

## ***Answering God's Call: Brother Paul Kennedy, OP***

By Tim Puet

*Catholic Times-The Journal of Catholic Life in Ohio,  
A Weekly Publication of the Catholic Diocese of Columbus,  
Volume 68 (3), October 21, 2018*

When Kevin Paul Kennedy was growing up in Cincinnati in the 1990s, he dreamed of running a restaurant and providing nourishing meals to hundreds of people every day.

Today, he is fulfilling that dream, but in a way, he probably never would have imagined two decades ago. He is now Brother Paul Kennedy, OP, a member of the Dominican Order. Every weekday, he is satisfying the physical and often the spiritual hunger of more than 300 people by being in charge of feeding them at the Holy Family Soup Kitchen in Columbus.

“What always was important to me about the restaurant business was the chance to communicate with people as much as the chance to feed them,” he said. “I graduated with a degree in communications from Northern Kentucky University and spent years in the restaurant business trying to break into management, but eventually realized that wasn’t going to happen, so I left and got into other things.”

But regardless of what I did, every job I’ve had in the past was focused on service to people. Here at the soup kitchen, I get the chance to do the kind of work I wanted to while growing up, while at the same time getting to know the people we serve and developing a rapport with them.”

“I love talking to them, learning their names and their stories, and engaging with them,” said Brother Paul, who has lived in Columbus since 2013, when he was assigned to St. Patrick Church after completing one year of formation at St. Gertrude Priory in Cincinnati and five years at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington.

He has served at the soup kitchen since his arrival in Columbus, becoming its director in 2017 after the death of Sharon Wing, who preceded him in the position.

The kitchen and the pantry connected to it are located in the former Holy Family School in Columbus’ Franklinton neighborhood, just across the Scioto River from downtown, and have served the community’s homeless people and low-income families for more than 40 years.

Msgr. Francis Schweitzer, Holy Family Church’s pastor from 1970 to 1997, founded the kitchen in the late 1970s. It grew steadily under his leadership and that of Betty Carr, who began work there as a volunteer in 1982 and served as its director for most of the next 30 years, with Wing succeeding her.

“These are fellow human beings, not numbers on a spreadsheet or a data base,” Brother Paul said of the people served by the kitchen. “It can be hard to see brokenness all the time, but I

am always trying to remember that these people are Jesus, and when we serve them, we are serving him.”

Brother Paul was born in Houston. “I’m the oldest of four children by seven minutes,” he said. He has a twin brother, Sean; another brother, Ryan; and a sister, Odile. His family moved several times early in his childhood because his father worked for the Public Health Service. They ultimately settled in the Cincinnati area, where his parents, Mike and Diane Kennedy, live today. He is a graduate of Indian Hill High School in the Cincinnati suburbs.

“I never thought seriously about the religious life while growing up,” Brother Paul said. “My brothers and I were active in the Boy Scouts. All three of us are Eagle Scouts. We weren’t members of St. Gertrude Church, the Dominican parish in Cincinnati, but my father and brothers and I used to go there quite a bit because they had a 6 p.m. Mass on Sundays, which we would attend whenever we got back late from a Scout camping trip.

“My dad asked me one time when we left St. Gertrude’s whether I’d ever thought about becoming a priest. My first response, like that of most young men, was ‘Why would I ever do that?’” he said. “But then I told him that if I ever did enter the religious life, it would be at a place like St. Gertrude’s, and that I didn’t think I wanted to say Mass. I was more interested in the personal connection, the grass-roots kind of mentality that would be part of religious life. ‘More like a brother would do,’ he said. Years later, that’s what happened.”

“I got disillusioned with the restaurant business, the whole day-to-day grind and the attitude and the language of some of the people there, and knew I needed a change,” Brother Paul said. He worked for a while as a debt collector, but realized that job was not suited for him, then was employed by the Hamilton County Job and Family Services Department to determine welfare eligibility for people. Later, he was hired by Jewish Vocational Services of Cincinnati to work with people with intellectual disabilities.

“That was a satisfying job,” he said. “I also had gotten involved with youth ministry at St. Gertrude’s at the time, and I was given the opportunity to help with a Eucharist-centered retreat for high school students sometime in 2004 or 2005. That’s where my life changed.

“While in the confessional at the retreat, I heard what I recognized as the voice of God, saying ‘I want you to give me everything you have, and I want you to be a religious brother.’”

He immediately began learning what it would take to pursue that goal. It took about a year-and-a-half to make the necessary arrangements, and in 2007, he pronounced vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and was given the white habit of the Order of Preachers, the formal name for the Dominicans. As a brother, he took vows similar to those of a priest or a deacon, but did not go through an ordination ceremony involving the laying on of hands by a bishop.

Becoming a Dominican Brother was a significant event not just for Brother Paul, but for the Dominican Province of St. Joseph, which includes the northeastern states as far south as Virginia, plus Ohio and Kentucky, and overseas to Kenya. Brother Paul was the first brother to complete post-novitiate formation in the province in 41 years. “The next-youngest brother in the

province is three months younger than my dad, who is 73,” he said. The province currently has six solemnly professed brothers, with three in formation, plus 234 priests and three bishops.

During his six years of religious studies, his unique situation enabled him to choose classes that were most helpful to him. These included an opportunity to attend a culinary school in northern Virginia.

Brother Paul’s formal title in the Dominican Order is “cooperator brother.” “We cooperate in the ministry of the priesthood,” he said. “We take part in preaching by example rather than preaching from the pulpit. That is my ministry at the soup kitchen, and I’m also involved with several groups at St. Patrick’s.”

As a Dominican, he took a religious name separate from his birth name. He chose the name “Paul” to honor his great-grandfather, who had that name. In addition, the word *paulus* is Latin for small, and Brother Paul is less than five feet tall. “In many ways, this makes me more approachable to people of all ages,” he said. “Some people may be scared to talk to a person in the clergy, but I’m not perceived as scary.”

Brother Paul occasionally talks to young men who are considering a religious life, and he says his advice to them is “Pray about it. Open your heart to what God is ultimately calling you to do. If you do what God wants you to, you’ll always be happy. You have to use your talents to serve God.”