



# Profile

*Descriptive personal profile.*

# New priest hopes honesty will energize local parish

“I’m an alcoholic, and I’ve been sober for five years.”

Quite a statement for a stranger to make to a crowd. You would expect it to be greeted with a chorus of “hellos!” or a round of applause. But the members of this audience exchanged quick, nervous glances or simply stared in silence.

You see, the man who made that statement wasn’t standing behind a podium at an AA meeting; he was standing behind a pulpit addressing his congregation.

The Reverend Richard J. Tusky had just introduced himself to his new flock, the parishioners of St. Joseph Parish in Natrona, Pennsylvania.

It’s not fair to say the people of the parish were stunned — after all, they had learned a month before that their pastor of 11 years had passed away suddenly, and *that* was certainly more stunning news. But those gathered for Mass that day in July *did* seem uneasy... how much more could they be expected to take?

“It’s such a part of my being,” Tusky says, biting down on the filter tip of a little cigar and patting down his pockets for a lighter. “If I hadn’t revealed [my alcoholism], I would have been less than honest with the people — representing myself to be something I’m not.

“It’s me, and if they don’t want to have a recovering alcoholic in their midst as a leader, they should speak up... but I wasn’t going to hide it.”

*I wasn’t going to hide it.*

That seems to be the mantra that guides the life of Richard Tusky.

As a priest, he represents a dramatic change for this small, aging parish, which was formally “cre-

ated” in 1992 when the Diocese of Pittsburgh began the arduous process of parish closings and mergers. Natrona’s three Catholic churches — one Slovak, one Polish, and one Irish — were to be melded together.

Each group fought, sometimes bitterly, to keep its own clergy, its own traditions, its own processes — essentially its own sense of normalcy.

“They were hurt,” Father Tusky notes, remembering the mood throughout the diocese. “And hurt comes out in anger. But that was yesterday and this is today. I’m not going to dwell on the past.

“If people want to withdraw and say ‘I can’t handle being merged,’ God help them... find some peace. It’s a matter of open-mindedness, of going to the sacraments and not to the building.”

Opening minds. Perhaps that was God’s idea in sending Father Tusky to this still struggling parish. Perhaps he will represent a challenge, entirely new to the congregation, behind which they can all unite.

Tusky is brutally honest about himself, his demons and his limitations. He treats all matters parish with that same honesty. Officially, he was named “pastor” of the area’s large territorial parish, and “administrator” of St. Joe’s, since according to Canon Law, one priest can’t preside as pastor over two church communities. The formal titles mean little to Tusky, however, and he says he considers himself pastor of both parishes equally.

Tusky admits this new assignment is huge — four churches, a preschool, a grade school, a high school, a hospital, and a cemetery, as well as the spiritual lives of more than 3,000 families. He finds it more than a little overwhelming.

He remembers his conversation with the Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl, Bishop of Pittsburgh, when he was told about the move.

“I sat in this chair 11 years ago,” he reminded the bishop, “and asked you what I did wrong that you were sending me to [my last assignment]. Did I do something bad there, that you’re punishing me like this now?”

Tusky isn’t the first of the diocese’s clergy to be challenged with this somewhat daunting arrangement. According to Father John Rushofsky, director of the Pittsburgh Diocese’s Department for Clergy, eight other local priests divide their time between two or more completely separate parishes.

He notes that fewer men are answering the call to the priesthood and Pittsburgh’s current priest population is aging, so it’s natural that the diocese would be looking for alternatives to closing parishes for lack of priests. Since many of the city’s Catholic churches are within walking distance of one another, or are the cornerstones of very small communities, it seems logical to ask a priest from one church to help his neighbor down the road. In fact, some of the eight priests doing “double duty” suggested this solution themselves when they saw the need arise.

Father Tusky understands the factors that underlie his assignment, and he’s trying to strike a balance between his skepticism and his enthusiasm.

“This might be the wave of the future,” Tusky says. “I don’t think the bishop is going to shut down any more parishes, [but] will stretch the priests out, probably beyond what’s realistic.”

He knows it will be a challenge to serve everyone effectively and fairly, but despite his comment upon hearing about the move, he says he’s happy with the nature of the assignment.

“I never dreamed I would be given such a challenge. If I pace myself right, keep a good attitude and be smart about it, you know, delegate it prop-

erly and have good help, I suspect it can work.”

Tusky understands, of course, that how *well* it will work depends on the response of the parishioners.

“He’s different,” says one member of the parish as she stirs a roaster filled with kielbasa and sauerkraut at the church picnic. “He’s going to be interesting, that’s for sure.”

Another parishioner looks uncomfortable when asked for her assessment of Tusky. Though she makes no real comment, her strained expression says what she won’t — and says it very clearly.

Tusky laughs when asked how people have responded to him so far. “It’s hard for me to say [how they feel about me]. They all appear to be wonderful and kind and gracious, but I don’t know what everyone is saying behind my back.”

