

It's never too late to discern

Different lives, same call to priesthood

By Lou Baldwin

SPECIAL TO THE CS&T

Two men, very similar yet uniquely different. Jim Cardosi and Kevin Mulligan attended classes together and shot hoops together for four years at Bishop Kenrick High School in Norristown, graduated in 1973 and then went their separate ways.

Cardosi went to the U.S. Naval Academy, became a pilot and married father of five. After attending college at Slippery Rock University, Mulligan became a sports writer, mostly with the Philadelphia Daily News. Neither man had the priesthood or religious life in mind.

Now their paths have once more converged at Blessed John XXIII Seminary in Weston, Mass., where after four years of formation they expect, God willing, to be ordained priests. Considering the gulf of time and space that separated them, they are needless to say shocked.

Cardosi, originally from Wilkes-Barre, finished his elementary school education at St. Titus in East Norriton before Kenrick. A neighbor who was a Navy man suggested that he consider going to Annapolis, and he got an appointment through his local congressman. It was toward the

end of his plebe year he was introduced at a picnic to Cindy Merson, who lived nearby.

They were engaged in February 1977, and after his graduation

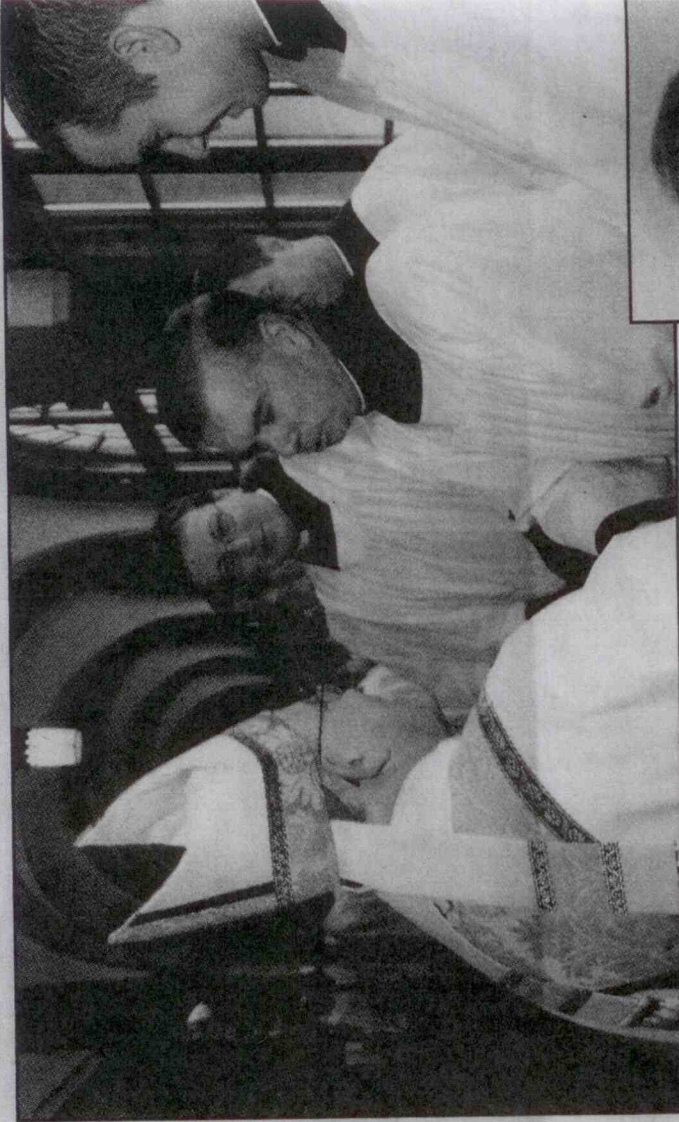
God.

On average patients with FTD survive for about eight years with some longer, others shorter. Cardosi knew at some point in the not-too-distant future, Cindy would die. Slowly, thoughts of entering the priesthood emerged. The idea grew especially after a pilgrimage to Lourdes with Cindy in 2007. His wife died the following year.

