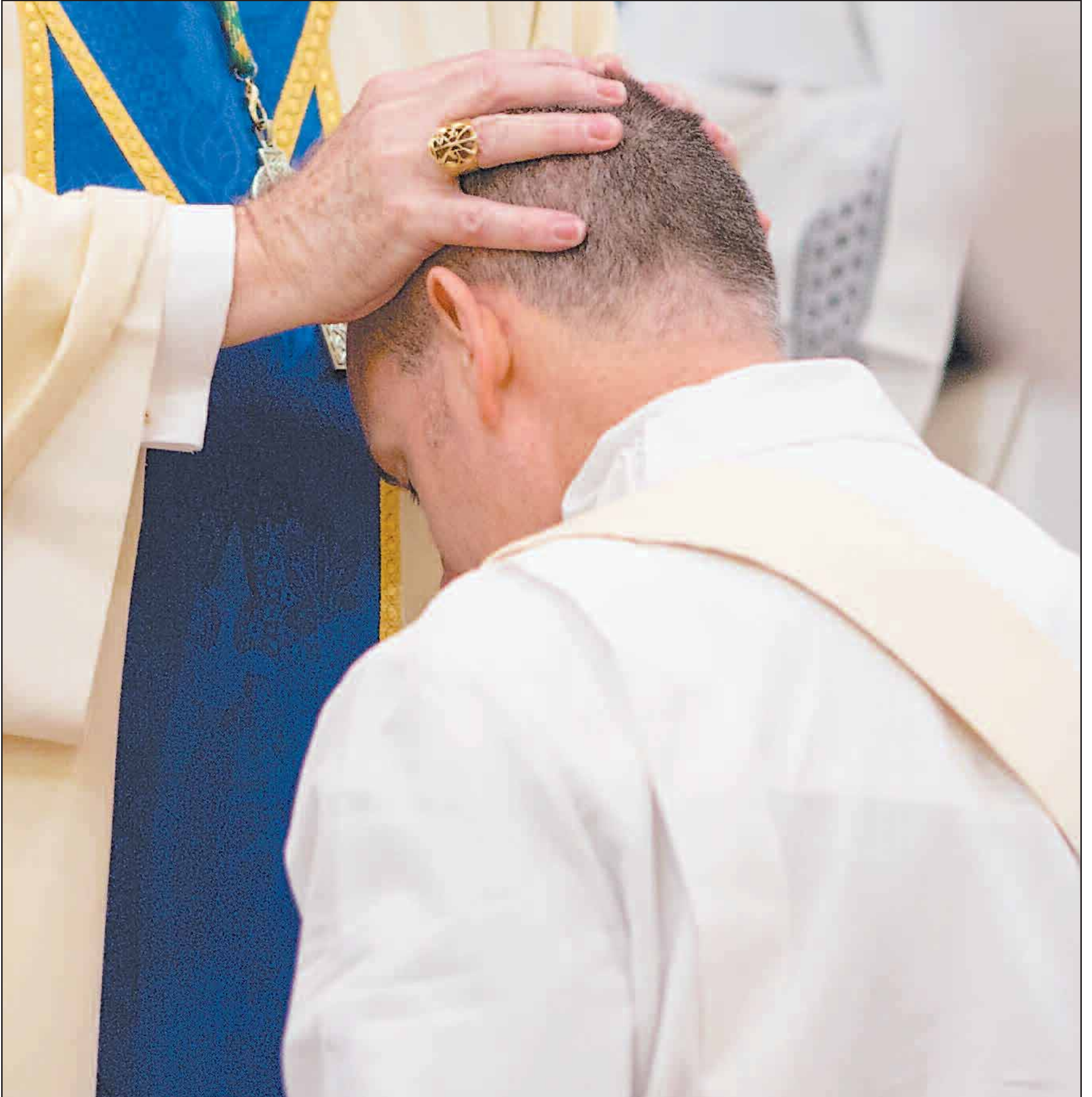


APRIL 16, 2021

# Vocations



A SUPPLEMENT TO THE CATHOLIC STAR HERALD

# What is a vocation?

The root word for vocation is vocare, which in Latin means, “to call.” God has created each one of us for a particular calling or way to follow Him. Through the Sacrament of Baptism we become a child of God and thus called to live in holiness through love of God and neighbor. It is important to also remember that our true vocation does not come from the world, or from ourselves, but rather is an invitation directly from God to follow Him.

