



Full Text of "An Interview with Bishop William S. Skylstad '60"

Can you share a little about how you heard a call to the priesthood?

I am the oldest of six siblings with an immigrant father from Norway and mother from St. Joseph, Minnesota. Our family grew up in the Methow Valley in North Central Washington State. My parents were apple farmers. We lived sixteen miles from our local parish of St. Genevieve in Twisp in a very non-Catholic area. I went to a one room country school house for five years in Methow and a consolidated public school in Pateros for the rest of my grade school years. I mention that reality because already in the sixth or seventh grade I felt a strong call to priesthood. In recent decades I have come to appreciate even more the powerful call of the Holy Spirit, even for a twelve-year-old kid.

What was it about the priestly life that you felt especially drawn to?

I always admired our pastors over the years of my childhood. In the fourth grade I learned to be an altar boy and served in both parishes for which my pastor was responsible. In Lent I served for the Stations of the Cross in both parishes as the pastor would pick me up on the way to Sacred Heart in Brewster. The pastors would often stop by at our farm home for dinner so I came to admire them and their ministry very much.

You entered the Josephinum at age 14. How did that come about? How did your family feel about your desire to leave home at such a young age to discern a call to the priesthood?

The normal age for entering the seminary in the 1940's was the beginning of high school. My pastor, Father Raymond Klemmer '40 was ordained at the Josephinum. In those days, room, board and tuition were an incredible \$100 a year. My parents and pastor suggested that is where I should attend the seminary. Hesitantly I was agreeable. Nine months away from home was a long time then. So at fourteen years of age, I got on the train at Wenatchee on to Chicago and then to Columbus. Today I admire my parents' courage of putting me on the train by myself and letting me go from the farm. I was at the age of being a very useful farm hand. And those years at the Josephinum proved to be such a blessing.

What are your best memories of your time at the Josephinum?

The whole sense of community was strong. The regimen was relatively strict and full. The liturgical life was integrated into our daily routine. Classes were also on Saturday morning and study halls scheduled on weekends. We also had to work to support the community.

We cycled thorough sorting laundry and dishwashing. We were asked to do two hours of labor every week for the institution, and there were crews. I was on the book binding crew (for eleven years), and it was the Josephinum that I learned to be a ham radio operator (still am, K7NKL) with the encouragement of Father Gerald Durst. Participation in sports was a must with teams divided up from the majors to the super peewees. The lifestyle was such that you would never forget. The bonding together was strong. Another strong memory for me was participation in the marching, band, the glee club and in the later years the polyphonic choir under the direction of Msgr. Walter Rees.

Did you have any favorite classes or professors?

I find it difficult to pick out any special professors. Looking back over those years, they were men who dedicated their lives to the formation of future priests. That commitment was impressive and inspiring.

You were ordained at the Josephinum on May 21, 1960. Can you share some memories of that day?

What a great day it was! The choir, the joyful spirit were most memorable. The only downside was limited space for guests. I was allowed six seats (my parents, my sister and her husband, and my aunt and uncle). On the other hand, family and friends traveling 2500 miles would have been difficult.

How have you kept in touch with your classmates after you were ordained?

I think as the class of '60 we had a very close bond. Over the decades we attended the alumni reunions and also scheduled regular gathering amongst ourselves (e.g. Chicago, Teton National Park, etc.). Almost all of my classmates came to my ordination as bishop in Yakima in 1977. For those of us alive we still keep in contact.

What were a few of the most valuable things you experienced or learned at the Josephinum that prepared you for your ministry?

The whole sense of fraternity was strong which I think carried over to an important part of my priestly ministry. There was tremendous diversity in our student body. If I remember correctly, there were seminarians from thirty-two states. So as priests, we had priestly friends all over the country. The hard work, the formation program, the spiritual experience, the comradery one never forgets.

How did those lessons or experiences also prepare you to shepherd the dioceses of Yakima and Spokane?

Accepting challenges of everyday life, both the joys and disappointments, were certainly formative. Because the routine was demanding, ministry after seminary life can also be very demanding, including the life and ministry of a bishop. I will be forever grateful for those

twelve years at the Josephinum...remembering stories with gratitude along with the formative experience.

Can you offer a few reflections on the gifts and challenges of serving as President of the USCCB?

I have always said that life is full of surprises. For me this was as huge one. From the beginning of my ministry as bishop, I was involved with the NCCB (USCCB today) on committees and various outreach programs like the support of priestly ministry with retreats and documents. Serving for example on committees focused on Hispanic ministry, the permanent diaconate, social development and world peace, priestly life and bishops' life and ministry, Catholic Relief Services, was a rich experience. One of the great challenges as I began my service as Vice President of the Conference, was the beginning of the sexual abuse crisis. That challenge as we well know continues to be very much with us. Chairing the general meetings, the administrative committee, the regular meetings with the Holy See were all part of the package never to be forgotten. Regular meetings with St. Pope John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI were also most memorable and inspiring.

Looking back on your decades spent as a priest, what aspects of ministry have been closest to your heart?

I have always from the earliest days of my priesthood loved pastoral ministry. Of course, the role of a bishop is eminently one of pastoral ministry as well. I've also loved the area of spirituality and presenting retreats. Over the years I have shared over fifty retreats for bishops, priests, deacons, and religious women around the country.

What drew you to devote so much of your ministry to Marriage Encounter?

Shortly before being appointed Bishop of Yakima, I was encouraged to make the Worldwide Marriage Encounter (WWME) experience. Shortly after beginning my ministry in Yakima as bishop I was invited to be presenting priest for the movement. I have been so since then until a few months ago. I was also involved more recently with national and international leadership for WWME. Its presence is now in almost 100 countries around the world. The personal experience of the weekend and the relationships with inspiring couples and priests have profoundly impacted my ministry as a bishop. WWME is also an example of lay ministry in the Church at its finest with so many couples dedicated and faithful to the Church in support of strengthening marriages and family life. Because of the experience, so many couples' lives have been profoundly transformed. Supporting marriage and family life is an important mission of the Church.

How do you spend your days in retirement?

Here I am, 88 years of age, in an assisted living facility as of four months ago. I am now limited to a walker and an electric scooter. I have a handicapped van (with a ramp) which I

can still drive. I no longer celebrate Mass publicly but am called upon periodically to preach a homily (funerals, a priest's anniversary, a Holy Thursday at the local parish). I also keep up weekly contact with four couples around the country who have become close friends through marriage encounter. Every once in a while I am asked to do a presentation on zoom. I must say my life continues to be relatively full. Also I live with Father James Kuhns '61. We keep the stories of the Joss alive!

Any words of advice or encouragement for today's young men who are discerning a call to the priesthood?

I would strongly encourage them to be a person of prayer staying close to the Lord. Secondly, they need to be humble persons of relationship (with God, themselves and others), relating to every one as brother and sister in God's kingdom. Lived well the priesthood is a great life and a powerful witness!