

MINISTRY of presence

Editor's Note: Fr. Tom O'Neill was diagnosed with squamous cell cancer in the spring of 2008. After undergoing several rounds of chemotherapy, his cancer went into remission. Fr. Tom was interviewed for this story in May of this year. In July, his cancer returned. Doctors have given him only a few months. He will continue in his ministry at Viterbo as long as he is able.

A ministry of presence. Purposeful loitering. Going where the action is. However he or friends describe it, the philosophy of being present for others has served Rev. Thomas O'Neill well in his more than 15 years at Viterbo University.

On most days, Fr. O'Neill, 61, eats lunch with students in the cafeteria. He is the announcer for Viterbo's athletics teams. He is a regular at Fine Arts Center performances. He teaches at least one course each semester.

Fr. O'Neill, or "Fr. Tom" as he is known by most students and colleagues, is Viterbo's vice president for mission and ministry and the head of the campus ministry program. When he arrived at the university in August 1994, the campus ministry program at that moment was in a state of transition, with no staff or activities

of which to speak. Today, it is an important and vibrant part of the Viterbo experience for many students, whether they be regulars at Mass or one of many who have participated in a life-changing service trip.

“You can’t start anything unless people trust you and get to know you a little,” Fr. Tom said. “I had to become visible and present. If I just sit in my office, students won’t know who I am, and they’ll be hesitant to come and see me, especially students who have never been around a Catholic priest. They don’t know what we’re like or what to expect.”

Much of the success of the campus ministry program is due to Fr. Tom, said faculty member Kim Fredricks, biology. She serves as an athletics team chaplain for the women’s basketball team, a campus ministry program.

“Students find campus ministry a very welcoming place,” Fredricks said. “Many people have the image of a priest being stuffy, intimidating, or not approachable. That’s not the case with him. Of all the priests I’ve known, he’s the one with whom I feel most comfortable.”

This feeling of being welcome also extends to his office, where students often will stop by to converse or to discuss a problem. Fr. Tom says it is important students know they won’t be judged or condemned when discussing problems or their lives.

“My biggest priority is to ensure people have had a good experience with a Catholic priest when they leave Viterbo,” he said. “That experience will transfer out into their lives.”

Nursing student Joe Kuzma can attest to this. He described Fr. Tom as a “mentor, confidant, good friend, and one of the best people I know.”

“There hasn’t been a time when I have talked to him about a problem and not felt 100 percent better,” Kuzma said. “He always makes time for students. He’ll spend as much time with you as you need.”

Life in Iowa

Fr. Tom grew up in Council Bluffs, Iowa, one of 10 children in a strong Irish-Catholic family. The family home was located right across the street from the St. Francis Catholic Church, and the Catholic grade school, complete with a playground, was also nearby.

“There were a lot of boys in my family, so whenever the nuns needed the yard raked or the windows washed, it was easy to call us because we were right across the street,” said Fr. Tom, whose father operated a funeral home. “We had a lot of interaction with the nuns and the priests. When they needed someone to serve Mass on short notice, they would call and say, ‘send one of the boys over.’ There were seven to choose from, so whoever was in earshot of the phone was sent to the church.”

He attended the prestigious Creighton Preparatory Jesuit High School just across the river in Omaha, graduating in 1966. Wanting to teach, he joined the Jesuits the same year. He went on to earn bachelor’s degrees in philosophy and English literature from



Fr. Tom serves students during the annual President's Holiday Dinner.

St. Louis University, a Master of Arts degree in English Literature from St. Louis University, and a Master of Divinity in Canon Law from Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif.

He was ordained a priest in 1978, and served in ministries at Creighton University, Georgetown University, St. Francis of Assisi Parish and Lourdes High School in Rochester, Minn., and Saint Mary’s University in Winona, Minn. He left the Jesuits in 1986 to become a diocesan priest.

During his time as a student and a Jesuit, he participated in several service trips, including spending eight summers working in the Dominican Republic. It was a tradition he would bring to Viterbo. Since Fr. Tom’s arrival, Viterbo students have travelled to the Gulf Coast, Peru, Minneapolis, Texas, Kansas City, and other places, working and providing help to people and places in need. Service trips are a strength of the campus ministry program today, and it is almost impossible for students not to be affected in some way by their experience, he said.

“I’ve had many students report that the service trips have had a profound effect on them,” Fr. Tom said. “What it does is inspire people to be life-long contributors to society.”