The process of making a decision about your life with the help of the Holy Spirit is called “discernment.” It is the process of discovering God’s will for you. Our common vocation as baptized Christians is to a life of holiness, to union with God in this life and in life eternal. Within that common vocation, some are called to a more specific way of service to God and others, such as the sacred priesthood. Remember, as you begin this process of discernment, that both you and God desire the same thing: your



Photo by John Kalitz

Bishop Dennis Sullivan celebrates Mass for new seminarians Aug. 9, 2020, at Saint Andrew the Apostle Parish, Gibbsboro. Also pictured are Rev. Mr. Carlo Santa Teresa, left, and Msgr. Louis A. Marucci, pastor.

happiness. You want to make a decision about your life that will bring you the deep joy that comes with following God.

Do you have the courage to ask God the question that is seldom uttered in our busy world, “Lord, how are You calling me to follow You?”

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Photo by Dave Hernandez

Father Peter Gallagher and Father John March prostrate themselves during their ordination ceremony at Christ Our Light Parish, Cherry Hill, on June 20, 2020.

## ***We need men who see the faith as a gift to be shared***

By Father Adam Cichoski

“He laid down his life for his people, long before they came to kill him.” This is what Bishop Anthony Taylor of Little Rock, Arkansas, said about Blessed Stanley Rother, the first American-born martyr.

Father Stanley Rother was an ordinary man who did extraordinary work. One of five children, there was nothing that made him stand out from amongst his brothers and sisters. He was a man who struggled through seminary but eventually became a diocesan priest.

He would hear the call of Saint John XXIII to go out to Central America and proclaim the Word of God so that all may know Him. This would lead him to Guatemala where he worked with the indigenous peoples there. He helped establish schools, hospitals, and even a radio station.

His work with the people there ended up putting him on a list that the government was watching; thinking he was there to disrupt the status quo. In fact, he was there to do this, but not as a revolutionary to overthrow the government. Instead, he as a man who knew things could be better and that the people needed to see the God-



FATHER ADAM CICHOSKI

given dignity each of them had.

He would eventually be martyred for this love of the people he served.

This love for the people began years before he was a missionary. He learned it in helping with the daily duties of the family farm. He learned it in the Catholic schools he attended as he received the foundation of his faith. He learned it in the seminary, as he struggled to do well in classes and become the priest God was calling him to be. He learned it in his ministry as a parish priest, assisting in parishes and always helping people get closer to God. All of us on this journey, of serving God and

His people. We see this in our own stories, how we make sacrifices and try to live as God is calling us to live.

At each ordination, the men preparing to receive Holy Orders first lay prostrate on the floor of the church. This is an important part of the ritual, as the men know they are laying down their lives for the people they will be serving. They are dying to the world around them. They themselves are no longer the most important people in their lives. As they rise, Jesus Christ now becomes the center of their lives and the example they will imitate. This is a big moment for them, and for us who are witnessing it. We know this is a big responsibility, and our praying for them now becomes a necessary part of our daily lives as they will one day be the leaders of our Church here in the Diocese of Camden.

What are we laying down our lives for? Do we hear God’s call to make Him present in our communities, so that others can experience the transformative love we have experienced? Can we be that sign of love and hope, giving everything over to God?

