

Priest to retire after more than 50 years of service

BY ANGIE LANDSVERK
STAFF WRITER

WEYAUWEGA – When Rev. Bert Samsa was young, he was a big fan of *National Geographic*.

"I loved to read about all those far away places. I wanted to be the man who took all the pictures. Then, I became a Capuchin. That was the end of that dream. I was chosen for different jobs, and I enjoyed all of them," he said.

Now, Samsa, who has been the pastor at SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Weyauwega since Oct. 12, 1995, is preparing for another change.

He is preparing for retirement. His last day at the parish is Jan. 27.

The 80-year-old Samsa was ordained in 1956 and told the story of how he was called to the priesthood.

He grew up in Kingsford, Mich., and was an eighth-grade student when two boys were soon going away to the seminary.

"The pastor asked me one day,

"What do you think about that," Samsa said. "I said I thought it was pretty neat for them. He said, 'Would you like to go, too?'"

Samsa's pastor got him a slot and instead of completing his second half of eighth grade, Samsa went to St. Lawrence Seminary in Mount Calvary, Wis.

"It wasn't a great idea to skip the last half of eighth grade, but I made it through. I caught on. I learned to study," he said. "I had never seen a Capuchin before, with their sandals and beards. It was all new to me."

St. Lawrence Seminary was founded by Capuchin Franciscans in 1860, and when Samsa went there, Capuchins did all the teaching.

"In my fourth year, on summer vacation, I worked on the railroad," he said. "I got in an accident and broke my arm. I spent eight weeks in a hospital in



Samsa

Chicago. It was a great retreat. I decided if I was going to become a priest, I better join the order."

Samsa said when a Capuchin works in a diocese, he is "on loan" to the diocese.

"The bishop tells you what to do in church, and the provincial regulates your lifestyle," he said. "Basically, they want us to live in community, but in some jobs, you can't live in a religious community. So now, I'm going back to community life. I'm going to a Capuchin retirement home. It is in Appleton."

Samsa's more than 50 years in the priesthood has included serving as a pastor in parishes and also serving as a chaplain from 1963 to 1970 in Saudia Arabia.

"After seven years in the desert, I asked to join the Army," he said.

Samsa served a total of 24 years in the U.S. Army, retiring in 1994.

He was a chaplain at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, in New York, in Vietnam, at Leavenworth Prison in Kansas, in Italy, in Germany and at Fort Sam Houston in Texas.

After retiring from the U.S. Army, he was finishing a sabbatical and wanted a job in Appleton, because his mother was living in a retirement home in Kaukauna at that time.

"The order didn't have anything open, so they told me to call

Mass schedule to change

On Saturday, Jan. 29, the Rev. Brian Belongia will assume the duties of pastor of SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Weyauwega. He will continue to be the pastor of St. Mary Magdalene Catholic Community in Waupaca and Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Manawa.

Beginning that weekend, the Mass schedule will be 4:30 p.m. Saturday at St. Mary Magdalene, 8 a.m. Sunday at Sacred Heart, 9:30 a.m. Sunday at St. Mary Magdalene and 11 a.m. Sunday at SS. Peter and Paul.

Each of the three parishes will remain open. The plan to link the three parishes with one pastor began around 2004.

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the personnel director of the Green Bay Diocese," Samsa said. "His phone was always busy. He was trying to find a priest for an absence."

Eventually, Samsa was able to connect with the personnel director and was leaving the parking lot of a Green Bay church when he learned that in addition to becoming the pastor of SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Weyauwega, he would also be the pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Manawa.

"They were two small parishes. I was able to handle it," he said.

This weekend, SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church will celebrate Samsa's retirement. A reception will be held in the church's hall af-

ter the 4 p.m. Mass on Saturday, Jan. 22. On Sunday, Jan. 23, a reservation-only party will be held in the afternoon at Ted's Grandview Supper Club in Fremont.

During his many years in the priesthood, Samsa has seen many changes in the church.

Among them is the number of young men entering the priesthood.

When asked about his own decision to do so, he said, "Consider the time. In '41, the war began."

Samsa said the country turned to prayer. "Our faith meant a lot," he added.

He had always been a server at church and close to the church, he said.

"I decided to give it a shot. When I entered, the first year, we had a class of 60. Out of those, maybe 12 became Capuchins and

12 diocesan priests," Samsa said. "Parents encouraged children to enter religious life. Now, I talk to the kids and say, 'Do you ever think about becoming a priest? I need someone to take my place.' They say, 'I want to get married.'"

Samsa says it is a changing world and it will change again.

Of all the ways in which he served as a priest, doing so at Leavenworth Prison was the hardest job he ever had, he said.

While serving there, he started a prayer group with the military civilians who worked with the prisoners.

"And, it's still going on today," Samsa said. "I started that around 1972. I get a report every week that they're still meeting on Sunday night. It's not always what we want to do but what the Lord wants."

Samsa said he enjoyed all his work, regardless of where it was. "I was always happy to come and always happy

to go, too," he said.

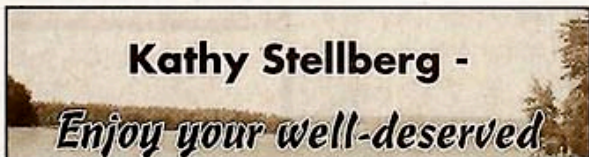
And, when he moves to the Capuchin retirement home in Appleton, he will have one of his brothers with him.

His 75-year-old brother, John Francis, is also a Capuchin and lives there. "He's upstairs, and I'm downstairs. He's my younger brother, and he's supposed to take care of me," Samsa said with a slight smile.

When asked about his retirement plans, Samsa said, "What's ahead? I don't know. I'm going to do nothing for awhile. I have a huge library. They're (books) all boxed up. I've got a lot of work to rearrange them and a lot of books to read."

Describing himself as a realist, he said he likes to read books about history and theology.

"It was the greatest life. I couldn't have chosen anything better," Samsa said of the priesthood. "I did what I could. The rest of it is in the hands of God."



Kathy Stellberg -

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