

# Giving thanks for priests

Thank-you note leads woman to start website, which generates a book

By Mark Haney  
The Catholic Times

ADA — At one of the lowest points in her life, a priest helped Anne Hughes.

In turn, she thanked him. Then, she decided to help others do the same. And, in the process, shine a light on all of the unsung heroes in the priesthood.

The priest was Fr. David Harvey, now pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Fenton but who was pastor of St. John the Baptist Parish in Ypsilanti when Hughes was growing up there.

Hughes turned to Fr. Harvey almost two years ago, at a time in her adult life when her husband of 27 years had left her and their three children — Jason, now 20; Lindsey, now 16; and Jackson, now 9 — and her father, Bernard, was dying of prostate cancer.

“I was completely overwhelmed,” said Hughes, now a member of St. Robert Newminster Parish in Ada. “I didn’t have very good skills. I was looking through my parents’ pictures, their photo albums, and I see a picture of Pope John Paul II. He is standing with Fr. David Harvey. In my parents’ pictures. And it was just this incredible feeling that you have the Catholic Church behind you. It was just an overwhelming feeling that there is strength here. ‘I am the strength you can count on. You can let your dad die. You do not have to tell him (about her husband leaving her). You have the strength of the Catholic Church behind you.’ It was just this overwhelming feeling that came from seeing Pope John Paul II next to a priest that I knew so well. I felt so connected.”

Fr. Harvey came to her parents’ home to speak to him, to help him get ready to die. Then he returned to concelebrate her father’s funeral Mass.

“It was just an absolute tribute to Catholicism and a man who had built his life on Catholicism,” she said. “While at Mass, my sister whispered to me, ‘I’ve never been prouder to be a Catholic.’”

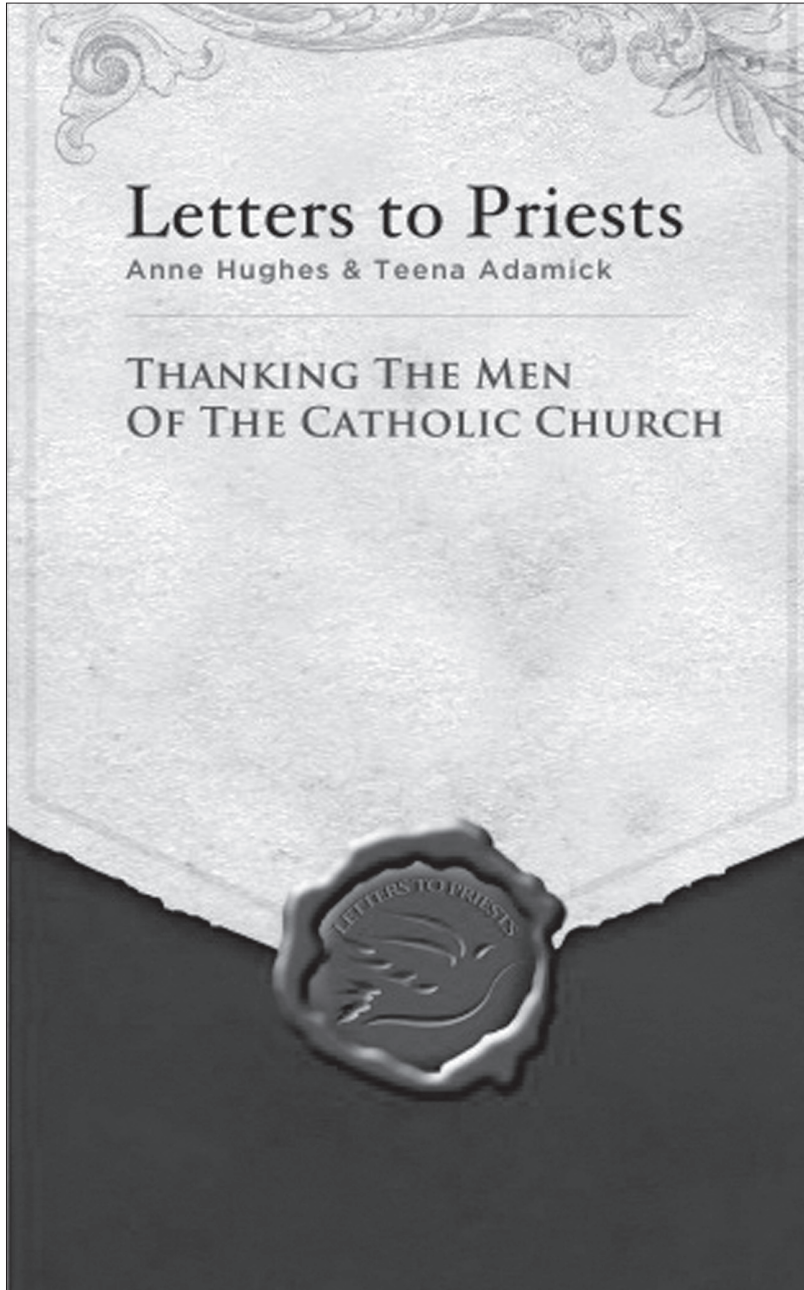
A little later, Fr. Harvey celebrated the 40th jubilee of his ordination.

“My 90-year-old mother (Eileen), myself and my sisters arrived to see the celebration of the anniversary of his ordination,” she said, “and he’s overcome that we are willing to do this.”

So she wrote him thank-you notes for coming to visit her father, for celebrating his funeral Mass and about what a great celebration his 40th jubilee was and how the celebrating gave her a break from her grieving.

He responded, telling her how much he appreciated her letters. He said he didn’t get many letters of such thanks.

And that got Hughes thinking. The result was “Letters for Priests,” an e-mail center that became a website that soon may result in a book. The whole idea was to give people a place where they could send letters of thanks to priests,



alive or dead, whether they be local, national or international.

