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He can bless you or arrest you

Police officer serves double role as priest



RICK GRAEFE PHOTOS
When he's not enforcing the law, Glendale police Cpl. Robert A. Catlett Jr. serves as pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Ecumenical Catholic Church USA.

BY ROBBI COURTAWAY
STAFF WRITER

When he was a second-grader at St. George Catholic School in Affton, Robert Catlett Jr. knew he wanted to be a priest, a veterinarian or a police officer.

Today, at age 40, Catlett fills two of the roles.

"I don't have any intention of going to veterinary school," he said.

A 20-year veteran of the Glendale Police Department, Catlett had studied to be a Roman Catholic priest in college but left "for philosophical reasons." On July 20, 2003, he was ordained a priest in the Ecumenical Catholic Church USA (ECC), an independent Catholic church. He is pastor of ECC's Sts. Peter and Paul church.

In both professions, "we're called to help people," Catlett said. "It's just the hat that you wear that is different. Especially in Glendale's small-town setting, we deal with people more on a one-on-one basis. We're called to do a lot of what I call ministry-type work: domestic violence situations, older residents who just want somebody to talk to. Just dealing with people, I see each one more as a human being than a suspect or complainant.

"I've been on death calls where, if I get a feeling they need some support, or I see religious mementos around the home, I ask them, 'Would you like to pray for your loved one?'" he added. "They seem to appreciate that."

For those who run afoul of the law, Catlett said he has no problems issuing a ticket or making an arrest.

"There certainly is a fine line," he added. "I would never go into an interrogation telling people, 'I'm a priest. Is there anything you would want to confess?' We would certainly have a problem with the confession."

Founded by former Roman Catholic priest the Rev. Carl Swaringim in 2001, ECC is one of a few hundred independent Catholic churches in the U.S. and has no connection to the Roman Catholic Church or the St. Louis Archdiocese.

"The independent Catholic churches run the spectrum from very conservative to very liberal," said Swaringim, of O'Fallon, Mo., who is diocesan bishop of ECC. "We tend to be in the middle someplace."

The church's belief statements are similar to those of the Roman Catholic Church, with a few differences: celibacy for priests is a personal decision; all holy orders are open to men and women; those who have been divorced and/or remarried are entitled to the sacraments; and contraception is not a sin but a personal decision of a married couple.

"We're similar to other Christian churches that say we're not here to judge. Let God be the judge, not us," Swaringim said. "We're basically here to facilitate the individual person's relationship with God through word and sacrament in the Catholic faith tradition."



A church organist, Catlett was asked by a friend about four years ago to assist with the music at Sts. Peter and Paul.

"I felt very comfortable, very welcome," he said. "I felt like I was in a Catholic environment."

As he became more involved in the church and his ordination approached, Catlett wasn't sure what his co-workers or his boss — Police Chief Richard Black, a devout Roman Catholic — would think.

"I didn't want to offend him," Catlett said. "The printer faxed me a proof of the invitation, and (Black) called me in and asked, 'Are you being ordained or something?' I told him, and he said, 'I think that's terrific.' He's been very supportive."

Black and other co-workers attended Catlett's ordination. Black was ill and unavailable for comment for this story, but Glendale police Capt. Gary Woepke said Catlett wears many hats. Among them are supervisor; administrative aide to the chief; certified fire investigator and accident reconstruction investigator; breathalyzer instructor; computer technician for the city; and executive director of the Missouri Crime Prevention Association.

"A few of us have used the colloquial 'padre' every once in a while with him," Woepke said. "I'm rather impressed with Bob, because he gets so much done. He's a supervisor and he goes beyond that to being a mentor. It really stands out how much time he spends with the younger officers."

Although he said he is reticent to discuss religion with others, Catlett sometimes is asked about issues such as the St. Stanislaus controversy. And sometimes a co-worker will joke around and then say, "I shouldn't have said that; you're a priest."

"I tell them I'm a human being first," Catlett said.

To detractors who say Sts. Peter and Paul is not a "real" church and Catlett is not a "real" priest, he would invite them to visit "and see what we're all about before they make that judgment."

The real-life experiences, mortgage payments and day-to-day challenges faced by Sts. Peter and Paul's clergy help them to be more compassionate, Catlett and Swaringim said. That quality also has surfaced in Catlett's job as corporal at the Glendale Police Department, Woepke said. In 1994, Catlett was attacked by a mentally ill suspect he was

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Robbi Courtaway

Of the Suburban Journals

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Like St. Stanislaus parish, Sts. Peter and Paul is governed by a lay board and the priests are the agents, subject to dismissal, Swaringim said. But the comparison ends there.

"He (Archbishop Raymond Burke) really can't excommunicate us, because we don't belong to his church," Catlett said.

Catlett, who said he never had severe differences with the Roman Catholic Church, attended Sunday services when his work schedule permitted at nearby churches such as Mary Queen of Peace in Webster Groves.

"As far as celibacy of priests, I didn't have a problem with that, but I didn't have a problem with priests getting married, either," he said. "And there's a lot of females out there I believe would make better priests than some men."

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"He went out and saw that the person received the follow-up care that was needed," Woepke said. "He really gives his time willingly to anyone who needs it."

Catlett, who is single, lives in South County and enjoys photography, cooking and traveling. He also is an accomplished singer, Swaringim said.

"The reality is, we're very blessed as a church to have someone of that caliber in the ministry here," Swaringim noted.

"He's just saying that because I have a gun," Catlett said, and smiled.

Sts. Peter and Paul Ecumenical Catholic Church USA

> **Affiliation with St. Louis Archdiocese:** none

> **Location:** Meets at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church, 808 N. Mason Road in Creve Coeur

> **Services:** Mass at 5 p.m. each Sunday

> **Phone:** (314) 719-2833

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