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"This is my beloved Son, in whom
I am well pleased."
— Matthew 3:17

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Life as a father inspires vocation to priesthood

Experience with 'special son' brings Chelmsford man to Orthodox seminary

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CHELMSFORD — When told 22 years ago that their newborn son might die, Ernest and Helen Coulouras turned to God — and in that time of spiritual crisis, Ernest Coulouras says, he found his vocation to the Greek Orthodox priesthood.

But Coulouras had to defer fulfilling that vocation. He had family responsibilities — and chief among them was caring for John, the youngest of his three sons, who was later diagnosed with Down's syndrome.

Now, at 65 and retired after a long career in education, Ernest Coulouras is about to reach his dream. He will complete his theological studies at Holy Cross School of Theology in Brookline this spring and seek ordination soon afterward.

Coulouras says he and Helen "relied on prayer and the support of Christian friends" again and again as fragile little John, born prematurely, struggled through one crisis after another to survive.

They learned that John had Down's syndrome just as Coulouras — who retired in 1993 after 11 years as a psychologist in the Chelmsford schools — was about to take the test for his certificate of advanced graduate study in child psychology from Boston University.

Getting that certificate was purely "the work of the Holy Spirit," he says now.

In that time of crisis, Helen Coulouras says, "Ernie found out what he was made of. (The experience) enriched the meaning of life."

The meaning of life, for

Coulouras, entailed the priesthood, but his family came first. So the "project," as Helen and Ernest call his path to the priesthood, has taken nearly 20 years.

In that time, they raised three sons — James, 29, who's now an accountant, Charles, 26, who's serving as a U.S. Air Force captain in Germany and, of course, John, 22.

Still, Coulouras — a lifelong member of Transfiguration Greek Orthodox Church in

Lowell, carved out precious time to pursue his religious education and to be an active member of his parish.

He even attempted in 1978, at age 47, to take advantage of a new program created by the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Boston for laymen with vocations.

He delved into theological books and courses and participated in services. But the program was intense and demanding and robbed him of time for his family and career.

"It was an intense program that was hard for me because my special son required a lot of time and attention. I did some of it, but I couldn't keep up. It was too demanding," he admits.

But he did find encouragement from his pastor, the Rev. John Sarantos. One Sunday, as Coulouras was engrossed in his task as chanter for the liturgy, "the Holy Spirit seems to have inspired Father Sarantos to announce (to the whole congregation) that I was studying to become a priest. It was a wonderful feeling to have that support."

In 1980, he began a two-year program at the diocesan offices in Brookline leading to a Certificate of Religious Study. He continued to work with



Ernest Coulouras and his wife, Helen, at home in Chelmsford, with his study books, including the altar book used for the Eucharistic liturgy in the Greek Orthodox tradition. SUN/JULIA MALAKIE

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young people in his parish and, at one point, served as diocesan youth director. Five years ago, with his family grown, he began taking courses at the seminary in Brookline part-time. Because of his job

obligations, he says, "I took all the lectures offered after 3 p.m." And, because of the scheduling problem, he also found himself taking some advanced electives before completing required courses.

Once he retired in 1993, Helen encouraged him to attend the seminary full time. "I just knew he had to satisfy that great yearning he's had all these years."

While Coulouras says he's been discouraged at times, his full-time experience at the seminary has been a rich one. And there have been funny moments — like when fellow students think he's a professor and move aside in the seminary cafeteria.

"Most of them know me now and they all call me Ernie," he says. But they have another name for him and it touches him. He knows that secretly, some of them lovingly call him

geros — the old man.

Coulouras' oldest son, James, who was recently elected to the Transfiguration parish board, admires his dad's dedication.

"I think it shows a lot of enthusiasm to go back to school," James says. "He's sincere and honest and always willing to help other people. I think he'll make a good priest. He's experienced in his field and I think that will help him in relating to people."

Coulouras brings a life filled with experience in working with young people to his ministry.

A 1947 graduate of Lowell High School, he got his bachelor's degree from Boston University in 1958 after a four-year stint in the Navy. He also holds a master's degree from BU in guidance and counseling and received his Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study in child psychology in 1972.

He served as a guidance counselor from 1968-82 in the Chelmsford elementary schools; and from 1982 until his retirement, in 1993, as a psychologist in the Chelmsford public schools.

His volunteer service has also revolved around children. He has led Boy Scout troops, coached Little League and has been active in the work of Chelmsford's Camp Paul for exceptional children, continuing to serve on its board of directors. In a desire to help handicapped children at his church, he established a Sunday school at Transfiguration for special students.

Ultimately, Coulouras credits his "special son" John with the inspiration for his vocation.

"I would say my special son is the reason why I couldn't study earlier, but also the reason why I did (eventually) study," Coulouras says. "Because of my son, we began praying all the time and looking more deeply into our faith."