

TOGETHER

a monthly bulletin insert from the archdiocese



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CIRCLING BACK WITH MSGR. BLEICH AND MSGR. BARTA

By Cassie Bird

Your generous support for priest retirement and the Priest Pension Plan are vital to supporting the Archdioceses' retired priests, who have dedicated their lives in service to God and the Church. In this month's newsletter, we are circling back with Msgr. Russell Bleich and Msgr. James Barta, almost 4 years after they were first interviewed about priest retirement for the ArchdioceseOne special appeal video.

Msgr. Russell Bleich

Msgr. Russell Bleich was ordained a priest in 1960 in Rome, after which he served in parish



Msgr. Russel Bleich (above) is a priest of the Archdiocese of Dubuque. He is shown outside of Villa Raphael. The residential facility in Dubuque is home to a number of clergy of the archdiocese who are retired. They are among the beneficiaries of the ArchdioceseOne appeal. Msgr. Bleich was ordained a priest in 1960, after which he served in parish ministry and taught in Catholic schools, among many other assignments. He retired in 2012. (Contributed photo)

ministry, taught in Catholic schools, and was the superintendent of schools for the archdiocese after receiving a master's degree from Creighton University followed by his certification as a superintendent from the University of Iowa, among many other assignments. He retired in 2012.

Msgr. James Barta

Msgr. James Barta was ordained a priest in 1955. In addition to his work in parish ministry, Msgr. Barta also earned a doctorate in psychology from Fordham University, worked as a psychology professor, and is a former president of Loras College. He also served as vicar general for the Archdiocese of Dubuque, beginning in 1999. He retired in 2009.

How has your ministry changed as you transitioned from active ministry to retired? What have you learned about yourself during this transition?

Msgr. Russell Bleich: Surprise! As my health permits, I am still able to serve helping out in parishes, convents, prisons or other ministries. I want to do as much as I can as long as I can knowing well that God will call me more and more to let go and offer my cross of aging and

dying in union with Jesus who let go to offer his life in suffering and death on the cross for all of us. I do not look forward to pain any more than Jesus did in the garden the night before he suffered and died for us. In a great mystery Jesus has made it possible for us to unite our suffering with His as salvific suffering for the people. By amazing grace, this too is a service I have yet to give to the people of God I have served in my life as a priest.

Msgr. James Barta: I was a teacher practically all my life, and that meant contact with all sorts of people. As time goes by, old age, a number of other things, set limits to that. So the thing I miss most is the interaction with large numbers of people. I used to preach to people on Sundays, lectured in classes, gave talks and things like that, and those occasions are very limited now. One of the other gifts that I receive is a good conversation. (...) On Wednesdays we have a little discussion group. Some days we will pick an article out of America (The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture) or something like that and study it ahead of time. There are about 7 of us there. It is a very refreshing sort of thing. But not being able to reach out to as many people to have contact with is one of the limitations of retirement. As a result of that, I think that, for me at least, retirement has made me a little more contemplative. Can't go out and have a beer, but you can have one here. We have more time to think and to reflect. So my spiritual life has probably become a lot more contemplative.

What have you enjoyed most about being a retired priest in the Archdiocese of Dubuque?

Msgr. Russell Bleich: After serving God and His people over 62 years, I want to tell you, my life is so full. I am blessed to share the sacred joys and sorrows, agony and ecstasy and all in between with our brothers and sisters in God's family. Beneath the ups and downs of everyday life, I am a deeply happy man – still unworthy to stand in God's presence and serve – bringing God to the people and the people to God.

Msgr. James Barta: After being retired, I was chaplain over at Mt. Carmel. And before I was retired I was chaplain there too. And that has been amazing - the whole sisterhood has been an amazing resource. I'm enjoying discussing the direction of the Church. But it's mostly

just discussion, because we don't make things happen too much. (...) Being able to talk about that is, I think it's very important for us to look for what's tomorrow like, what's the next year like. I like history, and we learn from history, but we have to be planners, to have some dreams, and there are always a certain number of people who are good dreamers. And it's very interesting talking with such people and giving a little bit of encouragement to those who not only can dream, but can make some of those dreams happen.