"It was a great marriage, and the opportunity to care for her was a great blessing," Cardosi said. "The commitment you make when you marry is what it is all about."

He didn't act precipitously, but consulted other priests, especially those with late vocations and ultimately chose to enroll at Blessed John XXIII, a seminary that only accepts candidates between the ages of 30 and 60, with most in the upper end of that range. His children were wholeheartedly supportive, and as a matter of fact, his youngest, Jeni, was telling friends she thought he would become a priest before he was ready to announce it.

With the blessing of St. Augustine's new ordinary, Bishop Felipe Estevez, he entered in the



Above, seminarian Kevin Mulligan meets Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput; inset, seminarian Jim Cardosi stands before photos of his family.

fall of 2011 for four years of theology and ultimate ordination for St. Augustine. He already knew his former friend and classmate Kevin Mulligan was at the seminary, because Mulligan entered the previous year to first study pre-theology.

Mulligan's home parish and school was St. Helena in Blue

Bell. At Kenrick "I thought about the priesthood for maybe five minutes," he said. Yet his only marriage was that of his twin passions, writing and sports. After college and a degree in journalism he cut his teeth at small Montgomery County newspapers, and then joined the sports staff of the

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'It was part of God's plan'

suggested that he consider going to Annapolis, and he got an appointment through his local congressman. It was toward the

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They were engaged in February 1977, and after his graduation, married at the Annapolis Chapel a week before Christmas that year. As an ensign he took pilot training and within a year had his wings and began piloting P-3 four-engine turbo props.

Their son Jimmy came along in August 1979 and over the next decade they had four more children, Nicki, Joey, Mikey and Jeni. Life was good.

In 2002 Cindy began to develop symptoms of FTD (Frontotemporal Degeneration), a form of dementia.

The disease progressed rapidly, and in 2005 Cardosi retired with the rank of captain, just so he could care for Cindy and their children.

Before her illness developed, Cindy had begun attending perpetual adoration at their parish, St. Catherine in Orange Park, Fla., and he continued to take her there, an experience that really brought him closer to

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short-lived Philadelphia Journal. After that folded in 1981, he switched over to the Philadelphia Daily News. "I wrote about college basketball, the Eagles, golf; I was an athlete and I enjoyed writing," he said. He was good at what he did and the number of bylines over the years proves the point.

Meanwhile, Mulligan also became active at St. Philip Neri Parish in Lafayette Hill, first by coaching CYO. He also became a youth minister and started a teen CYO in the early '90s. Sure, he dated, but it never got serious. "It was all part of God's plan," he said.

In 2007, when the Daily News was constricting, he took a buyout package, and after that he joined the communications department at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. He didn't know it at the time,

but his life plans were about to change dramatically.

Holy Week came early in 2008, and on Good Friday, March 21, Mulligan was at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary supervising the media who came for the outdoor Stations of the Cross. Despite the chill, it was a beautiful night and something about it filled him with an awe he had never before experienced.

Without knowing exactly why, he began to question his life. As he was walking along, retired Auxiliary Bishop Robert Maginnis asked him where he was going.

"I shared with him I wasn't sure," Mulligan recalls. "Don't do anything rash," the Bishop advised.

Meanwhile he prayed, and the more he prayed the more he came to feel God was calling him to

something, perhaps to be a permanent deacon. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at Visitation B.V.M. Parish in Trooper became an integral part of his prayer life, and through it his desire to be ordained deepened, but perhaps not as a deacon. One night at adoration he distinctly heard the call, God wanted him to be a priest, not a deacon, and there were further consultations with Bishop Maginnis, Msgr. Ralph Chieffo and other priest friends, and ultimately an interview with Cardinal Justin Rigali.

His final choice of seminary, because of his age, was John XXIII, which he entered in 2010 as a pre-theology student for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Just like his friend, Jim Cardosi, his targeted ordination year is 2015. Both men agree on one thing, "It was all part of God's plan."

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