All are Welcome

Students of many faiths participate in campus ministry, which is another of the program’s strengths, Fr. Tom said. “We are open to students of all religions, and we try to accommodate them so they have a good spiritual experience,” he said.

In this day and age of priest shortages, having a full-time priest

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on campus is becoming more and more rare. Viterbo is fortunate in that regard, as it strengthens the Catholic identity of the university and provides a person who serves as an ethical and moral guide that assists the university in advancing its mission.

“Fr. Tom is chair of our mission effectiveness committee, and during deliberations of policy and strategic decision, I can count on him to offer candid comment and to challenge us to be sure we keep mission and students at the heart of our decision making,” said Viterbo President Rick Artman. “Viterbo is blessed to have a full-time priest dedicated to campus ministry. We’re grateful to the Bishop for this commitment.”

In addition to more sacramental opportunity, there is also more relationship and community building with a full-time priest than with a priest who visits campus once a week to say Mass, Fr. Tom said.

Fr. Tom provides marriage preparation and the sacrament of marriage to Viterbo alumni, which helps keep them connected to the university. He also celebrates Mass in the San Damiano Chapel on campus on weekdays and on Sundays. Mass is well attended by Viterbo students, and by community members as well. One of the regular parishioners on Sundays is Wayne Wojciechowski, Viterbo’s assistant academic vice president.

“Fr. Tom has a gift for bringing real meaning to the scriptures,” Wojciechowski said. “His homilies are powerful. He’s able to take scripture and show its modern relevance, and it doesn’t get lost in a lot of verbiage. That’s rich.”

“I think he’s brought hope to a lot of people,” he said. “That’s a real gift. The numbers have been growing on Sundays. That extends Viterbo into the community. Viterbo is a symbol of hope and help for others.”

Continuing His Ministry

Before the spring of 2008, Fr. Tom had an idea of where his life was going. He would continue to serve at Viterbo or a parish until the age of 70 when he was eligible to retire. That was before being diagnosed with squamous cell cancer, which he shared with the campus community in an email. He underwent several rounds of chemotherapy, but the cancer has returned. He plans to continue working as long as he is able.

Fr. Tom values his privacy, but through his illness, he has discovered how truly important he is in the eyes of others. In a testament to the high regard he is held in by students, a Facebook page was created in his honor entitled Pray for Father Tom. It currently has 338 members.

“I’ve had students tell me that there isn’t a night when they go to bed that they don’t say a prayer for me,” Fr. Tom said. “That’s overwhelming and humbling. I don’t know how to respond to that except to say thank you.”

In the meantime, he will continue to live life to the fullest, enjoy-



Rev. Tom O'Neill applies ashes to the forehead of a Viterbo student during Ash Wednesday Mass.

ing his hobbies, including travel, fiction reading, cooking, movies, and spending time with friends. He is proud of the fact that he was awarded Irish citizenship and an Irish passport. He has a personal and campus ministry group Facebook page, a Twitter account, an MP3 player, a Nintendo Wii, and a Blue-Ray DVD player, all things that help him to relate better to college students. His wit, dry sense of humor, and “tell it like it is” demeanor is still strong too.

In addition to his ministry at Viterbo, Fr. Tom also serves the Diocese of La Crosse as a police chaplain (as a charter member) and is an elected member of the Presbyteral Council, an advisory body for the bishop. He also often says Mass for the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

One of his close friends is Rev. Robert Cook, who serves as the pastor at Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Viroqua. He is also a member of the Viterbo Board of Trustees.

“Tom is loyal to a fault, very intelligent, funny, and deep in his faith, a faith that has been tested by illness and personal loss,” Fr. Cook said. “He loves learning, and with his friends, he is very good at initiating contact.”

Viterbo is a great ministry for Fr. Tom, because “he gets along so well with young people who are vibrant and full of life,” Fr. Cook said.

Viterbo has indeed been a good fit, Fr. Tom said. “One thing that impresses me the most about Viterbo is that the university is very student orientated,” he said. “We really do give students a lot of time. We really go out of our way, more than any other school I’ve been involved with, to help our students succeed.”

“I know there are people who have jobs they don’t enjoy, and I don’t know what that’s like,” Fr. Tom said. “The work I do is rewarding and I enjoy it.”

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—Rev. Robert Cook