

Life of serving in many ways leads to St. John's in Cohoes

First published: Saturday, November 14, 2009

The Rev. Geraldine "Gerry" Clemmons: 17th rector and first female priest at St. John's Episcopal Church in Cohoes. She was ordained by Bishop William Love.

Background: Born in Memphis, Tenn. She has bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Memphis State University and a Master of Divinity from Trinity School in Ambridge, Pa. She and her husband live in Troy. They have three sons, three grandchildren, and a new great-granddaughter.

You were ordained into the priesthood on Sunday, and you're starting a big new job at age 66. What have you been doing over the years?

I've had several careers. First of all I'm a mother and a wife, which has been the best career of all. I went to Memphis State University and got my first degree in English and became an English teacher in the Memphis city school system. God used me there for three years. Then I met and married my husband Byard Clemmons, who was a Navy officer. We started in Mississippi and from there moved up North. Being a teacher wasn't compatible with me moving around, so I became a legal secretary and I loved that. Then when we moved to South Carolina and I applied to the Medical University of South Carolina and was accepted to become a physical therapist.

How did you come to be a priest?

I practiced physical therapy for 13 years and am actually still a licensed physical therapist. I worked with the geriatric population in nursing homes and retirement communities. God very intentionally moved me into the path that he originally called me when I was a little girl in the Catholic Church. My patients were saying, "Are you the therapist, or are you the pastor?" and I would say "I'm both." I started thinking, where will I serve the Lord, where does he want me to serve him? Originally he called me to be a priest; I just didn't recognize it. Of course I couldn't be a priest in the Catholic Church.

God remembered he had called me long ago, he hadn't forgotten even though I had. My pastor back in Tennessee tapped me on the shoulder one day and said, "God's telling me that he's calling you to holy orders." And I said, "I'm not worthy of that." And he said, "No, you're not, but you have to do it anyway." It made me start thinking, what's the call anyway? How could God be using me because I'm nothing, but he's moved me all along the way.

What brought you to Cohoes?

I didn't have a bishop, so I said, "God, if you want me to be ordained, send me a bishop." Bishop Love was coming to Trinity. I was the only one able to pick him up at the airport. On the way back, he asked me if I had a bishop and we started talking about it. He took my paperwork, prayed on it for a whole month and then I got the message that I could come into the Albany Diocese. I prayed for a bishop and literally God sent me one.

The Episcopal Church is facing several issues -- some members aren't comfortable with having openly gay or female bishops, and Pope Benedict XIV has invited Episcopalians to join the Roman Catholic Church. Where do you stand?

It's a sad situation that in our culture and in our church we have all the disunity. God created all things to be perfect and, because we're a broken people, all of us are imperfect. That's reflected not just in secular society but in the churches. We are called to be set apart from the culture. To be separate and distinct and to be a guiding light for the culture. I think being broken we have failed in that respect. We can all just try to find different ways to reconcile our brokenness.

I want to be open and reach out to all people. I want to love them with Christ's love and offer it to them. I have my sins. You have your sins. We all do. My sin might not look like your sin, and your sin might not look like someone else's, but we're all sinners and God reaches out to us in his mercy and his love.

-- Humberto Martinez