

Fr. Steve Newton

A fitting new beginning

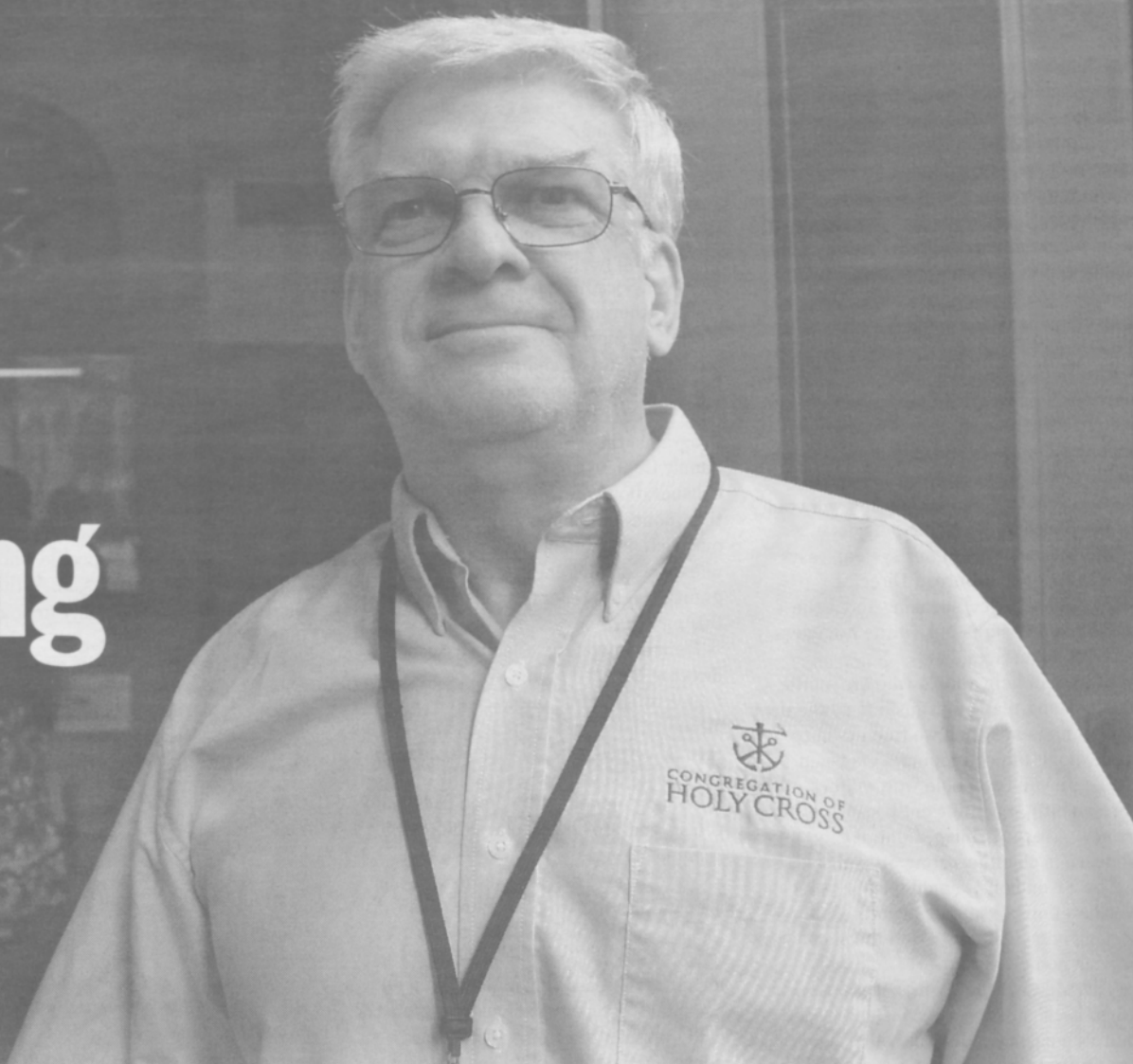


PHOTO BY ISRAEL BAYER

Fr. Steve Newton joins the Downtown Chapel with a past reflected in the community he now serves

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Oct. 25, 1975. It is probably the most important date in Father Steve Newton's life.

