

Priestly Vocations in America: An Updated Look

CWR takes another look at the latest statistics on priestly vocations in the US, on a diocese-by-diocese basis.

American seminarians standing in St. Peter's Square cheer at the election of Pope Benedict XVI last year. They were studying at the North American College in Rome.

NANCY WIECHECIONS

By Jeff Ziegler

In July 2005, *Catholic World Report* published a detailed analysis of priestly vocation statistics in the United States ("Priestly Vocations in America: A Look at the Numbers"). By examining the ratio of diocesan seminarians to Catholics in each of the 176 Latin Rite dioceses, CWR determined which American dioceses were proportionally "vocation-rich" and "vocation-poor" in 2003 and 2004.

Last year's article noted that even dioceses with a peerless track record of attracting seminarians could fall into rapid decline. Five years ago, the Diocese of Fargo was even more vocation-rich than the nation's top diocese is today; the number of seminarians then plunged from 42 in 2001 to 12 in 2004. Because the numbers can change dramatically, an examination of more recent statistics is warranted.

VOCATION-RICH DIOCESES IN 2005

Nebraska's Diocese of Lincoln, with one seminarian per 2,625 Catholics, remains the most vocation-rich in the nation. The dozen dioceses with the highest ratio of diocesan seminarians per Catholics, according to data published the 2005 edition of *The Official Catholic Directory*, are Lincoln; Bismarck, North Dakota; Wichita, Kansas; Juneau, Alaska; Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida; Cheyenne, Wyoming; Savannah, Georgia; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Duluth, Minnesota; Helena, Montana; Peoria, Illinois; and Tyler, Texas. Rounding out the top 20 dioceses are Rapid City, South Dakota; Denver, Colorado; Alexandria, Louisiana; Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia; Yakima, Washington; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Sioux City, Iowa; and Spokane, Washington. Officials of these dioceses who have spoken to

CWR have been quick to credit grace given in response of prayer, particularly Eucharistic adoration, as the foundation of their success.

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However, in addition to grace through prayer, personal example may play a large role. Historians of the latter half of the nineteenth century favored the "great man theory" of history and attributed events to the actions of heroic individuals. In many of these vocation-rich dioceses, success in attracting seminarians is also attributable in large part to a "great man": a bishop or a vocation

director who goes the extra mile to attract seminarians and form them in the Faith.

Bishop Alvaro Corrada del Rio, SJ, has helped make the Diocese of Tyler a vocation powerhouse: for two of the last three years, it has ranked among the dozen most vocation-rich dioceses in the nation. Father Eduardo Nevares, co-director of vocations, told CWR that Bishop Corrada...

... has called all of the pastors to follow the newest directives from Rome concerning the renewal of the liturgy so that our faithful Catholics may enjoy the beauty of the Catholic liturgy in all of its fullness. He has called all of the faithful to be as faithful to their individual vocation ... Bishop Corrada hopes that this new awareness and love for the truths and beauty of our Catholic faith will lead to a new evangelization ... showing forth the splendor of truth found in the Catholic Church.

Making vocation ministry "the top priority for the diocese," Bishop Corrada "has not been afraid to sacrifice any and every other ministry," says Father Nevares, "in order to have money to sustain the growing number of seminarians. He says (and means) that he will even sell his house if he needs money."

A combination of prayer and outreach has consistently made the Diocese of Duluth one of the most vocation-rich in the nation. Bishop Dennis Schnurr told CWR:

First and foremost, it is prayer. In the Diocese of Duluth, the bishop serves as the vocations director, but he is assisted by a priest who has been ordained eight years (who also is a full-time pastor) and a permanent deacon ... Every parish has been encouraged to pray for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life at weekend and daily Masses. Our youth ministry, campus ministry, and religious education programs encourage Eucharistic adoration focused on vocations discernment. Annually, we host Operation Andrew dinners throughout the diocese. The diocese also sponsors an annual week-long vocations camp.