The world, and our diocese, is in need of men willing to make that sacrifice. We need men who see the faith as a gift to be shared and lived out each



CNS file photo

Blessed Stanley Rother, left, a young priest from Oklahoma, served impoverished indigenous people in Guatemala. In 1981, Father Stanley Rother became the first American citizen to be martyred.

moment of their lives. We need to keep praying for vocations every day, and encouraging our young men to think about serving God with their lives as priests. They need our support and love to help them through the difficult moments, to celebrate the victories, and to walk together in sharing God’s Word to the people around us, no matter what the danger or obstacles that we face.

*Father Adam Cichoski was ordained a priest in 2017. He is Director of Vocations for the Camden Diocese.*

# Becoming a simple laborer in the vineyard

By Rev. Mr. Carlo Santa Teresa

**O**n April 19, 2005, I was a high school sophomore in the middle of geometry class when an announcement was made over the public address system at Camden Catholic High School, Cherry Hill, saying that a successor to now-Saint John Paul II was elected pope. As the television in our classroom was turned on, we had the first glimpse of the newly elected pope, Benedict XVI, who I knew was a man of great intelligence and a prominent member of the Church's leadership. And yet, when he spoke his first words to the people in Saint Peter's Square and around the world, I could not help but to be touched by his words when he said that the cardinals had elected, "...a simple laborer in the vineyard of the Lord."

From that time on, as I continued to think and grapple about my own vocation, the words of the pope-emeritus returned to me time and time again as a reminder that although the priest is called to receive the great privilege of becoming an *Alter Christus*, another Christ, and to offer His Body and Blood on behalf of and for the people of God, the priest is also called to be a laborer, one who is called into a life of service for God and the Church.

Yes, it is a great task, but it also requires a tremendous amount of humility to the will of God and the ever-developing understanding of one's gifts and talents as well as one's weaknesses and shortcomings. In recognizing those aspects, it is indeed a humbling thought to see how Our Lord, in the same way He called the Twelve Apostles in spite of their flaws, still calls fully human men, complete with their weaknesses, to go out and proclaim His Good News to all people.

In my time as a seminarian, I have had many opportunities to work through my seminary apostolates, my pastoral year, and now my diaconate assignment to receive a taste of what

