A FASCINATING LIFE

Mons. Joseph Senger of Minot has lived a fascinating and varied life, but he’s still a farm boy at heart

By Andrea Johnson
Special to the Tribune

Monsignor Joseph Senger is 86, but he is far from idle. After his retirement as a parish priest in 2000, he served as a chaplain at Trinity Hospital, where he still works part time and as a substitute pastor at different parishes in the area.

“T’m on call right now,” said the gregarious Senger, who enjoys visiting people at the hospital and giving them the sacraments when needed.

When he is not on call, Senger enjoys gardening and research and visiting family in the area.

Senger was ordained a priest on May 1, 1954, at St. Mary’s Cathedral in Fargo and celebrated his very first Mass at his home church, Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Orrin, on June 13, 1954. His first post was as assistant pastor at St. Mark’s Parish in Bottineau.

But his path soon led him very far from the rural life of a parish priest. He was chosen as secretary to Fargo Archbishop Aloisius Muench, who had been chosen as the pope’s ambassador to Germany and was stationed in Bonn between 1956 and 1959.

During his years in Germany, Senger enjoyed traveling around the country, meeting Germans and Americans and serving members of the military who were stationed there.

He also has met four different popes, some of them before they became pope.

But when Muench was made a cardinal and transferred to the Vatican in 1959, Senger had a choice to make. “When I was over in Rome, they wanted me to stay, but I wanted to come home,” said Senger.

Another priest at the Vatican told him that if he wanted to be a parish priest he should return to North Dakota and should not stay for longer at the Vatican.

Senger returned to North Dakota, where he was appointed pastor at St. Arnold’s Parish in Milnor and St. Vincent’s Parish in Stiritum in April 1960. He stayed there for three years and then was appointed to serve as the pastor at St. Mary’s Parish in Knox and St. Ann’s Parish in Fillmore between 1963 and 1971. From 1971 to 1985, Senger was pastor at St. Mary’s Parish in Grand Forks. He was pastor at St. Cecilia’s Parish in Velva and Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Karlruhe from 1985 until he retired in 2000.

During his years with the Fargo Diocese, Senger also held a number of other positions.

He was Director of the Propagation of the Faith for 40 years, was Deanery Director of Vocations, served as Director of Religious Education at St. James Education Center in Grand Forks, was Dean of Deanery II from 1984 to 1986 and Dean of Deanery VII in 1986, served with the Prison Ministry for the North Dakota Council of Churches and on the college of Consultants from 1997 to 2002, was spiritual director for Marriage Encounter, Search, and Cursillo from 1972 to 2014, was State Spiritual Director for the Catholic Order of Foresters and State Spiritual Director for the Catholic Daughters of America for seven years.

Though he remained in North Dakota, Senger never lost touch with his international connections. For instance, in 1981, he attended a seminar on mission work at the Vatican, followed by a trip to Kenya, where he visited many missions. In a letter to his parish, he recalled visiting villages and seeing houses made of twigs that were only about four to five feet high. In Nairobi, he met one of the bishops of Kenya and celebrated Mass there with other priests.

The trip took them out into the countryside, where he saw many sights as far away from North Dakota prairie as could be imagined.

“After our delightful welcome in Nairobi, we began our journey to visit the missions,” he wrote after the trip. “We travelled in vans, in groups of five. We visited several dioceses, always accompanied by two African priests. We travelled six days. We visited about 25 missions – parishes, schools, hospitals, cathedrals, simple mission churches, and private homes. We started as elegant tourists, but as soon as we left the paved roads we became missionaries. Like the dirt roads leading to my home town of Orrin, the roads were dusty, and rough, and dirty. But as we travelled we saw herds of elephants, zebras, impalas, baboons, monkeys, warthogs, and more wild animals. Those with telephoto lens cameras were very busy. At one hotel the crocodile were only 10 feet away from our table – separated, of course, by a wall. And we had to keep chasing the monkeys as they would sneak onto our tables and snatch food away.”

These days Senger still finds plenty to keep him occupied.

He was planning a trip to Orrin, where his nephew lives on the family farm, so he could watch the harvest.

He said there is a common misconception about the true geographical center of North America, commonly claimed by Rugby. The true center, he said, is actually near where he grew up in Orrin. At one time there was a lovely shrine in that spot, though it is now off limits to the public because it is on private land.

Senger, who grows a sunflower and tomatoes and other things outside his residence in Minot, is still a farmer at heart.

“I love chokecherries,” he said.

His is actually more a tree than a bush.

“It’s just one little way of trying to stay in touch with the farm,” he said. “I love the farm country and I love the smell of the fresh earth,” he said.

Andrea Johnson is a staff reporter for the Minot Daily News.