Father Matthew McGinness, vocations director of the Diocese of Wichita, says a culture of prayer and faithful episcopal leadership has been part of his diocese for decades. "Bishop David Maloney," who governed from 1967 to

1982, "steered the diocese through the rocky times after Vatican II. He held fast to the teachings of the Faith ... He would not allow the experimentation that was taking place and damaging the faith of the laity. We therefore had a very strong sense of our Catholic identity." Subsequent bishops, he told CWR, went out of their way to support the priesthood. Eucharistic adoration for vocations has been a regular part of the life of the diocese for decades; Father McGinness found his own vocation in a parish adoration chapel in the early 1980s.

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The emergence of the Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa, as a vocation-rich diocese is largely attributable to Bishop Daniel DiNardo, now Archbishop of Galveston-Houston. In the past decade, the number of Sioux City seminarians has increased from three to 19. Vocations director Father Brian Hughes told CWR that during Bishop DiNardo's tenure (1998-2004), "we sponsored regularly scheduled evenings where the bishop shared a meal and prayer with young men and their pastors to discuss the idea of priesthood and meals with young women to discuss the idea of religious life. During those six years the Bishop met with over 1,500 young men and women." Father Hughes added that all parishes are encouraged to hold weekly Eucharistic adoration for vocations and emphasized that "among our seminarians we consciously and deliberately emphasize the importance of adherence to the Magisterium of the Church, a regular prayer and devotional life, and dedication to works of charity, especially among the poor."

The decisive leadership of Bishop Robert Carlson is causing a vocation surge in the Diocese of Saginaw, Michigan. Bishop Carlson led the vocation-rich Diocese of Sioux Falls from 1995 to 2004 before his transfer to the vocation-poor Diocese of Saginaw,

which ranked 150th in the nation early last year. In his February 2005 installation homily, he announced:

I am Bishop Robert J. Carlson, and I come to you as an apostolic missionary and a servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I consecrate my ministry among you to the intercession and care of the Blessed Virgin Mary ... I promise as your bishop to teach only authentic Catholic doctrine ... And, as of today, I am the vocation director for the Diocese of Saginaw, and I invite the men of this diocese, young and old, who have the necessary gifts and state in life, to seriously ask God if they have a vocation to the diocesan priesthood.



Seminarian Henry Reid chats with Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, New York, before evening prayer at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York, last September.

In his first year as bishop, the number of diocesan seminarians in Saginaw nearly quadrupled from four to 15.

Other dioceses with notable recent increases in seminarians include Chicago; Covington, Kentucky; Crookston, Minnesota; Helena; Indianapolis; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Pueblo, Colorado; Sacramento; and San Bernardino, California.

According to a United States Conference of Catholic Bishops press release, 27 percent of priests ordained in 2005 were foreign born. Few vocation-rich dioceses contacted by CWR over the past two years have reported a particularly high percentage of foreign-born seminarians; exceptions include Yakima and Spokane, nearly half of whose seminarians were born in Mexico. Nearly half of the Diocese of Tyler's 15 seminarians are foreign born:

three are from Ireland, and four are from Colombia. The Diocese of Sioux City reports that one-third of its seminarians come from Mexico. Father Hughes explains:

More than 20 percent of our registered Catholics are Spanish speaking (plus many thousands of undocumented and unregistered Mexican Catholics). We have undertaken a serious effort to recruit seminarians from Mexico to serve the needs of this growing Spanish-speaking Catholic community. We have not accepted any candidates from Eastern Europe, Africa, India, or Asia. It has been our philosophy that our first priority is to raise up a clergy from our own Catholic people here in the Diocese of Sioux City and the second priority has been to provide our Mexican Catholics with clergy from their native land. This is the same pattern of recruitment that we undertook in a previous era when we had a large influx of Irish and German Catholics.

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According to the press release, the median age of priests ordained in 2005 was 37; officials of vocation-rich dioceses who discussed the age of their seminarians with CWR generally reported that their seminarians are younger than the national average.

