged by the priests depicted on TV and in the movies, is supposedly completely lacking.

We've got an interesting bunch of priests in the Catholic Diocese of Dodge City. At once wise and wise-cracking, you find in each priest a deep faith edged often by a humble question of their own abilities.

Following are a few snippets from the year-long feature, examples highlighting some of our priest's joys and challenges. All of their answers are available at [www.dcdiocese.org/vocations](http://www.dcdiocese.org/vocations).

### Father Wesley Schawe

#### What do you like most about being a priest?

Hearing confessions is probably not my most comfortable moment (from a personality perspective), but I like it so much because I know what it means, what it does, and how important it is.

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

People turn to a priest in the face of death, violence, anger, or despair, looking for some hope. I think my greatest challenge is wanting to help everyone in every moment of pain or sadness, but knowing that I can't. It gives a lot more perspective to fixing air conditioners, parking lots, and sound systems!

### Father Jim Dieker

#### What do you like most about being a priest?

The powerful freedom of priesthood to be with people at the most spiritual moments of their lives is the great wonder and blessing of priesthood. It is being an instrument of communion with God and with one another.

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

The greatest challenge is the constant grumbling and complaining about really petty differences and human insecurities within the local church. It is a great sadness to lose the practice of the faith in Jesus Christ over a few words said or left unsaid, or a gesture misinterpreted or simple dislike of someone or something in the Church.

#### What has been one of the highlights, so far, of your priesthood?

Every Sunday Mass is a highlight, but I remember and still am affected greatly by the opportunity to pilgrimage to Rome during the Jubilee Year of 2000. This was a gift of a good friend and mentor, Father Ken Schuckman. I was so impressed with at once the smallness, and at the same time, the greatness of the Roman Catholic Church.

### Father Ted Stoecklein

#### Was there a particular individual who inspired you to become a priest?

I can't narrow it down to one. Most definitely my parents had the most influence, but I didn't realize it until after they were gone. At the time my parents died, I didn't even want to be Catholic. It wasn't until I grew out of adolescence that I began to appreciate their faithfulness to the Church. Three of my brothers were ministers in the Assemblies of God church. Inadvertently they influenced me by their passion for loving and serving Christ. ... From a distance Pope John Paul II was a tremendous inspiration, but I never did meet him. Then there is Mary, the Mother of God. She has been my constant consolation before and during priesthood.

#### Who were people who encouraged you in your vocation?

Mostly the girls that I dated... just kidding. Above all, my step-mother, Barbara. I once went to look at Conception Seminary just so she would leave me alone about being a priest. When I was working for Msgr. Norbert Temaat in Garden City, he probably would have killed me or at least fired me if he didn't think I was a good prospect for the seminary. I probably would not be in the Diocese of Dodge City without the encouragement of Scotty and Lea Ann Scott.

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

The biggest struggle is being a public person. As a priest you are always in the public eye. That is hard for me.

### Father Rene Labrador

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

I really have a lot of challenges in my priestly ministry. But with all honesty, coming to Southwest Kansas to serve the three parishes of Rush County was the greatest challenge I ever faced in my priestly life and ministry. Resolving conflicts and making decisions in the three parishes are not easy. Because I have such a deep respect and great love for people, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. But as a pastor, there are times that I have to resolve issues and conflicts and make decisions for the common good and for the good of the three parishes. And the decisions I made sometimes (though unintentionally) hurt the feelings of the few. I really hate that. I really feel bad about that. But I have to make decisions for the sake of the common good.

### Father John Strasser

#### What do you like most about being a priest?

Helping people realize that God is with them in the joys and sorrows of life and in the daily routine of life.

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

Being a pastor in southwest Kansas challenges me to discover, develop and use all of my talents and ultimately to trust in God at the same time. I find this challenge a life-giving faith adventure.

#### What has been one of the highlights, so far, of your priesthood?

Meeting and serving with priests, religious and parishioners in diocesan and parish ministry.

### Father David Kraus, JCL

#### What do you like most about being a priest?

The freedom to keep God present among the crowd is a pleasant vocation. Also, I really enjoy visiting the sick and providing sacraments to the elderly.

#### What has been one of the highlights, so far, of your priesthood?

I think studying Canon Law at the Gregorian University in Rome was a great highlight. I met many priests from all over the United States who were definitely supportive. Many of these, and one good friend, are now bishops. I truly enjoyed helping with Holy Communion at Papal Masses at St. Peter's, about 10 times in two years. My parents even saw me on television doing my job as a priest. Also, one day I was walking in the street near the Vatican and this cardinal came toward me with his hand out for me to shake it. It was Cardinal Ratzinger – now Pope Benedict XVI. He recognized me since I had given him Communion the Sunday before. I haven't washed my hand since!

#### What do you do in your free time?

Believe it or not, I think a little, and pray some. I used to read considerably, but now enjoy – since I'm retired – having coffee a couple times a day with other seniors in Ransom. Now and then I travel to Ness City to help with confessions and it's a pleasure to have the noon meal with the teachers and students of Sacred Heart School.

### Father Warren Stecklein

#### What do you like most about being a priest?

I truly think I would be happy in a number of different vocations. Making the choice, accepting the call of the priesthood however, is where I truly believe God has called me, and continues to call me to be. I have had the opportunity to meet and come to know some of the most wonderful people imaginable: people who I try to serve, people who continue to challenge me, people who make my faith grow, and people who truly care about me.

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

Although intellectually I know better, I try to please all people, all the time, and it continually gets me into trouble (and I know I do not succeed in doing so). I have such a great love for the Catholic Church, and I know there are other ministers and people constantly trying to entice people away from the Church, so I often try to accommodate when I should not. I am trying to trust the grace of God to make up for my many inadequacies. I know God provides for his people, but often I am a little too eager to do what God may not want me to.

### Father Ted Skalsky

#### What do you like most about being a priest?

I like being able to help people on their way to salvation. Many other professions help people in important ways, but a priest can help people in ways that will last for an eternity. Even the best of doctors can only keep people alive for so long. A person who helps people in their relationship with God can help them in a way that will have eternal value.

#### What has been one of the greatest challenges you face in your ministry?

I think the greatest challenge is ministering in a secular culture that no longer accepts the basic Christian values. It is hard because there is no longer a solid point of reference in people's minds. For many, the teachings of the Church no longer carry authority. Neither do the Scriptures. When those two things are seen as one point of view among many, there is no longer a solid foundation upon which to teach. I find that very hard. It is also a real challenge to uphold teachings which are no longer accepted in our secular culture.