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Sept. 15 -
21, 2000

Kenrick's Banjo-Playing Priest

by Jo Beck

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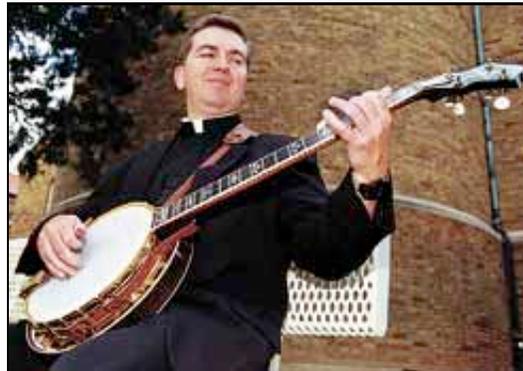
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Father Ed Richard is the associate dean of academics at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in Shrewsbury, but in music circles he is known as the "banjo-playing priest."

The door of his seminary office gives a hint as to his avocation. It is plastered with Peanuts cartoons, Dilbert, and the Far Side Gallery. The cartoons all have something to do with banjos.



Father Ed Richard. God called him. And so did the banjo.

Photo by Ursula Ruhl

Some might think that a man of the cloth, armed with a law degree and doctorate in moral theology, might tend to be stuffy, but this soft-spoken, genial cleric doesn't appear to take himself too seriously.

A native of DeQuincy, La., Richard spent his early years on a rice farm.

"We were surrounded by water and rice, and we caught crawfish in the creeks and bayous," Richard recalled.

"My father was 100 percent Cajun," said Richard, who pronounces his name "Re-shard," in the French style. "Cajuns have a positive, upbeat attitude about life. I think a big part of that attitude is their faith," he added. "They are hard workers, but when it comes time to play, they know how to party. They're not somber people.

"I grew up listening to music and visiting friends and relatives where music was always present. I can't remember a time when I didn't play an instrument," he added.

Richard's mother is a guitar player and she encouraged him, giving him a guitar and later sending him for guitar lessons.

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Instead of picking up Cajun-style music, Richard enjoyed the "Smoky Mountain" kind of music, including Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley and Flatt and Scruggs. He learned to play the Dobro and banjo on his own. Richard is left handed, but plays all three instruments with his right hand.

Along with some bluegrass music friends, Richard has recorded a CD of gospel songs entitled "Do Whatever He Tells You." The \$13 purchase price on the CD is tax deductible, and all profits go to support the LaSalette foreign missions that are located all over the world. Cassette tapes are also available for \$8.

On a recent Saturday, the Missouri Fiddlers invited Richard and his friends to play at a bluegrass festival in Valley Park. After playing, Richard did a brisk business selling his music CDs and audiotapes.

The recording, a mixed collection of 13 vocals and instrumentals, has a toe-tapping, spiritual feel that showcases Richard's claw-hammer picking style.

"The claw-hammer style is an older playing style," said Richard.

The style incorporates a rhythm action that plays rhythm and lead at the same time.

Gospel favorites include "In the Sweet By and By" and "Unclouded Day." In addition to these traditional Appalachian hymns, the disc includes five songs that were written by Richard, including the title song "Do Whatever He tells you." The Ozark Bluegrass Boys accompany Father Richard on the all-acoustic disk.

Like his banjo repertoire, Richard's professional credentials are impressive, including a doctorate degree in moral theology that he earned from the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome.

He received his undergraduate degree from McNeese State University in 1978 and his law degree from Louisiana State University School of Law.

He practiced business law in Lake Charles, La., for two years, but finally acknowledged a call to the priesthood that he had been feeling for years.

"I kept putting it out of my mind. I thought God can't be calling ME. Somebody else, maybe, but not me," he laughed. "But one day I was talking to my parish priest and he asked me if I'd like to be a priest.

"I admitted that I would. I think I was meant to be a priest," he added.

Richard joined the LaSalette Missionaries and graduated from Kenrick-Glennon, the seminary of the St. Louis Archdiocese. He was ordained in 1991, and served in parishes in Texas and Louisiana before coming back to teach at Kenrick-Glennon.

Richard has been a speaker for conferences and has appeared on TV and radio shows many times, speaking on contemporary moral issues. He served as a KMOX radio commentator for the 1999 papal visit.

He works with the St. Louis Center for Hispanic Ministry, assisting in parishes with Spanish masses.

For Richard, music is a common link, an evangelical tool, opening much-needed paths of communication between divergent religious groups. Through his music, he's enjoyed meeting and mingling with people from many religions.

"The people I meet through my music are from many faith communities, and we encourage one another to put into practice the teachings of our religions. One of my music friends is a deacon at an Assembly of God Church, and I've taught in their Wednesday night services," Richard said.

"We need to work together, and music is a tool to gain cooperation," said Richard. "We all need to look more at what we have in common instead of what which separates us," he added.

For more information about Richard's recording, or to order a CD or cassette tape, write to: Music, LaSalette Missionaries, 4650 S. Broadway, St. Louis, Mo., 63111-1398, call 314-605-2785, or e-mail Fr. Richard at e-richard@usa.net.

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