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Priest, mentor to seminarians receives honor

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His is a lifetime full of colorful memories — though not many left him as red-faced as the time he sneaked atop darkened gymnasium bleachers to hear a visiting Catholic dignitary speak near his Wisconsin parish.

The Episcopal priest had read some of the man's work and was impressed with his writings.

Only, the local Catholic bishop at the sold-out dinner with the Archbishop of Krakow, who would later come to international prominence as Pope John Paul II, happened to recognize Conrad Kimbrough peeking out as the robed group walked by. The bishop stopped the procession and asked the embarrassed Kimbrough to come down.

"It reminded me of when the Lord called Zacchaeus to come down out of the sycamore tree," the 81-year-old Kimbrough said. "As I was coming down the bleachers, I thought, 'What do I do?' So, I fell on my knee and kissed (the future pope's) ring."

That was 35 years ago. Kimbrough, who grew up Methodist in Salisbury before joining the Episcopal Church in college and serving as a priest for 25 years, soon would again convert, this time to Catholicism, and spend more than three decades in that priesthood.

Last month, the retired priest and former pastor of St. Benedict's Catholic Church in Greensboro was honored by the Te Deum Foundation with an endowed scholarship honoring his continued work mentoring seminarians. The group, based in Winston-Salem, is working to build the first Catholic seminary in the Southeast.

"Father Kimbrough is very much involved in shaping the future of the church," Bishop Peter Jugis, of the Charlotte diocese, which covers the Triad, said of the award.

Years ago, it was hard for Kimbrough to believe he was being called by God into the ministry.

"I sort of felt I was called to some type of church work but I didn't think I could stand up and talk in front of people," Kimbrough said. "I wanted to say no, but he wouldn't leave me alone."

As a seminarian, he worried about the counsel he would give.

"I knew I would be hearing people's confessions, and I thought I would give them the wrong advice," Kimbrough joked. But, "I was sure if God wanted me to do it he would provide the help that was needed."

Those he has mentored say Kimbrough had an uncanny ability to see what they couldn't always initially grasp or couldn't quite accept.



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"The first time I ever saw him, he said, 'What seminary are you going to?' and I looked at him like, 'What?'" said the Rev. Christopher Davis, now the pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Asheboro. Davis was a Lutheran college music major hired to play the parish organ.

"I started listening to what he was saying and I believed what he was saying and it was what I was looking for at that time in my life," Davis said.

Among others was the college student who told Kimbrough he would go to seminary whenever the "32nd of February" rolled around. But not long after, the young man stood up after Mass and said, "Lo and behold, Father Kimbrough did call the pope and have a 32nd of February arranged."

"He's the one that really fooled me," said Kimbrough, who saw another young man enter the priesthood this past weekend. "His mother has never forgiven me."

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