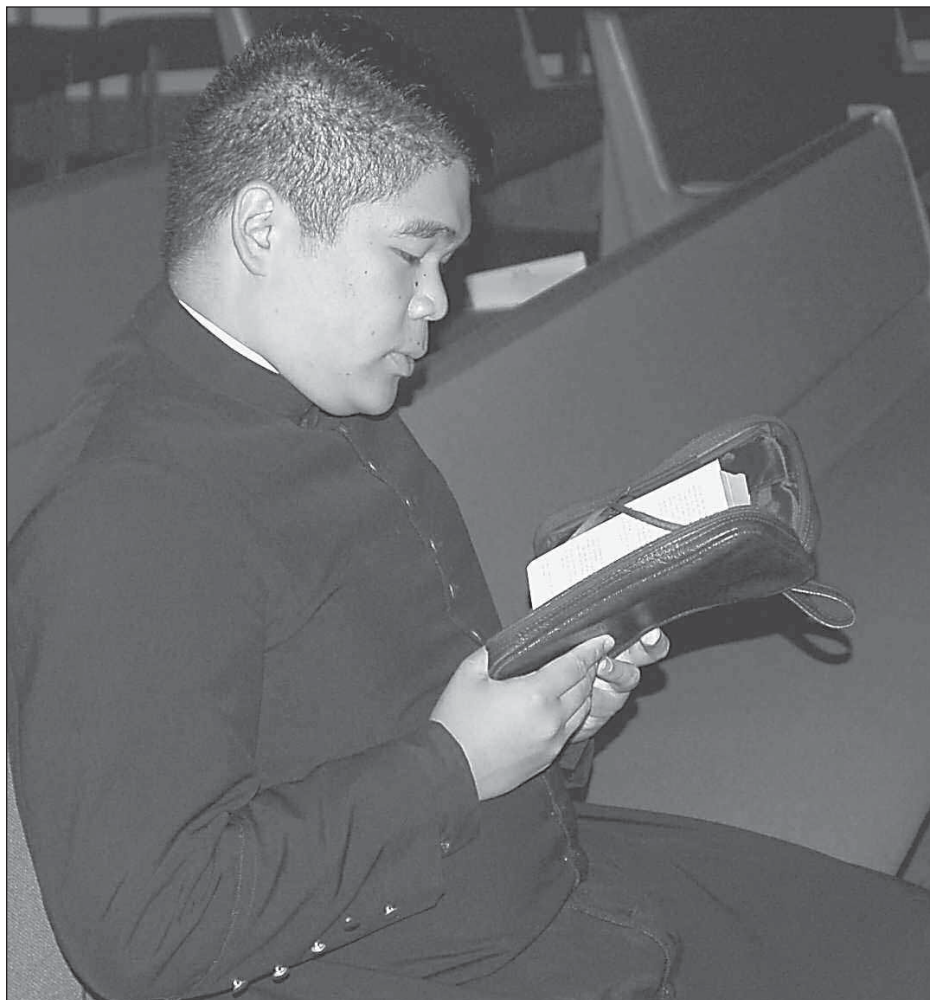


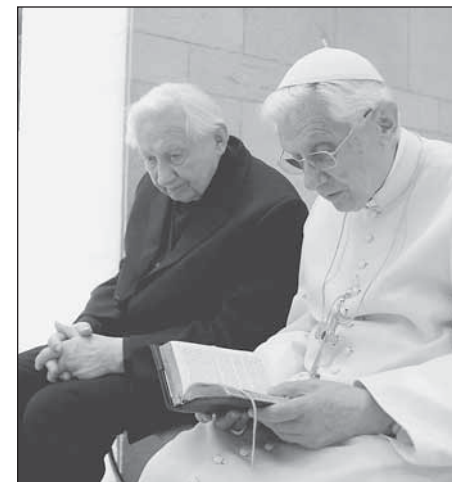
Photo by Peter G. Sánchez

Rev. Mr. Carlo Santa Teresa at prayer.

I ... look back with a sense of gratitude to God and to all who have led me, encouraged me, and have prayed for me. ...

priestly ministry should and will be like. In that time, I have been able to develop my gifts, recognize new strengths, as well as to face certain challenges that have refined me to become a better man and a better disciple.

The experience has given me a greater understanding and appreciation of what the people of the Diocese of Camden and the Church Universal need and deserve from their priests and how essential the prayers and presence of the people of God are in



CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters  
Retired Pope Benedict XVI is seen in a file photo praying with his brother, Msgr. Georg Ratzinger, in his private chapel at the Vatican in this 2020 file photo.

our own lives and ministry.

As I prepare to be ordained a priest of Jesus Christ in service to the Church in Camden, I look forward to serving the people of the Diocese through the priestly ministry, to bring joy and healing where it is needed, and to shine light on the presence of God's joy and love in the lives of the faithful. I also look back with a sense of gratitude to God and to all who have led me, encouraged me, and have prayed for me throughout my years of seminary formation.

As the Lord fulfills the good work that He has begun, please remember to pray for me and my brother, Steven Bertonazzi, that we may always be worthy to labor in the Lord's vineyard. And please pray that more young men will answer the Lord's call to serve Him and His Church as priests. Take my word for it, it is more joy that you think you could ever have and more blessings than you think you could ever receive!

*Rev. Mr. Carlo Santa Teresa, Fourth Theology, attends Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J.*

## Prayer engages the whole person in a relationship with God

**G**od invites us into a relationship with Him that is both personal and communal. He speaks to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh. Prayer is our response to God who is already speaking or, better yet, revealing Himself to us. Therefore, prayer is not merely an exchange of words, but it engages the whole person in a relationship with God the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit.

Various forms of prayer are present-

ed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2623-2649). These various forms include prayer of blessing or adoration, prayer of petition, prayer of intercession, prayer of thanksgiving, and prayer of praise.

What is meditation? Meditation is an essential form of Christian prayer, especially for those who are seeking to answer the vocational question, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

Meditation is a Christian practice of prayer dating back to the early Church.