In street clothes and his signature Birkenstocks (a style he picked up from the Franciscan monks) Father Tusky easily blends into the church picnic crowd. He casually arrives with little fanfare. The sea of parishioners does not part for him. Except for a couple of preschoolers who run up and throw their arms around his legs in little bear-cub hugs, he’s greeted respectfully, without the shouts or back-slapping that might be appropriate picnic behavior. He leads the picnickers in prayer. That, and the fact that he’s allowed to jump the chow line, give away his status. He sits quietly at the end of a picnic table with his plate, appearing out of his element.

But when he slips into an alb and chasuble, the “uniform” of a priest preparing to say Mass, any uneasiness disappears. He strides from the back of the church, his head and neck jutting forward slightly from his shoulders, almost as if God Himself were pulling him toward the altar, bringing his body along behind as an afterthought.

Grabbing a leather-bound notebook from his chair, he plants himself in front of the altar to lead the opening prayer, keeping his tone rather conver-

sational, both to the congregation and to God.

During his sermon, it's clear he has a point to make and he's not shy about making it — loud and clear — his voice threatening the tinny sound system in the old church, bouncing off a pillar and rebounding off a wall.

As he prepares for the Consecration, the part of the Mass in which Catholics believe the bread and wine are transformed into the actual Body and Blood of Christ, a transformation comes over Father Tusky too.

He becomes very quiet, very focused. He removes his rings and his watch, sets his eyeglasses on the altar and pushes up the sleeves of his liturgical garments. It's clear Tusky's preparing himself for important work.

"It's frightening for me," Tusky says. "If you were to put yourself in my place and take a piece of bread with your hands — hands that you've hit people with, perhaps stolen with... and change that bread into God... and *believe* that... and know in your heart that that's what's happening... it's almost terrifying."

While Tusky's Consecration isn't terrifying, some of the parishioners would call it spooky at least. He seems to enter a trance-like state, holding the host and cup close to his lips as if his chanted prayers need to be able to jump the short distance from his mouth and directly into the bread and wine. Sometimes, he has the servers dim the lights in the church and focus a spotlight on the altar to emphasize the importance of the event. He becomes physically affected (he says he has even had muscle spasms) and claims to forget where he is and what he is doing — just loses track.

Tusky realizes that all this appears very dramatic but insists he is not "showboating."

"It's a tremendous act of love on God's part to be

with us in this way... [to have] the 'uncaused cause' of the universe in my mouth, in my gullet, in my person... it's overwhelming. I sometimes don't know how I can go on with the Mass. I have to remember it's a public thing... and not to go into some deep meditation."

It wasn't deep meditation that brought Tusky to the realization that he wanted to be a priest, though it was undoubtedly the most important decision of his life.

"I remember wanting to be a cowboy," he says, "then I remember wanting to be a priest." He was only 6 years old at the time.

With his decision made, Tusky left his home on Pittsburgh's South Side and became what years ago was called "a lifer," a youngster who began grooming for religious service as an elementary schoolboy. Lifers would spend their grade school and high school careers in the "minor seminary" before becoming traditional seminarians and then finally taking their priestly vows.

Life for minor seminarians, pre-Vatican II, was tough. Up at 5:30, in bed by nine, the boys were allowed no money, no TV, no radio. They attended school six days a week, Mass everyday (and twice on Sundays "to make it special"), and could only visit their parents once a month. Only he and one other man were ordained out of his original class of 113.

But much as a mother's pain in childbirth disappears when she cradles her baby in her arms, the memory of the hardships Tusky endured in seminary vanished when he said Mass for the first time at his assigned parish.

"Just to say Mass as an ordinary priest on my own... [to be] accepted by the old ladies [who] just trusted me as their priest," Tusky remembers. "I came back to the rectory after that first Mass and I

*priest, add three*

told God 'I could die now... there is nothing more in life I can accomplish than what I just did'."

Thirty-one years later, and saying Mass is still a thrill for Father Tusky. He tries to pass his love and reverence for the sacrament on to his new parishioners at St. Joe's. He is careful to train the children who serve on the altar and even stops Mass to explain to the faithful in the pews just what he's doing and why he's doing it.

That need to explain — to teach — might just be the path Father Tusky can take to help the people of St. Joe's Parish fully welcome him home.

"He's getting the parishioners more involved. He's much more open," said one of the ladies at the picnic.

Another, older gentleman added, "It's been years since we've had a priest like this. You know what's going on — he's very open about everything. He tells it like it is, there's nothing artificial... it's wonderful!"

It seems that God believes Father Tusky did have more to accomplish than saying that first Mass those many years ago. He has been sent on a new mission.

Has this outspoken priest turned a corner with his flock in Natrona? It's probably too early to tell. But perhaps he was wise to lay it all on the line — to decide "not to hide it" — during that first sermon at St. Joseph Parish.

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