Fr. Harvey told the *National Catholic Reporter* this project shows the influence of our lives on each other: “It’s not just a passing acquaintance. Something deeper has happened. It’s part of the work of the Spirit, for sure.”



Anne Hughes

This wasn’t a straight shot, from start to book. At one point, trying to find work — she has a degree in industrial design from Michigan State University but has since become an insurance agent — she joined LinkedIn, a networking center for the business community. It connected her with Lukasz Wiczorek, a 24-year-old Pole who is proud of Pope John Paul II. He offered to create the website for her.

Her sister, special education teacher Teena Adamick of California, helped drum up responses by contacting various groups.

“What I did to help her out was I kept thinking to different groups, such as third order groups of various religious orders for her to talk to about the project, to try to get letters from them,” said Adamick.

But it also was a way for Adamick to thank Carmelite Father Gilbert Levario, who helped her when her son died, and now is helping the two women with the book.

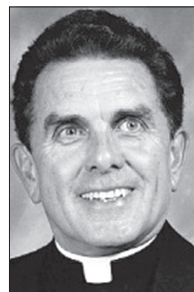
“I was just so broken hearted I

didn’t think I could survive,” she said. “But he kept talking to me and was always so willing to be available.”

Then, when letters were slow to flow into the website Hughes connected with Peggy Clores, the director of religious education at a parish in Huntington, N.Y., and a member of the Catholic Writers of Long Island. Clores’ letter thanking Marianist Father James Williams, president of Chaminade High School in Mineola, and “his army of Marianist men” for the support she and her husband, Peter, received when their son, Michael, was suffering with cancer attracted a lot of attention and emotional responses.

Part of Clores’ letter said: “God used your priesthood to make Christ Himself manifest to us in that grave hour and, through you, I felt His immense love for each and every one of us in our sorrow. It is the memory and witness of your extraordinary acts of service that has inspired each and every one of us to — boldly serve a world in need with all of our strength. There is no question that we are better people for having had all of you by our side. God bless you, dear priest.”

“Nothing could have made my husband and I happier,” said Clores, a 54-year-old mother of three, “than to give back to them (the Marianists). They are all so humble.”



Fr. Harvey

Hughes’ website gave her that chance.

“I thought the idea was just phenomenal,” she said, “especially at a time when our priests are so vilified and under attack. So many great stories, heroic stories, have been buried.”

Then the website got the attention of the National Catholic Register, which posted a blog about it. Then the Catholic Business Journal wrote about it. She also landed a radio interview.

“It talks about people from all kinds of tragedies who have been guided back to peace by the words a priest has said,” said Hughes, 52. “When I talk to priests, they love it. I’d love to say I did it for priests, but I really did it because I thought it would be healing for people. I thought it would be like ‘A Chicken Soup for the Soul.’ But I will tell you, the priests are often almost overwhelmed with gratitude.”

So far, more than 100 letters from people all over the world have been submitted.

“It’s all in response to big stuff, tragedies where a priest stepped in and helped guide them and helped keep families together,” she said. “The letters are outstanding. Catholics are rising to the occasion. They like this project and are very proud to be part of it.”

The project also has helped Hughes.

“It is such an incredibly healing experience,” she said. “And, what I have gotten out of it, the things that were missing from my life, because your marriage doesn’t fall apart like this unless you are missing certain things, I think, if you are really honest with yourself. I was kind of going through life in a hurry, concentrating on the wrong things. The book has taught me to slow down and to really concentrate on what counts.”

“I personally have healed tremendously from this project. It is a very uplifting project.”

Now she just needs to find a publisher.

“I would like it to be the kind of book you would give a friend in a time of need,” she said. “And I really want this to be a book that doesn’t just appeal to Catholics. I want it to be a book that appeals to people who need words that heal people. In other words, I am inviting everyone into the words that Catholic priests have said to Catholics that will heal people. It is like a gift we are giving the world.”

Hughes will not stop, either, until the book is published. She has good reason, she said.

“I believe this was inspired by Pope John Paul II,” she said. “That’s just the way it is. It is just a drive in me to get this done. So I will get this done even if it is with my last breath.”

To submit and read letters, visit LetterstoPriests.com. Letters may also be submitted to: Letters to Priests, Thanking the Men of the Catholic Church, P.O. Box 482, Ada, MI 49301.†

## BRIEFLY

**The rosary alive**  
FLINT — A living rosary will be prayed from 1-3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 23, in the Mary Garden at Catholic Charities, 735 E. Stewart Ave. Light refreshments will be served after the service. To participate, submit a special intention, or for more information, call (810) 232-9950, ext. 226 or 228.

**Find out**  
DETROIT — The Capuchin Franciscan friars are offering a “come and see” weekend, Oct. 29-31, to men ages 17-49 interested in religious life and how the Franciscans live in the world and Church today. To sign up, or for more information, call (773) 475-6206, (920) 915-4400 or e-mail vocation@capuchin-franciscans.org.

**For singles**  
LANSING — The next Refresh singles retreat is the weekend of Nov. 12-14 at St. Francis Retreat Center, 703 E. Main St. in Dewitt. To sign up, or for more information, call (517) 342-2494 or e-mail refreshlansing@gmail.com.

**‘Come and see’**  
ADRIAN — The Adrian Dominican sisters are hosting a “Come and See” Weekend Oct. 29-31, at the motherhouse, 1257 Siena Heights Drive. Single Catholic women are invited to find out more about religious life. The weekend starts at 5 p.m. Friday and ends after dinner on Sunday. For more information, contact Sr. Dusty Faman, O.P., at DFaman@adriandominicans.org. Or visit www.adriandominicans.org.†

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