

'Mind over murder'

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'Death Wears a Red Hat' author talks of leaving priesthood, writing

By Teri Banas
Staff writer

Author William X. Kienzle stands somewhat sheepishly at the podium and greets a steady procession of teenagers carrying one or more of his three novels.

Shyly, they ask for his autograph, sometimes for themselves, sometimes for a friend or parent. Dressed in a light blue sports jacket and towering more than six feet, he appears awkward but politely pens a personal line for each request.

He wonders why they're so impressed and frankly admits he's embarrassed. "They never look me straight in the eye," he muses.

Sudden bursts of personal humility aside, William Kienzle, an ex-priest turned mystery writer, is more than just another author on tour this day.

At a recent talk in Plymouth, he didn't promote any of his three best sellers — "The Rosary Murders," "Death Wears a Red Hat" or his latest one, "Mind over Murder."

Instead, he talks about the life of a writer. You need experiences, stories to tell, he said.

IN THE BEST tradition of successful writers, Kienzle is a foremost storyteller.

His anecdotes, brought out and dusted off for such public gatherings, are from his 20 years with the Catholic Church, as a parish priest and editor of the Michigan Catholic, a weekly newspaper.

The man is witty. His audience responds with smiles and chuckles.

He tells one story about a fellow priest and friend of the 1950s, Father George Magecky.

"Did anyone ever see 'Going My Way' with Bing Crosby? Well, you won't believe this, but at least a few of my friends went into the seminary because they wanted to be Father O'Malley (the character Bing Crosby played at the fictitious St. Mary Church)."

"In the '50s, priests could do a lot of things for people, like get them jobs and solve their problems."

And then there were those who wanted to become "big, fat pastors" of their own parishes, Kienzle said.

Enter young friend Father George. George was dying for his own parish, beginning right after his ordination. In the 1950s, it was accepted practice that priests became pastors through seniority.

But young Father George was impatiently ambitious. Whenever an opening came up in the diocese, Father George would write to the chancellor, asking for consideration. The boys in the chancellor's office thought Father George's faithful communiques were funny.

"George was the only one who didn't know that you don't get in that way. Eventually, he was told, and then waited to be old enough."

When the next opening occurred, the chancellor waited for Father George's letter of inquiry. No letter arrived, so the chancellor wrote to him.

"They wanted to know — 'What's wrong with this parish?'"

Pause for laughter.

"Well, it's not hilarious, but it's an amusing anecdote, at least for adults," Kienzle confessed.

KIENZLE'S LATEST novel, "Mind Over Murder," features, once again, the intrepid character of Father Bob Koessler, who continues his dabbling into sleuthing while running St. Anselm Parish in Dearborn Heights.

Koessler is a bit older now (59) and his crochetedness is never more evident than in his dealings with his young charge, Deacon Les Schroeder.

Not surprisingly, Koessler is modeled after Kienzle himself. When Kienzle quit smoking and began chewing toothpicks as an alternative, so did Father Koessler in "Death Wears a Red Hat."

St. Anselm also was Kienzle's last assignment as a working priest. Both characters enjoy playing the piano for

relaxation. And both men are impatient with church reform.

VATICAN II, held almost 20 years ago, was the long-awaited solution for those eager for the reform of church law. It was somewhat of a disappointment for some laymen and some clergymen as well.

"I loved being a priest," said Kienzle. "But I left because I cared an awful lot that church law was harming a lot of people and the church."

"It's like being a policeman. If you don't believe in the law, how are you supposed to enforce it?"

Kienzle's latest novel delves into the dealings of the diocese matrimonial tribunal, which reviews Canon Law as it relates to marriage. In effect, it's a clearing house for those wanting to marry in the church. Unsatisfactory results in such requests lead to murder in this book.

Kienzle, meanwhile, is preparing a

fourth novel, titled "Assault with Intent."

Father Koessler perfects his crime-solving skills and takes a bigger role in actually solving the main crime in this book, rather than stumbling on a solution, he said.

His fifth book, still untitled and unwritten, will take Fr. Koessler to Rome where Kienzle says "a lot of funny things take place." Koessler will accompany his friend, Bishop Boyle,

there for Boyle's ordination.

ANECDOTES FROM Kienzle's own experiences pepper his mystery stories. While police investigations and uncovered clues make up the framework of his works, his anecdotes bring life to the characters. Detroit area scenes are prominent.

St. John Seminary in Plymouth, where Kienzle received his religious training, is often the scene of a few pleasant rounds of golf for clergymen.

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