Bishop Ott looks back on his ‘moment of grace’

Stanley Joseph Ott’s “moment of grace” came just before D-Day. In fact, he graduated from high school the day after the Allies hit the beaches.

“I had a big decision: whether I would go into the service and do my patriotic duty and serve the country, or whether I should go into the seminary, and, after reflection, I decided on the seminary.”

Ten days later, Ott began his journey to the priesthood that would culminate with his installation as bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

“Everyone has a niche, and I think mine is as a priest,” he said, during a recent interview in which he touched on a variety of subjects including his battle with cancer, his youth, the sex scandal that has rocked the Catholic Church, and the role of women in the church.

Born on June 29, 1927, on the eve of the Great Depression, in Gretna, he was the youngest of three children born to his parents, who are both deceased.

“Life was, I guess, less complicated than today, in so far as television, the drug scene and so on. We had a happy family life. My parents were very good people. They had not received that much education, but they were very good people — people of faith,” he said.

He attended St. Joseph’s Elementary School, calling it “a protective, innocent environment.” The teachers were nun and discipline was strict. Ott served as an altar boy at St. Joseph’s, the mother parish for that area.

Ott’s thinking about becoming a priest began even before his high school years at St. Aloysius in New Orleans. As an altar boy he came to admire the priests he served and those who were close to his family. His aunt, a nun, played a pivotal role in his life.

Because of these influences, he began to think about a vocation. At first he considered becoming a brother, but then he decided to enter the seminary.

Gretna, in those days, had a large population of people of German descent and, as Ott puts it, “you were either Lutheran or Catholic.”

Ott said he could have very easily wound up a Lutheran according to the story he tells about his Lutheran great-grandfather.

When his great-grandmother, a Catholic, became pregnant, the couple made an agreement: If the first child was a boy, then all the children would be raised Lutheran like their father. If the first child was a girl, all the children would be raised Catholic. Their first child was a girl.

The bishop does have some aunts and uncles who are Lutheran. His cousin, Hall of Famer Mel Ott, the New York Giants outfielder, who hit 510 homers, was Lutheran.

Regrettably for Ott, he never got to meet the renowned slugger with the distinctive raised-leg swing.

“He was always in New York, and I was in the seminary (in Covington). I was very close to Melvin’s parents, though,” he said. “I loved baseball, and I love to watch it when I can, but I’m no good at it.”

As an expression of his love for the game and to honor his cousin’s memory, Ott had a small baseball stitched onto his coat of arms when he became bishop. The bishop was pleasantly surprised when “Sports Illustrated” published a photograph of him with the coat of arms under the caption, “A Real Ott.”

Of all the famous people Ott has met over the years — the popes, the politicians and the powerful — Mother Theresa stands out.

Baton Rouge has had only three bishops since the diocese was formed. Bishop Robert Tracy was installed in 1961 and served until his retirement in 1974. He died in 1980. Bishop Joseph Sullivan served from 1974 until his death in 1982. Ott was named bishop after Sullivan’s death.

“My toughest challenge has been . . . trying to foster a sense of unity and trying to get people with various views to
"People don't leave the Catholic Church because of the theology, they leave because of some human element — a bad priest, an abuser, a music that gets angry at someone in the church," the bishop said. "Some personal identities are the 'church,' but I am of the opinion that the church can remain as it is today as long as it would have been 30 years ago.... Even Christ himself chose 11 men and one woman, not a select group." 

"So you go to church and it's always the same thing. That's one of the greatest things about the church, you never know what you're going to get. But today, every week we all have our own personal values, our own way of looking at things, and the church isn't afraid of that."