

Meet the President: **Fr. Bob Koopmann '68, OSB**

By Doris Matter



A few days after he was appointed 12th president of Saint John's University, I had the privilege of sitting down with Fr. Bob to learn more about him. It was a great opportunity to find out about some of his formative influences, what brought him here and what he does to relax—in other words: who is Fr. Bob? What I learned is that our new president is thoughtful, down-to-earth and joyful, steeped in the Benedictine learning and teaching tradition, well equipped to guide Saint John's University. I hope you'll enjoy this conversation as much as I did!

DM: What first brought you to Saint John's?

BK: It was in 1962, when I was a junior in high school. My folks and I were looking around at colleges, and we came up [to Minnesota] to visit St. Thomas. A music teacher of mine had told me that her brother had gone here as a music major and loved it. We decided to add Saint John's to the trip to St. Thomas. We came up and Fr. Don LeMay met us in the Great Hall, and he won us over immediately. He told us there was a concert pianist on the faculty, Wim Ibes, who still teaches here, and there was a men's chorus that toured all over the world. I just fell in the love with the place and that was it.

DM: What was your family life like growing up?

BK: A very Catholic family. Much of what we did revolved around the church. My folks were involved with all kinds of things in the parish. We lived just a couple blocks from St. Edward's Catholic Church in Waterloo [Iowa], and I went to grade school there. My father worked for the same company for his entire career—which people did in those days—and was very loyal to the Rath Packing Company. He was in the administration, and they had branches all around the country. My mother stayed home when we were little but had worked for the same company

as my father as executive secretary to the president. Both have since died. I have a younger brother with children and grandchildren. In my extended family, I have an aunt who is a nun from the LaCrosse Franciscans. I also had a great uncle who was a diocesan priest and also enjoyed playing the piano.

DM: How did you come to study music?

BK: My mother and her sister played piano quite well. We had a piano at home, and my mother just showed me how to do things when I was 6. So that's when I first started playing, and I was playing by ear already then. I started formal lessons when I was 7, with a very good teacher. All the way through high school, I was taught by Franciscan sisters from Dubuque. My mother practiced with me the first few years and that helps a lot when you're a little kid.

DM: Who at Saint John's was influential in bringing you into the monastery?

BK: Most of my teachers were monks because that's the way it was back in those days, but one person would certainly be Gerard Ferrell. He was a musician who taught me music theory and a little bit of

organ. One person who I have always kept in contact with is Fr. Cletus Connors. He's now the pastor at St. Boniface Church in Cold Spring. He's still one of my best friends.

DM: Where have you traveled abroad, and what is your favorite place outside the United States?

BK: My favorite place keeps changing. But my first trip abroad was when I was in the Men's Chorus, and we took quite an extensive trip to Europe during the summer after my freshman year. I had to really work on my parents to let me go! That travel really opened my eyes to the fact that there's a big world out there where people think much differently than I do.

Currently my favorite place might be East Africa—Tanzania. I have been there three times in the last few years. In 2000, I spent about six weeks in Tanzania, dividing my time between the men's monastery and the women's monastery, and I just loved the culture there. Shortly after I came back, Br. Paul Richards was starting to think about developing the Benedictine Volunteer Corps, which I thought was a great idea.

I suggested we try for sites in Africa. Now Hanga Abbey, in Tanzania, is one of



our Benedictine Volunteer Corps destinations. I always come back from my visits there spiritually refreshed. They are a people of deep faith, and I'm very inspired by that. I'm also brought back to reality. Hanga Abbey is almost completely self-sufficient, much like Saint John's was 150 years ago.

DM: What do you do on a rare free day when you're not travelling? What's your stress reliever in life?

BK: I take long walks, and I'm a great fan of fiction. I read a lot. It very easily puts me in a whole different world. Or if I just want to get away, I might go down to the Twin Cities for lunch, maybe go to a movie, have supper or maybe go to the Guthrie, something like that. Those kinds of things really refresh me.

DM: You mentioned reading as a stress reliever. What are you currently reading?

BK: I'm reading the new biography of Flannery O'Connor [*Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor* by Brad Gooch]. She's one of my favorite fiction writers. Just before that I read *Home* by Marilynne Robinson. She's originally from Iowa and grew up about 40 miles from where I grew up and that makes it all the more interesting. Then I'll also read something I just stumble across like a book about the history of Meire Grove [*Building Community, Keeping the Faith: German Catholic Vernacular Architecture in a Rural Minnesota Parish* by Fred W. Peterson]. I love the book because as I read it I learned so much about my father's side of the family and why they are the way they are. My father's grandfather's family came from Holdenburg, Oldenburg, the same area in Germany as the people of Meire Grove.