Can you elaborate on how the Priest Pension Plan allows retired priests like you to live in human dignity?

Msgr. Russell Bleich: During my years of active ministry, priest stipends were not enough for me to adequately invest in a retirement plan. Because of the Priest Pension Plan supported by the generosity of the good people of the Archdiocese, we are able to have the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter, health insurance, and internet access. The pension is enough for me to even have some funds for occasional golf green fees on a warm summer day with a brother priest. He is better than I am but some days I hit some really good shots. Thanks to God's people for the Priest Pension Plan.



Msgr. James Barta (above) has been a priest of the Archdiocese of Dubuque for over 60 years. He is grateful that the Priest Pension Plan helps provide him with necessities during retirement. Msgr. Barta earned a doctorate in psychology from Fordham University, worked as a psychology professor, and is a former president of Loras College. He also served as vicar general for the Archdiocese of Dubuque, beginning in 1999. He retired in 2009. (Contributed photo)

Msgr. James Barta: We get a pension, and it's pegged a bit to the salary of priests in general, but the main difference is that we have to provide for our own board and room, things like that. I don't know whether our pension is high as some other places, but it is better than other places too. It gives us a certain security. Around here people will say we're maybe not rich, but we're not poor. We've got good food, good housing, good surroundings, good staff, and a very good community. The priests who live here are a tremendous bunch of people.

Could you talk about the positives of living in community with your brother priests at Villa Raphael?

Msgr. Russell Bleich: The chapel is the center of Villa Raphael where we priests concelebrate mass daily for God's people for whom we were ordained and have served during our lives as priests. We enjoy the blessings of fraternal support and fun. What is not to like about living next door and among brother priests who are men of prayer and have given their lives in service to God and others. Well, sometimes we may have to remind them that they told us that joke before. As health allows, some among us are able to help out in parishes, convents, prisons or other ministries. Many are spiritual directors for seminarians,

religious, laity, deacons and priests on their spiritual journey.

Msgr. James Barta: Most of us were fairly independent before coming here, pastors particularly. My background was totally Loras, so there was always a community there. But besides that, the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Dubuque has always been a little special.

(...) But probably the biggest adjustment is putting up with the fact that a lot of people were fairly independent. It kind of ties in with what I think is a national problem today. People see things in either black or white. And we got to be able to, this is Pope Francis again, okay you don't agree with everybody, (...) but there are certain things with which you do agree, build on those. And make something happen. And where you disagree, well, okay, there's probably nothing I can do about it, so I'll live with it.

What would you say to a young man considering the priesthood about your time in active ministry?

Msgr. Russell Bleich: Young men, let me speak to you from my heart. I am still unworthy to stand in God's presence and serve. But what can I say, God chose me anyway. After over six decades of serving God and his people, I want to tell you how full my life is. As a priest, it is a great gift to be in the special sacred place between the love of God for his people and the love of the people for God. This is the life of a diocesan priest. Men, if God wants you to be a priest, it is a great ride - don't miss it. If you have thought about it, talk to a priest. Do not be afraid. Be bold. Do not worry, if priesthood is not your vocation - God will let you know.

Msgr. James Barta: Look forward to a creative time. We've got a good priesthood, we've had good bishops, we've had good popes, so something good has got to come out of that. And nothing is wasted. Not everything works out. We're idealists. If you're an idealist, you've got to be a rather special brand of idealist not to experience some disappointments once in a while. But even with the disappointments, when you look at the whole picture, I think we can look back and say it was good that we were here. And that's good.

Update on ArchdioceseOne Progress:

Thank you to those who have already supported priest retirement or any of the other beneficiaries of ArchdioceseOne with a sacrificial gift. If you would still like to make a donation to support ArchdioceseOne, you can do so by reaching out to our staff at (563) 556-2580, or going online to www.archdioceseone.org/support. Donations can also be mailed directly to ArchdioceseOne at 1229 Mt. Loretta Ave, Dubuque, IA 52003. Over \$14 million has been raised for the ArchdioceseOne special appeal. Over \$6.9 million of this amount has been left unrestricted, and over \$2 million has been restricted to Priest Retirement.