

# Longtime Redding pastor known for empowering people to live their faith

By Nancy Westlund  
Herald staff

The precept upon which Msgr. Russell Terra has built his ministry as a priest over the past 42 years is that truly wise decisions are conceived in prayer and given life through collective collaboration.

Making the decision to retire Nov. 26 from his current assignment as pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Redding, however, required even more prayer than Msgr. Terra had expected.

"I kept asking for signs and rejecting them," he said, explaining that it took awhile to leave the parish where he had served since 1981. "Then I realized I needed to be quiet for a time."

Making that crucial first decision to become a priest, Msgr. Terra said, was never really a question.

"Apparently God nailed me before I was born," he said with amusement, recalling some anecdotes from his childhood.

He said his mother was informed by a priest visiting Sacred Heart Parish in Sacramento that the baby boy she was expecting would become a priest.

Then when he was six years old, Msgr. Terra remembers rushing to tell his mother the rather overwhelming news that "God talked to me and had a lot of work for me to do."

But it was Msgr. Terra's admiration for Msgr. Roy Peters, then a young seminarian teaching religious education at Sacred Heart one summer, that sealed the deal when he was 11 years old.

"Here was this personable charming guy who was going to give himself to God," Msgr. Terra recalled. "I found out I couldn't live without God."

Following studies for the priesthood, he was ordained at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in 1962 and the same year was appointed parochial vicar of the Cathedral.

On his rather lengthy list of responsibilities was oversight of religious education programs at several Sacramento Catholic schools, including the former St. Joseph's Academy and Bishop Armstrong High School, the former Holy Angels School and St. Joseph School.

Emil Tanghetti, who was an altar boy at the Cathedral at that time, remembers the "tall, energetic priest" who took time to sit down and chat with him from time to time.

"He was very athletic, intensely involved, a very holy man but also a very human guy," said Tanghetti, who now a dermatologist in Sacramento.

Then in 1964, when Tanghetti was a student at Christian Brothers High School, he reconnected with Msgr. Terra, who was teaching religion at Christian Brothers.

"He was a great communicator and gave a sermon you could remember," he said.

Msgr. Terra worked from 1964 to 1968 as a teacher and counselor at Bishop Armstrong. Following that assignment he served as director of religious education for the diocese and as director of the former Aquinas Center, a Catholic library and gift store, from 1968 to 1981.

During Msgr. Terra's tenure in the religious education department, a major effort was made to train and involve lay people in catechetics and religious education.

"It was the cutting edge stuff of Vatican II in religious education, trying to bring religious education and Catholic school programs together," he said. "Religious education was where the rubber met the road."

Msgr. Terra also worked to bring priests serving in common geographic areas together, especially those in remote Northern California parishes. The focus was on collaboration in religious education and long-range planning.

Since the first day he was appointed pastor of St. Joseph Parish on Nov. 26, 1981, his approach to empowering people to do God's work has been in full throttle.

"Unless people believe in a vision nothing will happen," he said. "If we have a great program we have to

find people willing to own it."

Among ministries that have flourished in this manner at St. Joseph is the parish's hospital ministry, through which every Catholic at Shasta Regional Medical Center is visited daily.

St. Joseph also became the first parish in the diocese to start a Stephens Ministry, an outreach to shut-ins begun nearly 20 years ago.

Parish administrator Diane Welch remembers being impressed by the fact that one of the first things Msgr. Terra did when he arrived was to organize a retreat.

"(Msgr. Terra) wanted to bring our community closer to God through music and liturgy," she said. "He understands the importance of silence and listening to God."

Welch added that his next order of business was to identify leaders and then let them work.

"Msgr. Terra is the type of pastor that doesn't hamper people — he lets them do whatever God calls them to do," she said.

One of these people is Cheryl Barnes, music minister and liturgy director at St. Joseph. When she became a member of the parish more than 16 years ago, Barnes committed to joining the choir but soon found herself drawn more fully into the life of the parish.

"Msgr. Terra is a great enabler, giving people some freedom so they can find their gifting," she said. "He's done that with me musically."

A strong supporter of Catholic schools, Msgr. Terra has overseen the addition of classrooms and a library for St. Joseph School and been a leading fund-raiser for St. Francis Middle School and Bishop Francis Quinn Catholic High School in Palo Cedro.

Ray John, a former principal of both schools and a member of St. Joseph, said Msgr. Terra has been "the strongest supporter of Catholic schools in this entire community. He was great with the kids."

Msgr. Terra will continue to celebrate weekend Masses at St. Joseph until the arrival of Father Edulino Silveira, who has been appointed pastor of St. Joseph effective Jan. 13.

After taking some time to enjoy his twin passions — hunting and fly fishing — Msgr. Terra said he is considering future involvement in retreat work.



Msgr. Russell Terra '53