

Priest for Life Full of Life

PRIEST PROFILE



In his short time with Priests for Life, Claretian Father Mark Clarke has become convinced that the Gospel of Life must be preached from the pulpit on a regular basis.

Since joining the national organization in July as a full-time priest associate, Father Clarke has visited parishes in many parts of the country to celebrate Mass and preach at all weekend Masses.

“People have come to me after Mass to say they've waited 30 years to hear a priest mention abortion from the pulpit,” he says. “For every one parishioner who may walk out because you're talking about abortion, there are 10 who are grateful.”

He adds that the seven itinerant preachers for Priests for Life do not labor to “make up for the priests who do not mention abortion.”

“We offer resources, we offer encouragement,” he explains. “Most priests are pro-life, but many priests do not mention abortion from the pulpit because there are always women in the congregation who have had abortions. They're afraid of opening wounds. But our experience shows that the topic must be raised for full healing. We condemn abortion, but we don't condemn the women who have had abortions. We always preach about the love, mercy, forgiveness and acceptance of God. In this way, we can help bring about reconciliation.”

Father Clarke, who joined the Claretian Missionaries in 1994 and was ordained in January of 2003, is spending a year with Priests for Life with the permission of his community to see if he is called to join a new religious society, Missionaries of the Gospel of Life.

The formation of the new society was announced last March by Father Frank Pavone, national director of Priests for Life, who has opened headquarters in Amarillo, Texas, under Bishop John Yanta. The society is in the process of having its constitutions approved in Rome, Father Pavone tells the Register, and its formation house in Amarillo will begin accepting candidates in October. The lay associates program of the society is already in operation.

In addition to his preaching duties, Father Clarke oversees the formation house in Amarillo and works with the men who are applying to enter the new society.

“Father Clarke brings to Priests for Life a longstanding commitment to the defense of life as a full-time ministry,” Father Pavone says. “I met him years ago, and back then we discussed the idea of having him join a community like this. He knows what this calling is, because it has been in his soul for a long time. He brings an understanding of what a missionary is, because the Claretians are missionaries.”

Claretian Calling

Father Clarke grew up in Los Angeles, where he was a certified emergency medical technician working for the city's fire department before entering Chapman University. After receiving a degree in chemistry and doing some graduate course work at California State University in Los Angeles, he worked for five years as an analytical chemist in the pharmaceutical industry.

He had felt a call to the priesthood in the eighth grade, he said, and in 1994 he finally decided to respond.

“God called me back in the midst of my work in the secular world,” he recalled. “I developed a devotion to Mary and became interested in the Claretians because our full name is Missionary Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. God was calling me to become a missionary.”

In 2002 he graduated from the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas, where he wrote his master's thesis on the U.S. bishops' statements on abortion in the context of the family, health care, justice and peace, and respect for life. After ordination, he was assigned to San Gabriel Mission, one of the 21 historic California missions founded under the inspiration of Blessed Junipero Serra. Much more than a museum, the mission offers 10 weekend Masses in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, and has a teeming youth ministry that Father Clarke directed.

Claretian Father Ralph Berg, pastor of San Gabriel, tells the Register that Father Clarke was popular with the young people of the parish.

“They related to him very well because he was a younger priest and he was very hardworking and full of life,” Father Berg says. “He also coordinated the liturgy committee and worked with many other people in the parish. He was always outside the church after Masses saying hello and talking with people.”

Father Berg was on the committee of Claretian priests who approved Father Clarke's release to work with Priests for Life and possibly enter the new pro-life society.

“Pro-life work is very important in the Church today,” Father Berg says. “Anything that a priest can do in this area would be very commendable, and I know he will do well.”

Father Clarke calls the formation of the Missionaries of the Gospel of Life a “historic and prophetic” undertaking. “The bishops have called abortion the fundamental human rights issue of our day, so we need a priestly society devoted exclusively to the issue,” he says. “Priests by their ordination are called

to be preachers of the Word, ministers of the sacraments and leaders of the community.

“This is exactly what the pro-life movement needs right now,” adds Father Clarke. “We need this ministry of priests to stand up for the unborn, speak out against injustice, sanctify the people through the sacraments and lead the people as we evangelize and live out the Gospel of Life.”

Stephen Vincent writes from Wallingford, Connecticut.

Stephen Vincent, Register Correspondent