

Retreat attendees gain a 'listening ear'

BY WARD MIELE

Managing Editor

NEWARK—As he prepared for last weekend's three-day discernment retreat, Father John D. Gabriel, director of vocations for the Archdiocese of Newark, was guided by his vision of the experience as a time for men considering the priesthood "to discern, to listen, to speak and to enjoy the presence of Christ."

Reflecting on the essence of a retreat, Fr. Gabriel said "often in life, it seems to us that we are the ones making the decisions, that we guide our lives according to our own wishes and desires. Yet sometimes, even without knowing it, we are in fact being led by forces outside of ourselves." That, the former pastor of Saint Thomas More Parish, Fairfield, stressed, is what the retreat was all about.

The work that goes into tilling the fields for vocation awareness has yielded a bountiful harvest for the archdiocese in recent years. Last May the Church of Newark again led the nation in the number of new priests with 13 (see *The Catholic Advocate*, May 20, 2009). In addition the archdiocese had the most ordinandi in the United States in 2006 with 17 and 13 three years ago.

Addressing the 25 men who attended the "Stay with Us, Lord" retreat, which was held Jan. 8-10 at the Carmel Retreat House in Mahwah, Fr. Gabriel prepared a reassuring essay, writing that "God will reveal His plan to you; perhaps in a dramatic way but, more likely, it will be revealed in the quiet of your own heart, in a moment of heartfelt prayer, perhaps during a time of struggle or joy." He urged them to "develop a listening ear and cultivate within yourself an availability to God so that His Word will take root in you....your peace rests in doing His will."

Calling the priesthood "an awesome life, a great adventure, a life filled with meaning and purpose," Fr. Gabriel cautioned "don't let feelings of fear or unworthiness make you dismiss any possibility right off the bat. Relax, be open and honest and put your past, present and future into God's hands. Jesus always seemed to have a special place in His heart for imperfect people as long as they were willing to trust in Him."

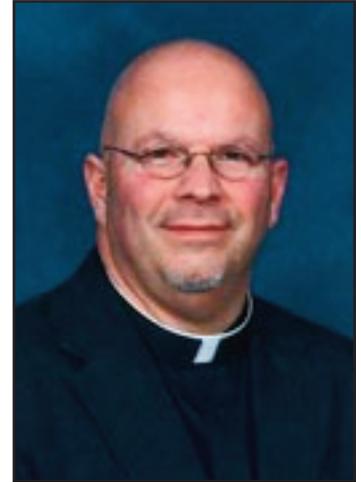
The vocations director told those at the retreat "from the beginning of time, God knew that you would exist at this moment. He knows the deepest desires of your heart, He knows your struggles and fears, He knows your potential for good. He has in mind a great plan for your life."

A focal point of the retreat was the words of Pope John Paul II on the meaning of vocation in comments made over the years to young people. Fr. Gabriel drew inspirational passages from the book "The Meaning of Vocation, In the Words of John Paul II," published in 1997 by Scepter Publishers, a collection of writings and the text of speeches given by the pope.

On one occasion the late pontiff said "you must never think that you are alone in deciding your future...when deciding your future, you must not decide for yourself alone." Pope John Paul II elaborated, declaring that "every vocation is part of a divine plan."

He urged young people to ask about the love of Christ. "Acknowledge His voice resounding in the temple of your heart. Return His bright and penetrating glance, which opens the paths of your life to the horizons of the Church's mission. It is a taxing mission today more than ever, to teach men the truth about themselves, about their end, their destiny, and to show faithful souls the unspeakable riches of the love of Christ. Don't be afraid of His demands, because Jesus, who loved us first, is prepared to give Himself to you as well as asking of you. If He asks much from you, it is because He knows you can give much."

Another bit of advice given by Pope John Paul II was that "there is a wonderful way of experiencing love in life, it is the vocation to follow Christ in the celibate state freely chosen or in the state of virginity for the love of the kingdom of heaven. I ask each of you to question yourselves seriously about whether God may not be calling you to one of these paths. And to all of those who suspect that they may have this possible personal vocation I say: pray insistently to receive the needed clarity, but then reply with a joyful 'yes!'"



Father John Gabriel