More important than the day he was ordained - April Fools Day, 1989, a fitting twist he's rather proud of. It is more important than July 29, the date he arrived to become pastor at the Downtown Chapel Roman Catholic Parish of the Archdiocese of Portland. The former pastor, Fr. Bob Loughery was headed to a new assignment at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend.

Oct. 25, 1975, was the day Newton took his last drink, the final draw after a decade of alcoholism that took him far away from the church, his family and his life - and ultimately brought him back again. It is an experience he credits with keeping him from becoming a "nice-guy priest." Which is probably best for a parish in the challenging and dynamic neighborhood Old Town, where the Downtown Chapel opens its doors daily to a community living with homelessness, addiction and little or no health care.

"The experience of going through the rest of the progression, and the experience of going through recovery outside the priesthood, I think is a wonderful deepening experience - to hit bottom," Newton says.

Bottom was far away from where he grew up, in what he calls the Catholic ghetto of Chicago - a place where the Catholic Church was the depth and breadth of the community. The church was faith, sports and school. It was the world, Newton says. As a result, Newton says he realized he wanted to become a priest at an early age and for his freshman year entered the high school seminary of the congregation. During the end of his novitiate year, in preparation to take his first, temporary vows, he struggled with his health and the stress of the strict environment. He developed ulcers

and was hospitalized, but eventually returned to the school. Then, at the age of 18 in 1966, he had his first beer: his first and his 15th in one night, he says. All the pressure from the novitiate became diluted with alcohol.

"I felt I had made a new friend. Life had meaning. I was 18. All the tension of the year was gone. And that was that."

Then he discovered liquor at an open bar. "My first sip of scotch and I thought, *yuck*. And the guy sitting next to me said, 'You've got to develop a taste for it.' I thought, OK, I'll work on that. I worked very hard on that," Newton says, with a measure of dry humor.

This continued throughout college, even as he worked double-time to complete his degree in short order and move on with his life as a priest. In the meantime, he took teaching jobs and pursued his masters at Loyola University. Once back at the seminary, however, he was a wreck; he would wake up in the afternoon, and drink until he passed out at 5 a.m.

"I could not predict with accuracy what were to happen after I were to take the first drink," Newton says. "Will power, of course, was out the window. I developed the interest, and then certainly abuse, and then to a point of addiction where I simply had no choice in the matter. There's a saying, the man takes a drink, the drink takes a drink, the drink takes the man. And that very well was how it was for me."

He was essentially asked to leave the seminary because of his behavior - even though alcohol was never mentioned.

"They never talked about the alcohol. Never came up. But I knew. I could either stop drinking or I could leave. I didn't want to stop drinking. It was like a divorce. It was like losing everything."

He took a job at the St. Joseph County Jail in Indiana as a counselor, which became

one of many he lost as a result of his drinking. He took on teaching positions, only to lose the jobs with ever-increasing speed. He turned to his family for assistance until that well was tapped. At one point, he was sleeping at the school he worked in, drinking all night, and then vomiting.

"At this point, I knew I couldn't go home. I took my car and drove somewhere into Chicago and parked it," Newton says.

"There was a period of seven to 10 days and I have no memory of it at all. I went from hotel to flophouse. And I was in terrible shape. I'd lost everything. I didn't know what to do, but I was praying for death, turning to a God I had ignored for so long and giving my orders that I would die and it wouldn't hurt. I just wanted to be taken."

Instead, in the lobby of the flophouse, he called a helpline for alcoholics. A team of people responded and took him to a 12-step house that was, ironically, a former funeral home. That was Oct. 25, 1975.

"A day at a time, I learned about the disease. I was born with it. I'm going to die with it. There's nothing I can do about that. But there are certain things I need to do."

This is Father Steve's second mission in Portland. He first arrived in 1977 to take a position with St. Vincent DePaul's alcohol treatment center, where people could stay five days for detox or a maximum of two weeks for recovery. Newton knew this wasn't adequate.

Back in Illinois, Newton had worked to establish the first detox center in the state, a new kind of institution as the state decriminalized alcoholism. He had spent his newfound sobriety learning about the disease, the need for late-stage treatment, and the urgency to end the stigma surrounding people who are addicted and

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