As the Catechism states: "Meditation is above all a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking." By meditating on the Gospels, holy icons, liturgical texts, spiritual writings, or "the great book of creation," we come to make our own that which is God's. "To the extent that we are humble and faithful, we discover in meditation the movements that stir the heart and we are able to discern them.

It is a question of acting truthfully in order to come into the light: 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'" (CCC 2705-2706).

Spiritual reading of Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, is an important form of meditation. This spiritual reading is traditionally called *lectio divina* or divine reading. *Lectio divina* is prayer over the Scriptures.

*For more on prayer, go to camden-priest.org*



CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

The chapel at Saint Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y., is seen during the ordination of transitional deacons Nov. 7, 2020.

## A vocation is a gift, not something one can earn

By Stephen Robbins

*“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.” (Jn 12:26)*

Over the past few years at Saint Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, I have had the blessing to sing in the choir at the diaconate ordination for the New York dioceses. This passage above from John's Gospel is the Entrance Antiphon for the Mass of Ordination of Deacons.

Each year, while we sang this verse as I saw my friends process up the aisle, preparing to lay down their lives for Jesus, I felt my soul flooded with immense joy. I would feel a fire burning within me, desiring to likewise lay down my life for Him as I looked forward to my own ordination one day. I too wished to serve Him and to follow Him wherever He led me. After so many years of formation, it is hard to believe that now it is my turn to lay down on the



STEPHEN ROBBINS

floor in submission to His will!

Throughout my initial years of formation, I have sometimes been so excited to be a priest that I wished I could just fast forward to ordination day. I thought much like Saint Peter at the Last Supper: “Why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you” (Jn 13:37).

I felt a great desire to do heroic things for Christ, and still do. Yet, the Lord in His mercy has shown me over the years that following Him as a deacon and eventually as a priest is not

We are extremely excited to serve you, the people of the Diocese of Camden.

about my own merits in desiring to be a hero, but receiving a gift that can only be given by the Lord Himself.

Pope Benedict XVI, commenting on Saint Peter, says, “He must learn that even martyrdom is no heroic achievement: rather, it is a grace to be able to suffer for Jesus. He must bid farewell to the heroism of personal deeds and learn the humility of the disciple. His desire to rush in — his heroism — leads to his denial.”

Like Peter, I have come to learn that my vocation is not something that I have earned, but a gift, and boy am I grateful for it!

As May 15th approaches, please

pray for my classmates and me, that we may more fully “conform our way of life always to the example of Christ,” as we will promise on ordination day. We are extremely excited to serve you, the people of the Diocese of Camden, following the example of the Good Shepherd, who “did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). May the Lord bless our Diocese with an increase of vocations, and may Camden flourish!

*Stephen Robbins, Third Theology, attends Saint Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, N.Y.*

# The moment I knew I was born to be a deacon

By Deacon Omar M. Aguilar

Ten years and seven months ago, as eight men lay prostrate before the altar at Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, one of them sobbed quietly. The date was Sept. 25, 2010. The occasion was the ordination of these eight to the permanent diaconate for the Diocese of Camden.

I was the crying man. As I lay there, listening to the church full with the people of God praying the Litany of the Saints over us, I broke down in tears of joy. I then had the full realization that it was God who had called me and had brought me to that place and the time to fulfill His plan for my life. It was at that moment I knew I was born to be a deacon, an icon of Jesus Christ, the servant.

My calling to the diaconate had not been so clear cut before then.

I first became aware of a possible vocation to the diaconate when my then-pastor, the late Msgr. Robert McDermott, asked that I consider applying for admission to the diocesan diaconate formation program. His words shocked me. Although at the time I was involved in several parish



Deacon Omar M. Aguilar, who serves at Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lindenwold, stands in front of a portrait of Saint Oscar Romero.

ministries, the thought of discerning a vocation to ordained ministry had never crossed my mind.

