

With courage and conviction

Seminarians prepare for priesthood through prayer, study

by MARY B. WORTHINGTON

correspondent

WYNNEWOOD, Pa. — It is 6 o'clock in the morning April 1, and a dozen seminarians start their day at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary with an hour of prayer.

Among the seminarians are three of the 14 men studying at seminaries to be ordained priests for the Diocese of Charlotte.

The pews are notoriously squeaky, yet the chapel is profoundly quiet and peaceful. Many of the seminarians use the time to pray the Liturgy of the Hours' Office of Readings.

All ordained clergy and vowed religious are bound to observe the Liturgy of the Hours. In order to prepare them for life as priests, seminarians also pray the Liturgy of the Hours.

"It (Liturgy of the Hours) brings a discipline to prayer," said transitional Deacon Benjamin Roberts, a member of St. Philip the Apostle Church in Statesville and a seminarian for the Diocese of Charlotte.

"It is the prayer of the church. I love the Liturgy of the Hours," he added.

Throughout the holy hour, the nearly 80 theology division seminarians file in, all clad in the traditional clerical cassock.

"Since we are being formed as priests, in all ways, we begin to live that life as much as possible," says David Miller, a member of St. Aloysius Church in Hickory and seminarian for the Diocese of Charlotte.

"The [clerical] garb is another way to enter into that," he said.

This morning, Deacon Roberts serves as the deacon during the holy hour and Mass. Deacon Roberts rotates the liturgical duties with the 19 other transitional deacons in his class.

After Mass, the seminarians head to breakfast while some spend extra time in prayer or make last-minute preparations for class, which will start at 8:50 a.m.

"The most important thing a seminarian does each day is go into that chapel and pray," said Deacon Roberts.

Five minutes before class begins, third-year theology students — who are only six weeks away from diaconate ordination — file in for the day's first class, "United States Church History."

The 15 men pull out texts and laptops. Miller sits in the back row. Waiting for class to begin, one man reminds the class of the Lenten fundraiser — raising money for a local pregnancy center to purchase an ultrasound machine.

The 75-minute class is both academically challenging and pastorally focused, with topics varying from ecumenism to liturgy to popular piety.

Practice and preparation

After class, the seminarians proceed to the chapel, this time for a weekly practicum on the responsibilities of the deacon at Mass.

By now, Miller has attended thousands of Masses in his life; however this is different — the seminarians must master all of the subtleties of their role before diaconate ordination. Miller will be ordained to the transitional diaconate, along with seminarian John Eckert, by Bishop Peter J. Jugis at the Pontifical College Josephinum, a Catholic seminary in Columbus, Ohio, April 26.

Father Patrick Welsh, dean of men and head of liturgy, instructs the seminarians on posture, which is “not rigidity, but a posture that is formal and sacred.”

It is Miller’s turn to role-play. He said he is not nervous of the role itself, “but nervous to be a good deacon.”

He likened the training to earning a driver’s license.

“Driving a car and navigating the road is a whole new experience” than riding in the passenger’s seat, he said.

After the practicum, the third class period of the day begins. Seminarians have five or six classes per semester, which meet two times per week on Mondays and Wednesdays or Tuesdays and Fridays in the morning.

Afternoons are for study, elective classes, exercise, personal business and preparation for various apostolates. Thursdays are reserved for apostolic work at various schools, parishes and agencies around the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

Richard Worthington, a second-year theology student and seminarian for the Diocese of Charlotte, spends this Wednesday afternoon doing lesson plans.

He is teaching moral theology to sophomores at a local Catholic high school. Worthington, a member of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Mocksville, has spent the past several Thursdays on a series of classes explaining the Catholic teachings on marriage, fertility and chastity.

After spending a class giving his vocation story, Worthington said he “taught classes on the problem of contraception.”

“I used an approach that started with the premise of beauty ... When contraception is used, the beautiful marital embrace becomes ugly through the trash that we bring into it,” he said. “More precisely, one or both of the persons is holding back.”

To explain chastity, he said he brought in “some superb chastity educators from Generation Life, [who] delivered a difficult message in a way that was relevant” to the teenagers.

To begin again

Deacon Roberts, Miller and Worthington are all in the seminary’s theology division, or the “upper division” of studies.

Seminary study begins with two years of philosophical training called “pre-theology,” or a four-year college program for those who have not completed an undergraduate degree.

The “lower division” students reside in a separate building with a separate chapel from the theology students.

Each Wednesday, both divisions of men gather in the lower side chapel — much larger than the upper chapel but equally ornate — to chant evening prayer before attending “Rector’s Dinner,” during which all seminarians and priests gather for a meal and to work on friendships and manners.

Tonight’s Rector’s Dinner is special because the priests serve the seminarians. Usually, one of the classes serves the others.

After an evening that finds seminarians back at their books and at chapel, they retire usually by 10 or 11 p.m., ready to spend another day in preparation for service of the church as priests.

“We are men like any others,” said Miller of his current role as a seminarian. “We need grace just like others do, although we have a higher calling.”

“Seminary is a daunting task because of what it’s leading to,” said Deacon Roberts, who will be ordained to the priesthood by Bishop Jugis at St. Patrick Cathedral in Charlotte June 6.

“Entering takes the same courage that it took Matthew to get up from the tax collector’s booth and follow Jesus,” he said.

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