

# Milwaukee Catholic Herald

## Rector views himself as ‘pastor’ of theology school

Fr. de Jong training ‘passionate priests’

By Brian T. Olszewski

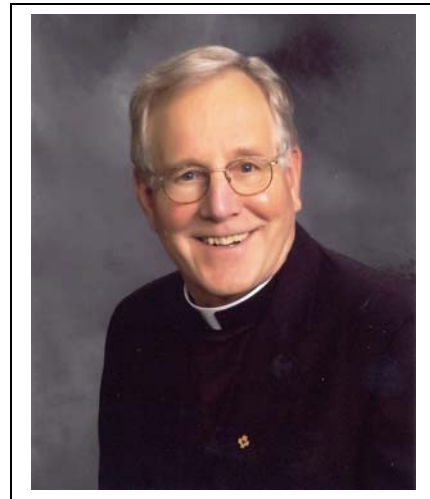
Catholic Herald Staff

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**Hales Corners-** At age 70 and after more than 43 years of priesthood, Sacred Heart Fr. Jan de Jong has received his first pastorate. Not of a parish, but as rector and president of Sacred Heart School of Theology.

“This speaks to me of being a pastor,” he said of the job he has had since Jan 1. “As a seminary rector, you are, first of all, a pastor – pastor of the school community.”

The pastorate includes overseeing an institution that provides academic formation for 108 seminarians, including 24 who are studying for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. It also includes 17 men who are enrolled in the school’s English as a Second Language program and 28 students, including four seminarians, who are pursuing a master of arts in theology.



He noted that teaching is done by modeling, so he is “modeling being a priest.” “I try to be present, listening and compassionate. I try to use my pastoral skills, my listening skills – active listening, not just passive listening,” he said.

Fr. de Jong said that when he worked as a hospital chaplain in Houston, he learned from his supervisor “the ministry of presence.”

“You float around. You make yourself visible,” he said. “Visibility is one of the key things I learned in hospital ministry.”

While studying for the priesthood, Fr. de Jong did not anticipate coming to the United States nor going into hospital ministry. In 1964, following ordination, he began graduate work in Rome, completing his doctoral work in moral theology at the Academia Alfonsiana, and a licentiate in theology from the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas. About the time he finished in 1966, his religious community closed its seminaries in his native Holland. However, Sacred Heart School of Theology needed someone to teach moral theology.

He remained in that position until 1974, when his Dutch provincial asked him to go into hospital chaplaincy at St. Luke Hospital in Milwaukee. Besides providing medical-moral guidance to physicians and medical residents, the job evolved into supervision of clinical pastoral education (CPE) programs. Fr de Jong welcomed the switch from academic work to pastoral work.

“I did not see myself spending all of my life in academics without having pastoral experience,” he said. “I kind of missed that after ordination. Pure academics were not enough for me. I wanted more pastoral experience.”

From 1987 to 1995, he supervised CPE students at hospitals in Houston. In 1996, his provincial asked him to become master of novices in Chicago for the Congregation of the Sacred Heart. When, three years later, there were no more novices, he asked to return to teaching at Sacred Heart.



“I still felt I had the mental energy and capacity to catch up with the latest developments in moral theology,” he said. “I kept abreast of it.”

He is teaching a medical moral ethics class this semester, and hopes to teach one course every year, at least until another moral theologian is added to the faculty.

Besides having “traditional” seminarians, i.e., those who are in college or who have completed college, in its student body, Sacred Heart School of Theology is one of two seminaries that provides formation for older men preparing for priesthood. The other is Blessed John XXIII National Seminary in West, Mass.

This niche in the seminary market came at the suggestion of Bishop Joseph Potocnak of the Diocese of De Aar, South Africa, who, as vocation director for the Priests and Brothers of the Sacred Heart in the early 70s, suggested that the school open a Center for Adult Religious Vocations.

“What we did is respond to the needs of the church at different stages,” Fr. de Jong said of the school’s decision more than 30 years ago.

Informing bishops and their vocation directors, as well as vocation directors of religious orders, about this facet of the school is part of the rector’s job.

“We have an experienced program with regard to older, mature men. We have an excellent spiritual formation program that is geared to people who have experience,” he said.

By building upon the men’s professional experience, Fr. de Jong said that SHST will train them to be leaders in the church.

“Our unique contribution is to take the experienced people – the doctors, lawyers, farmers- who have had some leadership experience in their field and help them translate this to pastoral leadership, to prepare those people to be leaders for our communities,” he said.

Noting that “developmental issues for people in their 50s, 60s, 70s are different than those who are 20, 30 years old,” Fr. de Jong said the result of having both age groups in the school is positive.

“There is good interaction in classes. We have an interesting environment. With our ESL students, it’s like a little United Nations,” said the priest who is fluent in English, Dutch, German, Italian, French and Spanish. “It is good for Saint Francis Seminary students to experience this. It is a dynamic place, a multicultural place.”

Fr. de Jong said that SHST trains its seminarians, whose average is 46-years-old, to have what Fr. Leo John Dehon, founder of the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, instilled in the religious order’s members- a passion for priesthood.

“We want priests who are educators, priests who are virtuous, and priests who are zealous (in their apostolic work),” he said.



*Fr. Jan de Jong, SCJ, as he is installed as president-rector of Sacred Heart School of Theology, January 30, 2008, by Very Rev. Thomas Cassidy, SCJ, provincial superior of the Priests of the Sacred Heart (C )and Michael Falbo, chairman of the Sacred Heart board of directors (R)..*