

Redford native, Borgess alumni ordained a Roman Catholic priest

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SPECIAL WRITER

A few days before Fr. Pat Kelly was ordained a Roman Catholic priest he talked about how a bridge between the sports culture and religion will take a lot of otherwise forgotten people to God's doorstep.

"Sports is so pervasive in our culture and yet theologians and religious people haven't reflected on it and thought what the significance is," he explained.

Fr. Kelly, 38, was ordained Saturday, one of four Jesuits from Ohio and Michigan. With a shortage of priests today, this is considered a big class, but not compared to 35 years ago when his mentor, Fr. Art McGovern, a Jesuit at the University of Detroit Mercy, graduated. At that time there was an average 20 seminarians graduating annually.

Fr. Kelly celebrated Mass on Sunday at St. Valentine Church,

the Redford Township parish, where he attended Mass, served as an altar boy and played sports. He plans to work as assistant pastor at Gesu Parish in Detroit for one year and to begin a doctorate exploring the relationship between religion and sports.

One of five children of Maureen and James Kelly, Redford Township supervisor for 18 years, Fr. Kelly had no intentions as a kid to become a priest. At the time his mind was on running track and laying basketball, baseball and football. And he always excelled.

Star athlete

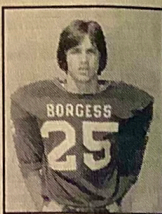
At Bishop Borgess High School, he played varsity basketball as a freshman and varsity football as a sophomore. He made the football Catholic Team in Detroit and his junior year he was picked All-Observer defensive back. In a glorious, never to be forgotten name, Kelly

scored four touchdowns and he was one of the first players named to the Bishop Borgess Hall of Fame. He graduated in 1978.

"I was having a lot of fun playing football and basketball and spending time with my friends, especially at Bishop Borgess," said Fr. Kelly explaining that his vocation is based on a friendship with Jesus and that he learned how to be a friend from his high school teammates.

Displaying the ultimate in loyalty, 15 of his teammates attended his ordination.

Sports remained an important part of Fr. Kelly's life at Grand Valley State where he was football captain and an all-confer-



Kelly

ence player on the team that won the conference championship. He took his first steps toward priesthood when he attended a prayer breakfast with his brother, Dan, at Grand Valley State.

"I was meeting people who were reading the Bible and I started reading the Bible," he said. "That's when I started really feeling drawn to something that turned out to be a Jesuit vocation."

Jesuits are an order of priests who live in religious communities, mostly universities.

"We see ourselves as trying to reach those people who are on the margins of the church and society," Fr. Kelly said. "Our ministry is directed to people who are not reached by the ordinary ministry of the church."

Another milestone toward his religious vocation was at the U of D Mercy when he attended a retreat with Fr. Justin Kelly, who is not related.

"That was when I had the experience that I couldn't explain away," Fr. Kelly said. "I had a real peace and joy that was connected with entering the Jesuit novitiate. For a number of years after I got done playing football in college I thought the spiritual life meant I had to forget about all the sports stuff."

Fr. Kelly taught high school for several years before attending Harvard Divinity School where he earned a masters degree of theological studies. His lay work also included teaching high school and coaching football and basketball at Monroe Catholic Central for two years. As a Jesuit regent at U of D Mercy, Fr. Kelly taught classes like the "The Quest for God Today," "Psychology and Religion," and "Religion, Education and Sport," which he created.

"I think in fact there is a huge gulf between how we think about



Proud: Former Redford Township Supervisor Jim Kelly poses with his son Fr. Pat Kelly who was ordained as a Roman Catholic Priest last Saturday. Fr. Kelly celebrated Mass on Sunday at St. Valentine Church, a Redford Township parish.

what religion is and this aspect of culture, sport," he said. "People initially think they don't have anything in common."

For years now, he has worked on diminishing that myth. At U of D Mercy he worked on a handbook used to generate discussion with kids after they watched the film, "Hoop Dreams," a documentary following the lives of two African American boys over a five-year span. The handbook is used in schools around the country today.

"You get a sense of the struggles they face, financially and holding things together," Fr. Kelly said. "It was a chance to use something they enjoyed, which was sports, and connect with a lot of aspects of their lives, like peer pressures; drug use and aspiring to become professional athletes. It's an opportunity to open up with these young people about values."

Five years ago, Kelly also helped establish an annual conference in Chicago called "Sports, Spirituality and Character Formation," for school administrators, coaches and teachers to use sports to generate positive character develop-

ment in students.

"We tend to think that the only things that are worthwhile is what can be measured and we can get locked into thinking that money and who has the most points on the board are the only things of importance," Fr. Kelly said. A person's real value comes from being loved by God, he added. "If we think that religion has only to do with the spirit and not with the body then it would have nothing to do with sport, but I think that's a misunderstanding of religion, especially from a Catholic perspective."

Reaching students with that kind of message is something Fr. Kelly does well, according to Fr. McGovern.

"I've had students say that he was the most influential teacher of their lives," Fr. McGovern said. "He gets them thinking about their spirituality and what they want to do with their lives. He is very good at touching not just the minds, but the hearts of young people in the classroom. He also has this unusual gift of talking with athletes, to talk about spirituality and theology and sports."