That night, I mentioned Father Bob's suggestion that I seek admission to diaconate formation to my wife, Maureen. Well aware of my weakness-

es and defects and unable to fathom what he saw that would cause him to suggest the diaconate to me, we both laughed at the thought.

Not wanting to disappoint him by not even trying, I told her that I would apply, figuring my application would not be accepted. Much to our surprise, I was accepted to a period of aspirancy where I, along with other men, would more intentionally discern God's plan in our lives.

During this time, I met many men and women of strong faith and spiritual character. I felt out of my depth. These new friends encouraged me to continue despite my early self doubt. I completed the aspirancy period with the help of my brother aspirants as well as Maureen's support.

Before starting formal formation, all the men were required to undergo a psychological evaluation. With a sense of acceptance, I thought, "this is surely the end of the line for me." When I got home after the evaluation, I asked Maureen to buy me some time to get away through the back door if any men in white showed up looking for me. No such appeared and I began formation in full.

For the next six years, with

Maureen's full support, I received direction which deepened my trust in God and increased my knowledge of my faith tradition. Still, I continued to experience painful bouts of doubt and self recrimination.

Slowly, the Holy Spirit led me to recognize these as temptations designed by the accuser to lure me away from the Father. My willingness to follow God's will where it would take me was strengthened by my brothers in formation. I gradually came to realize that I was not called to the diaconate for any merit I might have. I was being called regardless of merit so that if I was called to Holy Orders, anything good coming from my ministry would be patently the work of God.

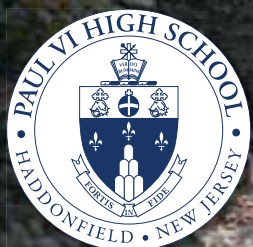
Since my ordination, 10 years ago, I have learned what it means to let God be God in my ministry and in my life. I have taken to heart the words of the psalmist:

"My soul clings to you;  
your right hand holds me fast" (Ps 63:9)  
Amen.

*Deacon Omar M. Aguilar serves at Our Lady of Guadalupe, Lindenwold.*

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# The first years of formation

By Thomas Piro

I cannot believe that I am finishing my fourth year of seminary! I still remember moving in on Aug. 22 to Saint Andrew's Hall and thinking, "Let's see how this goes." Well, it came and went quicker than I thought it would.

At the end of every year, the seminary faculty asks each man to write a self-evaluation. This evaluation calls me to reflect on how I have grown this past year and find areas in need of improvement. For seniors, there is a special set of questions. These questions make us reflect on how we have grown as a person and our understanding of priestly life and ministry.

While praying over them, I learned the importance of prayer in priestly formation. If a seminarian ignores his prayer life or places it at the bottom of his "To Do" list for the day, his drive to be a priest and servant of the Church will be snuffed. He will not be as receptive to God's grace moving within him to touch the hearts of those he will encounter in ministry. He will not hear the voice of the Lord in his heart. If he does not hear the Lord's voice, he cannot respond to his vocation or calling. I can only imagine how much more important the prayer life of a priest must be.

Throughout my formation, I have been able to recognize my strengths and weaknesses. This is essential since it prepares us for our future lives as spiritual Fathers and dispensers of God's grace through the sacraments.

Although I have had four years of formation, developed a healthy prayer life, and grown as an individual, I still have at least another four years of formation left. After four years of the college seminary, I will be moving onto the major seminary. The major seminary is where a candidate for the priesthood develops a more practical approach to formation.



THOMAS PIRO

In the college seminary, there is a heavy focus on being a disciple, learning more about yourself, developing a spiritual life, and receiving the essential theological and philosophical classes. The major seminary, which continues this formation, takes a much more practical approach to priestly training. Seminarians practice celebrating the sacraments and preaching, and take theology classes.

To use the words of one of my formation group leaders, "The priesthood becomes more real." While in the major seminary, I will be wearing a Roman collar to class and will receive assignments during my summer breaks. There is a greater commitment to being a major seminarian.

