

JOY OF MY VOCATION

Sister applies God's love to daily life experiences

Editor's note: In celebration of the Year for Consecrated Life, the Florida Catholic offers a series of articles told by religious sisters and religious order priests and brothers, who will share the joy of their vocation. Sister Concepta Najjemba of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Reparatrix, from Blessed Trinity Parish in Ocala and who operates Brother's Keeper soup kitchen there, shares her story.

SISTER CONCEPTA NAJEMBA, SISTERS OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY REPARATRIX

Special to the Florida Catholic

OCALA | I belong to the congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Reparatrix. We were founded in Uganda in 1948. I joined this congregation when I was only 14. The experience of joining so early was wonderful because I have grown up in religious life and have seen how much the love of God empowers religious. I have found I was able to learn how to serve God's people. In 1964, I was able to make the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

When I was sent to school to be trained as a teacher, it was a little bit of struggle to be a student and a religious at the same time. When I graduated from teacher training

college, I taught religion in grade school, which was wonderful. I learned to take care of the children and they learned about Jesus. I still know many of these children after so many years.

In religious life, I had the chance to go to school get two master's, and my doctorate degree. All this knowledge doesn't mean as much as the work I have done from my heart. I started out helping out in the schools and now I am working with the homeless and people with needs. That is the most important to me.

I found that in religious life, our presence is very touching to people. Even though I am working in a foreign country where I don't know the language, I find people coming and asking me questions. I am not here for my own; I am here for Jesus. My daily life and my religious life go hand in hand because if we separate them from another, then life would not be so meaningful. I try each day to use what I have learned and put it into practice. In fact, in the Gospel it is very well understood that we are to live in Christ in our daily lives and apply his love to our daily life experiences.

Last year, I had the chance to go to Israel, to the Holy Land. Being able to see where Jesus walked, where Jesus taught, was wonderful. Since I came back, I have tried



Sister Concepta Najjemba, Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Reparatrix, speaks with volunteers at the Brother's Keeper soup kitchen in Ocala. (LINDA CALDWELL | FC)

very hard to reach out to others — the sick, the prisoners, the homeless — where they are. That brings me so much joy. They are my people and I love them.

We have a practice in the soup kitchen. Before we have a meal, we say a Hail Mary. It is good to see the homeless wearing rosaries or praying four or five together. It is

amazing. I love my ministry and I am so happy to be there for everybody. I don't belong to just one person; I belong to them all. Living a religious life is a treasure. ■

Special collection supports retired diocesan priests

ELIZABETH WILSON

Special to the Florida Catholic

ORLANDO | Father Sean Cooney celebrates Mass every Sunday and at least once during the week. He hears Confessions at several area parishes, assists with senior adult ministry, presides at weddings and funerals, helps with retreats, leads pilgrimages to Ireland, provides spiritual direction — and has been retired for 11 years.

His experience is not unique. Unlike retirement from a secular career, for the 67 retired priests in the Diocese of Orlando, retirement does not always mean a time of peace and quiet. As retired priests continue to care for the people of God, the annual Priest Retirement and Care Collection Aug. 22-23 ensures that they will also receive care in their senior years.

Explaining the importance of the special collection, Bishop John Noonan remarked that retired priests are "wisdom characters" who continue to be a vital part of priestly ministry in the diocese.

"They retire from active min-

istry but they never stop being a priest," said Bishop Noonan. "They are wonderful because they have served the diocese for so long and now it's our turn to take care of them. They have taken care of our people and we need to make sure that they are looked after in their old age."

The funds from the annual collection will be used to assist with medical claims, prescription drugs, nursing home care, auto insurance, retirement residence subsidy, and pension benefits. With a 20 percent increase of retired priests over the last five years and 38 percent of diocesan priests over the age of 60, the cost of care is escalating quickly.

"This collection allows Bishop Noonan to safeguard the personal and professional dignity of our retired men. It provides the resources appropriate and needed for them," said Father Ed McCarthy. He retired from active ministry in March 2011, and Bishop Noonan appointed him the vicar for senior priests in October 2013.

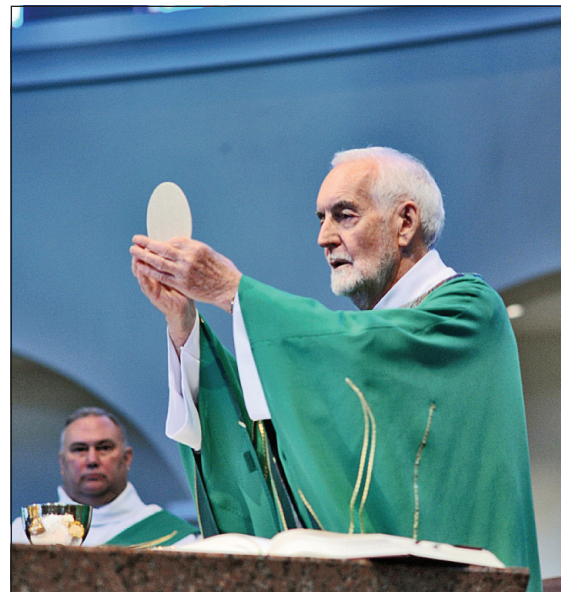
Dan Hardester, manager of services for senior and international priests, said as priests have taken

lifelong vows, the faithful are called to give lifelong support.

"These priests have dedicated their lives to sacramental ministry among us," Hardester said. "As part of their priestly ministry, they have pledged themselves to be family among the people of the Diocese of Orlando."

"They pledged obedience to Bishop Noonan, and they have taken all of us as family," he continued. "And just as we take care of the needs of the seniors and elderly in our own families, in our wider family of Church, these are our senior and older members and we are called to take care of them."

Father Cooney still assists at four parishes in the diocese: Sts. Peter and Paul and St. Margaret Mary in Winter Park, St. Mary Magdalen in Altamonte Springs and Most Precious Blood in Oviedo. He has been a priest for 56 years, previously serving as a high school teacher in his home country of Ireland, a campus minister for two decades and pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish for nearly 10 years. He appreciates the time to slow down, even a little. He re-



Father Sean Cooney, retired for 11 years, celebrates the noon Mass at Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Winter Park. The Priest Retirement and Care Collection Aug. 22-23 ensures that priests such as Father Cooney continue to receive care in their senior years. (JACQUE BRUND | FC)

called that while there was some initial fear of losing his identity in retirement, he continues to be greatly blessed in his vocation.

"The greatest blessing has been the opportunity to learn and practice and live a holy life as a child of God, and a servant of God and his people. That's the gift that God keeps on giving over the various

life stages of being a priest," said Father Cooney. ■

The Priest Retirement and Care Collection will benefit local diocesan priests who are retired in the Diocese of Orlando, and is not to be confused with the annual National Campaign for Retired Religious (nuns, priests and brothers).