



A piano teacher and a holy card

Strike a chord

*that leads to priesthood
for Bishop Robert Rose*

He had struck the final chord on the keyboard when his sixth-grade piano teacher placed a holy card in Robert J. Rose's hand. Then she asked him a question that would propel his life in a new direction.

The front of the prayer card depicted a boy praying. On the back was a prayer.

Did he understand what the boy was doing? Sister of Mercy Mary Delores asked. He did not, Sister Delores' young student replied.

The boy was praying, she explained, asking God if he was called to the priesthood. Her question sparked in young Robert a desire to pray for direction daily, particularly during the Holy Hour held every Sunday afternoon at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Grand Rapids that included a silent time of petitioning the Lord.

"She gave me the card, and I started saying the prayer every day," recalls Bishop emeritus Robert Rose, now 85. Those daily prayers are a key reason why Bishop Rose will celebrate his 60th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood later this year.

His journey to ordination required perseverance, however. Bishop Rose's father died when he was 7. After touring St. Joseph's Seminary when he was in the eighth grade, Bishop Rose decided to apply – but not before having a heart-to-heart conversation with his mother.

"My mother was not anxious for me to leave home when I was in ninth grade," Bishop Rose recalls. "I continued to pray about it. One Sunday afternoon in June, I was praying about it at the parish Holy Hour and it just seemed to me the Lord assured me that I should sign up for the seminary and begin preparing to be a priest. That week, I got on my bike and rode over to St. Joseph Seminary and got the forms for application."



► **ALL BECAUSE OF A CARD:** Bishop Rose enjoys retirement, but remains active by attending priestly gatherings and tutoring a handful of clergy in Greek and Latin. He still has the holy card that set him on a path toward priesthood.

'AN EMOTIONAL OCCASION'

During his 12th year as a seminarian, Robert Rose was ordained a priest on Dec. 21, 1955, at the Pontifical Urban College De Propaganda Fide in Rome. The celebrant was Cardinal Clemente Micara, the vicar general of the Holy Father for the Diocese of Rome. In the afternoon, the 30 newly ordained priests went to the St. Peter's for an audience with the Holy Father, Pope Pius XII. It was a high point in Bishop Rose's life.

"My mother and aunt managed to get to the ceremony by airplane, which in those days was quite novel," recalls Bishop Rose. "It was an emotional occasion for those of us ordained in the midst of our 12th year of seminary training. Pope Pius XII was a good friend of our college. On that afternoon he spoke to our group directly, urging us to be holy priests and ardent missionaries. It was hard to come back down to earth after the events of the day.

"I don't recall having serious doubts about my vocation," Bishop Rose continues. "I do recall a discussion with my spiritual director at the college in Rome as the time for ordination as subdeacon came nearer. That was the occasion when we made the promises of celibacy and praying the Divine Office daily. He reassured me that I had the vocation and should go ahead."

TEACHER, PASTOR, BISHOP

After his return from Rome, Bishop Rose was assigned to the faculty at St. Joseph's Seminary, a post he held from between 1956 and 1969. His command of foreign languages was put to good use. He taught religion, Latin, Greek (classical and New Testament), French and music (chant).

From 1969 to 1971, he served as director of the junior college students at the Christopher House, a seminary residence near Aquinas College. In 1971, he became rector of St. John's Provincial Seminary in Plymouth.

His sole pastorate was at Sacred Heart in Muskegon Heights from 1977 to 1981. "They were hard-



▶ **AT THE KEYS:** Bishop Rose still enjoys playing piano, a favorite pastime since childhood.



▶ **THE CARD:** Bishop Rose still has the holy card that set him on a path toward priesthood.

working people, strong in faith and very generous to the parish," Bishop Rose says of his parishioners.

He describes his four years at Sacred Heart as coming to "an abrupt end" when he was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Gaylord in October 1981. He enjoyed his years "Up North."

Pope St. John Paul II appointed him as the ninth bishop of the Diocese of Grand Rapids in 1989. He would become bishop emeritus in 2003, after Pope John Paul II accepted his resignation.

"The Holy Father was very friendly; even in the later years when his health was poor, he made the effort of speaking English," Bishop Rose recalls of the several visits he had with Pope St. John Paul II.

His 22 years of episcopal ministry were rewarding and challenging.

"You have the privilege of confirming young people from all around the diocese and you're privileged to ordain the priests and deacons of the diocese," says Bishop Rose.

"What I also enjoyed very much were the visitations to the parishes; They would start with Saturday evening Mass. I would stay overnight and attend, and preach at, all the Masses on Sunday, rest up a

bit and then meet with the staff of the parish and the pastoral council, and finally meet with the pastor," recalls Bishop Rose. "We have some fine leaders in our parishes."

'WE PREACH BY OUR EXAMPLE'

These days, Bishop Rose lives in a four-unit apartment complex at St. Camillus Woods, set on 18 acres in Byron Township. He stays connected to the diocese and priests by attending clergy days and major ceremonies, and in many personal contacts. He has tutored an ambitious handful of clergy in Latin and Greek.

His span of ordained ministry affords Bishop Rose words of wisdom he freely offers to seminarians and new priests – summed up in the words salvation and service.

"*Salus populi suprema lex:* The salvation of our people is the first law," says Bishop Rose. "We (priests) are sent out by the bishop to serve the people of a given parish or parishes. We serve by living and preaching the Gospel. The living comes first. Our people do automatically compare what we say from the pulpit with what we do in the church or the office or the rectory or the school. We preach first of all by our example." †