Msgr. Dillenburg grateful for opportunity to get closer to God

BY SAM LUCERO | THE COMPASS

GREEN BAY — The joy in Msgr. James Dillenburg's voice is evident as he discusses his 50 years of priesthood.

"We are involved in so many joyful moments (like) baptism and marriage," he said. "Sad moments, too. Not just funerals, but people who are wrestling with hard questions. Sometimes it is just finances or loss of job. Sometimes it's faith questions.

"But over the years I learned that it's not so necessary to have the answers," Msgr. Dillenburg told The Compass.

"It's more necessary to have the ear and the heart because people, generally, can work out their own problems if they have a sounding board or if they know they're not walking alone."

Ever since his ordination to the priesthood on May 29, 1965, Msgr. Dillenburg has had countless opportunities to be a sounding board and to walk the journey with others. He said he is grateful to God for those opportunities to be a bridge "between God and the people."

"Let's face it, liturgy many times is not good entertainment. But people come all of the time -- not just to meet their neighbors but to meet our God and -- they do it in the community," he explained. "And all of that is holy. No matter how many kids are screaming ... people come out of church and they've been touched by the holy. I'm at the crux of all that stuff. I am the bridge -- that's what priest means, of course -- between God and the people. It's such a privileged place."

Msgr. Dillenburg was born Nov. 28, 1939, the eldest of five children, to Edward and Marie Dillenburg. The family lived across the street from Holy Trinity Church in Casco, where Msgr. Dillenburg's priestly vocation was planted. He recalls playing Mass with his younger siblings and always being the priest.

"I would look in the prayer books for the longest prayers," he said. "The Litany of the Saints was a good one. I would be the boss and they would tolerate that.

He said his pastor, Fr. Rudolph Hodik, was someone he admired "because Fr. Hodik was the only one everybody listened to." Fr. Hodik was also the first to know about Msgr. Dillenburg's interest in the priesthood. When the priest came to the Dillenburg home with documents to enroll young James at Sacred Heart Seminary in Oneida the summer after eighth grade graduation, even his mother was surprised.

"For my parents to sacrifice me, at that tender age of (13), and to have that kind of trust in God," he said. "My parents were strong."

Msgr. Dillenburg completed high school and junior college at Sacred Heart Seminary, then studied philosophy and theology at St. John's Seminary in Collegeville, Minn. After ordination he was named assistant at his home parish for three months, then as assistant at St. Agnes Parish in Green Bay.

While serving at St. Agnes, Msgr. Dillenburg's priesthood took a nautical turn. He was named diocesan director for Apostleship of the Sea, responsible for ministering to sailors on ships that docked in Green Bay's port. He became part of the ecumenical Seafarer's Ministry of Green Bay. "We were one of the first in the world to have an ecumenical port ministry," he said. "I feel very blessed to be on the ground floor of that."

Ministry to sailors from around the world led to many new opportunities for Msgr. Dillenburg. He was elected to the national board of Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) in 1974 and named board president in 1976. He served as a delegate to the International Congress of AOS three times and in 1991 was released from diocesan duties to serve in the Vatican Office for Apostleship of the Sea, a post he held for five years.

The priest joked that his long tenure in the Apostleship of the Sea ministry happened despite his inability to swim and his penchant for seasickness. "It's just how the Holy Spirit works," he said. "My love for ships is what got me in (in the ministry) in the first place and then I found that the men were even more interesting than the ships."

Msgr. Dillenburg said he found their stories intriguing. Many times, sailors had drifted from their faith, but spending months aboard ships gave them time to reflect and ponder God's role in their lives.

He recalled a Saturday night visit in the early 1970s visit to a ship. "I was so tired but my conscience would not let me not go," he said. The ship hauling cement had been to Green Bay before and he knew a few sailors who he was trying to bring back to church. "I went down to the ship and this fellow said, 'I've been waiting for you.' He had been away from the sacraments for many years. So he went to confession. I went back to St. Agnes to get Communion for him. I gave him Communion and he was a happy guy." Msgr. Dillenburg visited three other vessels that night. "I didn't get home until after midnight, but I wasn't at all tired after that," he said.

Msgr. Dillenburg's ministry to seafarers around the world and leadership with the AOS earned him recognition from St. John's School of Theology, his alma mater. On Aug. 3, Msgr. Dillenburg will receive the school's "Ezekiel: Prophet of Hope Award." The honor recognizes alumni "who dynamically live out the principles of collaboration and ecumenism that are at the heart of the mission and Benedictine heritage of St. John's."

Msgr. Dillenburg, who was named a monsignor by St. Pope John Paul II in 1992, resigned from the seafarer's ministry in 1998. He served as pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Green Bay from 1996 to 2010, when he retired from active ministry. (He was also pastor there from 1989 to 1991 and at St. John Parish in Seymour from 1973 to 1989.)

Another important role he served from 1984 to 1989 was as director of vocations for the Green Bay Diocese.

The opportunity to get closer to God, including through the lives of others, is perhaps Msgr. Dillenburg's most gratifying reward of priesthood.

"The trust that people put in me and the witness that they've shown me -- God has revealed himself so much to me in the midst of all that," he said. "I see God in them, too. That's really the number one thing."

Today, Msgr. Dillenburg serves as priest celebrant at Holy Rosary Parish in Kewaunee and St. Mary Parish in Algoma, splitting those duties with another senior priest, Fr. Ron Colombo. He also fills in at parishes around the diocese.

Reflecting on 50 years, Msgr. Dillenburg said it's all been a blessing.

"At the beginning of my priesthood, if I could have designed my life to do whatever I wanted to do ... I could never, ever have come up with anything as fantastic as what God did to me," he said.