

New Priests: Orthodoxy Among Key Factors in Ordination Numbers

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STEUBENVILLE, Ohio — What makes a diocese fertile ground for encouraging men to follow a path to the Catholic priesthood?

When Anne Hendershott, a sociology professor at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, began to do research on the dioceses in the United States that have consistently ordained the largest numbers of men to the priesthood, she was able to identify the top five: the Archdioceses of Newark (New Jersey), St. Louis and Atlanta and the Dioceses of Paterson, New Jersey, and Arlington, Virginia.

Over a 10-year period (2006–2016), those dioceses produced the most priests per 100,000 people. Why these dioceses have full seminaries year after year is an important question. While some dioceses languish with zero ordinations, these “superstar dioceses” are vibrant and flourishing.

Father Chris Martin, the vocation director for the Archdiocese of St. Louis, believes it is important that all men who consider the priesthood do so with a healthy sense of freedom. He tells the story of a young man of 18 who had been on discernment retreats in St. Louis. He came to Father Martin last year for some advice.

“He was torn, because on the one hand, he wanted to go out on a date with a girl, but on the other, he was thinking about the priesthood,” said Father Martin. “I asked him if she was nice. He said, ‘Yes.’ Then I asked if she was the kind of girl who would lead him astray? He said, ‘No.’”

Father Martin reached into his desk and took out a \$25 gift card to Appleby’s.

“I gave him the assignment to take this girl out on a date. He had his freedom,” said Father Martin.

That young man ended up dating the girl for a short time, but eventually broke it off. He said that dating her actually gave him clarity about his vocation to the priesthood. In fact, he recently submitted his application to St. Louis’ Kenrick–Glennon Seminary.

“We tell the guys who are discerning: ‘If you can’t go out on a date, don’t ask the Church for a date.’ You need to be self-possessed in order to be a priest. We want to attract solid, healthy young men,” said Father Martin.

The Archdiocese of St. Louis has 53 seminarians. (Its seminary currently has 132 seminarians total from various dioceses.) Many give credit to Archbishop Robert Carlson for this high number. “Archbishop Carlson is very good with vocations. Wherever he has been appointed, the number of vocations has gone up,” said Father Martin.

“He spends time with the seminarians. He often says that he will never ordain a man whom he doesn’t know. He goes to the discernment retreats, and he is very accessible.”

Another factor is that St. Louis has the largest Serra Club in the United States. The Serra Club works to promote vocations to the priesthood and consecrated religious life. The organization’s members provide parishes with posters about the priesthood and essay contests about vocations. They organize financial and prayer support for vocations and seminarians.

The archdiocese also has a well-developed youth office directed toward teens and young adults.

“Our youth office is phenomenal,” said Father Martin. “They are intentional about vocational support in all of its outreach, both at the parish level and the diocesan level. I often give talks to youth ministers and train them on vocation promotion.”

Other factors that seem to support vocations are the witness of young, energetic and happy priests. These priests are encouraged to share their vocation stories during homilies. The Fishers of Men Summit in St. Louis is an annual dinner that awards pastors who foster vocations.

Many vocations come from parishes that have perpetual Eucharistic adoration coupled with a strong youth ministry. Every year, the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, holds several “Quo Vadis” events for high-school young men. Under this program, there is a discernment summer camp. The diocese is in its 11th year of holding the camp. Quo Vadis also sponsors a ropes course with seminarians, a visit to the seminary and a basketball game called “Hoops Challenge vs. Seminarians.”

“We set the limit to 115 boys per camp, but we usually get 170 applications of boys who want to go. We end up having to decide on who gets to go by lottery,” said Father J.D. Jaffe, vocation director for the Diocese of Arlington.

Each applicant must make a statement that he is open to the vocation of the priesthood. “We have seen a couple of boys who went to all four years of Quo Vadis. In the beginning, they were really into the sports. By their second year, they became more accustomed to the prayer, and by the third and fourth year, they developed a tremendous desire to become a priest,” said Father Jaffe.

The growth of vocations in Arlington has been described as “organic.” It comes from good liturgies, strong families and solid parish-based ministries.

“It is more than just the case of a good pastor or parish. It has been, really, faithfully practicing Catholics who have been promoting the faith for 30 years,” he said.

There are 44 seminarians in Arlington. They come from home-schooling families, Catholic schools and public schools, with the breakdown being, roughly: 40%, 40% and 20%, respectively.

Father Edgar Rivera, vocation director of Paterson, New Jersey, which has sent the most men to seminary from 2006 to 2016, attributes his diocese’s success in priestly vocations to the fact that his bishop, Bishop Arthur Serratelli, is a “good shepherd.”

“He is passionate about vocations. He has a heart for international students, and not only for seminarians, but for priests, as well,” said Father Rivera.

Bishop Serratelli hosts several “pizza nights” a year for vocations.

“We do this three times a year at different Catholic high schools. Bishop Serratelli will read from the Bible and then give a talk about vocations. After this, we have adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Finally, we have the pizza dinner, during which the kids can ask our bishop any question they want,” said Father Rivera.

Another tradition in Paterson is an annual fundraising dinner for seminarians; a video is always shown at the event. Last year, the video was titled “Get to Know Your Seminarian.” In it, seminarians were interviewed about their vocations. This year, the video will be about thanking seminarians. “During our ordinations to the diaconate this year, we decided to have all the seminarians process in together. This will be a witness,” said Father Rivera.

There are 55 men in Paterson’s seminary right now. They hail from the Philippines, Poland, Colombia, India and the U.S. For those who do not speak English, they are given one year of language lessons before official seminary studies. All foreign priests remain in the diocese after ordination.

According to Anne Hendershott, the author of this study with her assistant Makenzie White, there are several factors that can account for high ordinations in a diocese: a “transformational” bishop; a culture of promoting vocations in the diocese; a seminary where orthodoxy is a given; and a solid rector for the seminary who does not allow dissent from Catholic doctrine.

Not all dioceses have all four factors. According to Father Frank Fano of the Newark Archdiocese, the seminary there is evenly split between American seminarians and foreign seminarians.

“You also have to look at the role of the Neocatechumenal Way. They came in the mid-1990s and spiked vocations up ever since,” he said.

The Neocatechumenal Way is a charism within the Catholic Church dedicated to the formation of adults. The movement is responsible for the formation of communities called “families in mission.” It is also known to attract many vocations to the priesthood.

When Hendershott began her research, she noted how some dioceses had many priestly ordinations, while others had none. “I started analyzing the data, and the news was better than I thought,” she said. “I think the No. 1 reason for vocations in most of these ‘superstar dioceses’ is their bishop and vocations director. These bishops are faithful. I call them transformational. They are not questioning Catholic doctrine or calling for female priests. The men who answer the call to the priesthood want to be a part of something bigger than themselves.”

Sabrina Ferrisi writes from New York.

This story was updated after it was posted and went to press.