DM: As a youngster were you ever involved in any kind of sporting activities?

BK: I grew up as a golfer. In fact our

whole family played. From the time I was 10 or 12 we golfed a lot. My folks would give my brother and me season passes at a city golf course not too far from us, and we just played and played. My brother still plays, and we used to play maybe once a year, but I don't think I've golfed at all in the last two years, so of course I'm terrible now.

DM: At this point in your life, what brings you the most joy?

BK: Making music, certainly, and especially making music for the community—playing the organ for morning prayer, evening prayer, and for Mass. If I can somehow inject some life into their singing, then I've succeeded. I just like it so much.

DM: How do you think that you'll be able to bring that joy into the presidency?

BK: Well, I'll certainly be able to use music here and there. What I do with music is bring people together, and I like that process. I'm hoping I can use those kinds of skills in bringing everybody that is connected with Saint John's together—whether it's faculty, staff or alumni. I've always been known as kind of a diplomat, and that's not so different from playing chamber music.

Another thing I love is drawing the best out of people and that doesn't have to be in music. It's a real joy to have a student suddenly realize that he or she can get into hard literature—like the short stories that I use a lot in my first-year seminar class—and to realize that they like it. I just love that because it expands the students' horizons.

DM: This article will primarily be read by alumni. How can they help you most as you transition from being a member of the music faculty to the president?

Well, they can come and visit. Tell them to come to the alumni events because I'll look forward to seeing them again. Now I mostly see alumni at weddings because it's often someone who lived on my dorm floor, and then, of course, all his buddies



come, too, plus their friends from Saint Ben's. The sense of community that builds up here among the students is just amazing.

DM: Is there anything you don't want people to be afraid to tell you? In other words, "Don't be afraid to tell me that ..."

BK: Actually anything. I'm quite resilient. As a musician who works with others, we have to disagree with each other and criticize each other so I feel like I'm quite open to criticism. Nobody likes it immediately, but I bounce right back. I'd love to know what's on their minds.

DM: Can you share something about yourself that might surprise most people?

BK: Well, I enjoy cooking. I'm not a gourmet cook, and I only started it in 1993 during my second sabbatical, when I was living in a house where I was preparing my own food. Since then many students have experienced my cooking, of course.

DM: Do you have a specialty dish?

BK: They're usually pretty simple—something that I can serve to a big group while I interact with them. So I'll do beef burgundy, or I'll do a pasta sauce, a roast, or some kind of pork chops that I've baked in my own secret sauce—well, it's not a secret anymore, because the *St. Cloud Visitor* published it. It's called Blessed Pork Chops!

DM: What are you looking forward to most in the next few months?

BK: In the immediate future, getting to know all the staff and members of the administration. They've all been great to me but I don't know them very well yet. I also look forward to working with students in a new way, giving the talk at the first-year banquet and other opportunities where the president gets to speak. I also look forward to the travel. I can hardly wait to go out and meet alumni and friends of the university.

Doris Matter is the president's executive writer.



ABOUT FR. BOB KOOPMANN, OSB

Born August 13, 1946 in Waterloo, Iowa
Graduated from Columbus High School in Waterloo, 1964
Bachelor of Arts (music major), Saint John's University, 1968
Master of Music, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1970
Final Monastic Profession, September 21, 1971
Doctor of Musical Arts, University of Iowa, 1976
Master of Divinity, Saint John's University, 1981
Ordination to the Priesthood, June 6, 1981
Postdoctoral work with faculty at the Royal Academy of Music, London, 1984, and the Juilliard School of Music, New York, 1984-85

Teaching, Administrative, Board service:

Music professor, 1975 to present
Director of Music, Saint John's Abbey, 1976-1983, 1985-1987, 1996-2009
Chair, Music Department, 1977-1983, 1985-1986
Fine Arts Division Head, 2006-2009
Member of Board of Regents, 1994-2003, 2005-2009

Recordings:

Wondrous Love—More Sacred Improvisations, 2008
Sacred Improvisations—Piano Improvisations on Hymns, Spirituals, and Chants, 2004
All in the Family, with Soprano Patricia Kent: Songs of the Mendelssohns, 1999
Robert Koopmann—The Second Piano Recital, 1996
Robert Koopmann—Piano Recital, 1994