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"He kind of put me at ease right away," Fr. Widder said in a phone interview with your Catholic Herald. "... one of his good things is that he's really easy to get along with. He's like an eternal optimist that kind of brings out the best in everyone."

Fr. Widder said that Fr. Heppe's connection and involvement with the people of the Holy Family community made him a great pastor, "because he was really good at reaching out to people and making them feel comfortable around him."

Fr. Heppe would oftentimes show up at community and parish events, visit people and work out at the YMCA where Fr. Widder said "he (Fr. Heppe) felt like he did some of his best ministry." Fr. Widder laughed at the idea of the former Holy Family pastor's best ministry being in an exercise facility until he went with him one day and witnessed it firsthand.

As Fr. Heppe was using the weight machines, "...this guy comes up to him and says, 'So, now tell me about this Immaculate Conception that's coming up,'" Fr. Widder said laughing. "...He's got a great ability of just touching base with people where they're at and making people feel comfortable and just, kind of, I guess, bringing out the best in people."

Fr. Widder also described the priest's ability to come up with great one-liners as a way that he "kind of opens up the doors for deeper conversation with people," he said.

During his internship, Fr. Widder said the now-vicar was key in his decision to become a priest.

"It's like the critical year that kind of makes or breaks you in some sense because it's practical hands on and we had a lot of long conversations," Fr. Widder said, explaining how they used to meet up on the couches at the end of the day to talk about the good times and the struggles. "...he's just always there, and he's just always reaching out."

Spreading hope

Fr. Widder considers Fr. Heppe to be a leader who smiles even when everything is falling apart.

"Fr. Pat is just really someone of hope. Wherever he goes, he spreads hope," he said.

Following his ordination in 1977, Fr. Heppe spent six years as associate pastor at St. Peter Claver Parish, Sheboygan; as vocations director on the seminary high school staff for the "Call to Ministry" program from 1983-1987; as associate pastor of Our Lady of Good Hope, Milwaukee, from 1987-1989; and pastor of St. Joseph Parish, Fond du Lac from 1989 for six years and then renewed for another six.

In 2000, the six parishes that made up Holy Family – Sacred Heart, St. Joseph, St. Louis, St. Mary, St. Patrick and St. Peter – merged, closing three sites and building a new one. Fr. Heppe became the moderator of the priest team and led the parish community of more than 15,500 people through an experience he called "traumatic."

"Putting together six offices – it was the worst month of my life, absolutely horrendous," Fr. Heppe said of the merger that closed St. Louis, St. Patrick and St. Joseph. "I mean, you didn't know what you were doing. You didn't know where you were supposed to be going and that type of thing and it was difficult."

Leadership brings parishes together

Joe Bird, parish manager at Holy Family Parish since its inception and a former member of St. Patrick Parish, said the merger wasn't traumatic for him.

"I came out of the business world and I was used

to events like this – mergers and changes," Bird said. "...the merger had significant support, but there certainly were people who were against it and that was one of Fr. Pat's biggest challenges ... facilitating the healing and bringing people together."

Bird, who described Fr. Heppe as friendly, collaborative, a strong leader, wonderful parish priest and good listener, said that these traits helped the former Holy Family pastor succeed in doing just that.

"His leadership was key in bringing the six parishes together as one," said Bird.

Fr. Widder said that even though people had hard feelings about their parishes closing, Fr. Heppe was still positive, saying that they could work together.

"Overall, what they did in Fond du Lac, it wouldn't work in many places and I think he (Fr. Heppe) was a big part of that, just bringing people together, getting people to work together; I mean that's a big gift that he brings," Fr. Widder said. "...that's one thing that he does very well is he kind of gets people putting aside their differences and kind of focusing on the mission and working together."

Focus on three 'H's'

The Fond du Lac experience, combined with his work as vocations director, have helped Fr. Heppe relate to priests who are dealing with similar situations.

"All of this has given me just a wealth of information to tap into and I do," he said. "I tap into it a lot and I don't always say, 'Well, I know when I was going through this,' because they don't want to hear my experience, but I think my experiences have made me sensitive to what the priests are going through and what the parish councils might be going through because most of this stuff I've at least had some experience with – some a lot and some little."

While Fr. Heppe's title as vicar has changed his role a bit, he said his approach and focus on the three "H's" – holiness, health and happiness – in the lives of the priests has stayed the same. When he went to Fond du Lac in 1989, there were 12 priests serving that community. Now, with four ministering to the more than 17,000 people that make up the parish today, he said the three "H's" are even more important.

"It sounds a little hokey in a sense, but if they're going to be good priests, they need to be holy, they need to be healthy and they need to be happy doing what they're doing," he said.

Fr. Widder can attest to this from the time he spent with Fr. Heppe during his internship, as well as at the seminary before he was ordained.

"That's kind of really what he does," Fr. Widder said. "He's focused on prayer, he's focused on exercise and he's focused on ministry, too, and I think that's kind of what gets us into trouble at times ... when we kind of forget about one of those things."

But Fr. Heppe makes time to exercise – Fr. Widder said he doesn't think Fr. Heppe missed one of his 7 a.m. Saturday morning spin classes while he was in Fond du Lac with him – and while that meant Fr. Heppe wasn't doing ministry during that hour or so, Fr. Widder said he thought it enhanced the rest of what Fr. Heppe was doing, keeping his life balanced and focused.

Because Fr. Heppe's life is balanced with prayer, exercise and happiness, and he helps other priests balance their lives and get through rough patches, Fr. Widder said Fr. Heppe fits well into his role as vicar.

"I think he really bridges the gap between the archdiocesan offices and the regular person in the pews," Fr. Widder said. "I think he serves as a good kind of middle point."



Fr. Jack Kern,

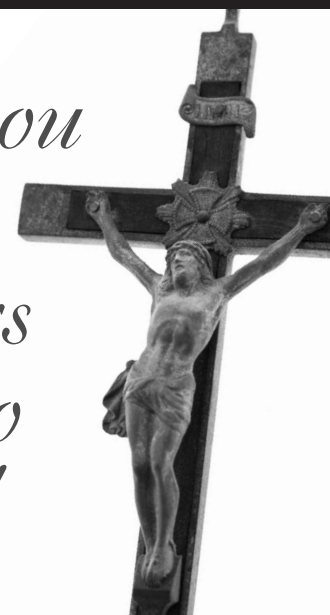
*Shepherd, Mentor, Caregiver, Challenger,
Teacher, Empathetic, Friend of the poor.*

Thank you for 42 yrs. of dedicated priesthood.

St. Catherine / United Cross Cluster

Fr. Robert Turner

*"Thank you
for your
many years
of service to
our parish"*



Blessed Sacrament Congregation



*With heartfelt and prayerful gratitude to Fr. Gerald Hessel
for nine years of priestly ministry. Happy Retirement.*

The Parish Family of Our Lady of Divine Providence.