VOCATION-POOR DIOCESES IN 2005

The Diocese of Honolulu, with one seminarian per 236,933 Catholics, remains the most vocation-poor in the nation. The dozen dioceses with the lowest ratio of seminarians to Catholics are Honolulu; Las Vegas; Metuchen, New Jersey; Santa Rosa, California; Hartford, Connecticut; San Antonio, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; Los Angeles; San Diego; New York; El Paso; and Dallas. Rounding out the bottom 20 are Brooklyn; San Bernardino (despite a marked increase in seminarians between 2004 and 2005); Rochester, New York; Gallup, New Mexico; Greensburg, Pennsylvania; Rockville

Centre, New York; Boston; and Detroit.

Several of these dioceses tend to be among the most vocation-poor in the nation year after year; others have suffered from recent declines. One bishop attributes his diocese’s recent decrease in seminarians to a lack of Catholic schools. “Regarding your question about the challenges that our Diocese of Las Cruces has faced attracting priestly vocations and what brought about the decline in seminarians between 2004 and 2005,” Las Cruces Bishop Ricardo Ramirez, CSB, told CWR, “I believe that it has to do with the poor quality of education in the area. We only have six parochial elementary schools and we do not have Catholic high schools that could serve as a springboard to promote vocations among the students.”



Seminarians Daniel Beeman, left, and Leo Gajardo chat after class at The Catholic University of American in Washington April 26. Beeman is studying for the Diocese of Gary, Indiana, and Gajardo was to be ordained this year for the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia.

Other dioceses that have suffered a notable recent decline in seminarians include Owensboro, Kentucky; St. Augustine, Florida; and Lubbock, Texas, whose ranking plunged from 9th in 2003 to 92nd in 2005. Miami had a decrease of 10 seminarians between 2004 and 2005; Los Angeles decreased by nine; and Cincinnati and La Crosse, Wisconsin, each fell by eight. Even after its recent decline, though, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati is not vocation-poor: it is the seventh most vocation-rich diocese of those with over 500,000 Catholics and ranks 85th overall. Archdiocesan spokesman Dan Andriacco told CWR that the “clergy sex abuse scandal was the major factor in the decline in seminarians. Many potential candidates have told [the vocation director] they were holding off until they see how the situation plays out. This may have had a disproportionate effect in this archdiocese compared to others because the scandal was a major issue here.”

A FEW “GREAT MEN”

According to the Holy See’s statistical yearbook, the number of diocesan and religious seminarians studying philosophy and theology worldwide rose from 63,882 in 1978 to 113,044 in 2004—an increase of 77 percent. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, the total number of American diocesan and religious seminarians in college and theology seminary programs fell from 9,021 to 4,553 during the same time period—a decline of nearly 50 percent.

Thanks to prayer, fidelity, and action, a few “great men”—bishops and vocations directors alike—have influenced their local ecclesial culture to such an extent that their dioceses are sharing in the worldwide priestly vocation boom rather than the American vocation crisis. Some, like Bishop Bruskwitz of Lincoln and Archbishop Chaput of Denver, are well known; others, like Msgr. C. Slade Crawford of Pensacola-Tallahassee and Father Darrin Connall of Spokane, are less so.

Typical among these “great men” is Father Thomas Richter, vocation director of the Diocese of Bismarck, the second most vocation-rich diocese in the nation in 2005 (up from 24th in 2003 and 12th in 2004). Bismarck Bishop Paul Zipfel told CWR last year that Father Richter’s plan has been “to visit each parish and mission and to preside at all the Sunday Masses and speak about vocations to the priesthood.” In doing so, according to the diocesan Web site, Father Richter is seeking—and finding—men with a ...

... deep love for the Eucharist, for the Mass and for the Church. They are men of fidelity; they want an undivided heart for Christ. Their heroes are Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. They are not interested in fluff or watered down teaching; they loathe mediocrity ... They are prayerful. Along with daily Mass, daily Rosary, praying the breviary, they spend an hour each day in quiet prayer. They want to teach the truths of the Catholic faith. They love to explain and help people understand the faith. Most of them went through a religious education system that left much to be desired, but at some point they were taught the reasons behind our faith and it changed them ... They are men in Christ, men of the Church and men for others.

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