I look forward to my next four years, and I appreciate the formation that I have received at Saint Andrew's Hall. This August, I will move into a new house of formation. I am sure that these next four years will come and go just as my four years of the college seminary have, but I know that these next four years will help me configure my life to the Lord and His cross.

I ask that you continue to pray for my classmates and me as we begin this new stage in our lives, and please pray for an increase of vocations to the priesthood.

*Thomas Piro attends The College Seminary of the Immaculate Conception at Saint Andrew's Hall, Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J.*

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Bishop Dennis Sullivan is pictured with, from left, seminarians Christopher Myers, Cesar Pirateque, Logan Nilsen and Stephen Robbins.

## ***Please pray for those who are about to be ordained***

By Logan Nilsen

One of the best parts of the academic year is when, at the end, ordinations take place, which is usually done in the month of May or June. Here, at Saint Joseph's Seminary, things are done a little bit different. In November of their fourth year, most of the men from New York are ordained as transitional deacons, instead of it happening at the end of third year.

It is a very moving experience to witness men that you've known and lived with for numerous years be ordained to the diaconate, to see the joy they exuberate, and then to see them go out, participate and preach in their first Mass as deacons.

The night before, those to be ordained as transitional deacons take the oath of

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It is a very moving experience to witness men that you've known and lived with for numerous years be ordained to the diaconate.

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fidelity, in which they pledge to live their lives in accordance with the Church and all of her teachings. After years of study, the men give their formal consent to the Church. A festive dinner follows and then the following morning the ordinations take place in

our chapel here at the seminary.

Being ordained as transitional deacons is different from the ordination to the permanent diaconate. As transitional deacons, the men are preparing for the next step of Holy Orders, which is ordination to the priesthood,

at the end of Fourth Theology. Transitional deacons still proclaim the Gospel at Mass, preach and baptize, among other duties, but they also prepare to be ordained to the priesthood.

The diaconate plays an important part in the life of the Church. For seminarians, it serves as a reminder of what is to come down the road, and that, for them, it leads to the ordination to the priesthood.

Please continue to pray for an increase of vocations and pray especially for those who are about to be ordained, that more men will follow in their footsteps to serve the Church.

*Logan Nilsen is in Third Theology at Saint Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers, New York. His home Parish is Our Lady of Hope, Blackwood.*

## **The best first step in the discernment process**

The best first step in this sometimes difficult process is to follow the words most spoken in Holy Scripture, "Be not afraid!" Whether it was an angel announcing good news, or Christ speaking to His disciples, setting aside

your fear is the first step. Once you are open to hearing the Lord speak to your heart, a message that will most likely come as a quiet whisper, you will be able to truly discern, figure out, "Lord, where are You calling me to serve

You in this life?"

Discernment must involve prayer, the willingness to seek out quiet in an otherwise noisy world, a desire to know God's will for your life, and a love for the Church and all her mem-

bers. Discernment is the first step in coming to know if the Lord is calling you to serve Him as a Roman Catholic priest.

*For more information, go to [camdenpriest.org](http://camdenpriest.org)*

# Each step is about surrendering to Divine Providence

By Cesar Pirateque

Peace and joy have occupied my heart during my preparation for Holy Orders. I have thought a lot about what it means to respond to this blessed call. I never wished to respond only passively, but instead, I have always wanted my heart to participate as actively as possible. While receptivity is essential, receiving does not imply inaction. On the contrary, the required action involves a total embracing of everything that is offered in my preparation for Holy Orders.

Preparation begins with the Lord, who is always the initiator of the call to belong to Him for His own purposes. It is essential to know that those He calls have free will and that our receptivity of His love and grace requires the soul to be dependent upon God. I have learned over these years that when the soul is prepared with good, tilled soil, God can produce fruit in it. Good soil involves prayer, study and good works, which is tilled through formation challenges.

The clearest example that I have known is from my childhood. The significant presence and model in my life is Mary Most Holy. She, the Queen of Heaven, was perfectly prepared, entirely disposed to Divine Providence in the plan for our redemption. God planted in the heart of the Blessed Virgin Truth itself, and it is through our Queen's "yes" that we have the living "yes" that leads to life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mary Most Holy has been and will always be my example of receiving the gift of a vocation from God. God gave a great gift by calling me to His service, and I cry out to heaven to be worthy of this calling, this gift every day.

The seminary has helped me to be attentive to the tilling of the land of my heart so that whatever fruit the Lord desires can grow in my soul. I said previously that receiving implies action and not passivity. I say this because, from the moment that I began to discern my vocation, it has constantly been receiving grace upon grace. It has been necessary to respond to the graces. On many occasions, this call has been a challenge because the Lord does not want me to remain in the same place where He found me, but on the contrary, He wants to take me beyond my imagining. To take me, He demands more from me. Every day is as though the first time I felt His tugging on my heart.

If I am not careful and do not remain vigilant to my call, I will attempt to stay in my comfort zone, where one does only the basics, forgetting that the Lord's work is a calling to the eternal and supernatural.



CESAR PIRATEQUE

When a man is receptive to priestly formation, it allows God to continually reveal who he is and what he is called to be. Openness to self-knowledge leads to a readjustment and transformation in every aspect of life by the grace received. Without this time, I could have mistakenly thought nothing should be changed. Despite the challenges, it is all worth it for the glory of God.

This transformation can only happen in dialogue that takes place in silence. The transformation will not take place if the mind is constantly occupied with noise and distractions. It is prayer, the constant and intentional conversation with Almighty God, which has guided, unveiled and preserved my vocational discernment. In prayer, I allowed silence to embrace me and to help me to listen for the voice of the Father, who in the heart seeks good soil to make His dwelling. I hope that the Lord will help me to understand that I can receive His grace, always living in humble receptivity during my entire life. The call is His initiative, and it is proper to place oneself in His hands in order to become one with Him.

In receiving God's gift, a Light becomes brighter, allowing the consciousness to be formed in the truth that humankind seems to be abandoning. I pray that God will use me to live and teach the freedom found in His Gospel. It is in the depths of the human soul where God is and waits to be found. The heart is made for the truth, and only in abandonment to Him and openness to receiving His grace will peace and joy be found.

This reception is something I believe calls me always to follow the path of continuous formation in Christ. We are constantly being formed, and in my own crosses, I see Calvary not only as a reminder of the love of Christ but also I believe that I am called to be His living example of Christ Who suffered in love for us. Seminary formation has allowed me to embrace this reality.

My path continues, and with it, the soul's continuous formation according to the Father's will. There are so many risks to be had when the soul does not seek God, Who is the one on Whom everything depends. One must not

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think that priestly formation sets one's eyes on himself or has one embracing some false god. I cry out to heaven for His grace and mercy because I need it at every moment. While I do not deserve His call, I abandon myself in obedience to Him. I understand that nothing can be done to deserve or earn His gift. It is not any self-merit, but the Lord is the one who always gives Himself to the one He loves.

How can this mystery be explained? When a person recognizes himself as one loved by God, he can actively receive the gentle and humble promise of God that He is with us and that He will offer His love to others through

the one who is called. All of these years, since the day I first left Colombia, each step has been about surrendering to Divine Providence so that my will makes communion with the Divine Will.

My heart is trying to understand and live the call that the Lord has given me. In trying to answer honestly and with humility, I know that I do not merit this gift. I beg heaven for the grace to let His love consume me.

*Cesar Pirateque, Third Year Theology, attends Immaculate Conception Seminary at Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J.*

## MASS FOR VOCATIONS APRIL 25 | 12 NOON

A Mass for young men who have been thinking about a vocation to the priesthood to be with others who are considering this call.

Come listen to God's call to be shepherds by our Good Shepherd, Bishop Dennis J. Sullivan, D.D.

**CHRIST THE GOOD SHEPHERD PARISH  
SACRED HEART CHURCH  
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Women religious participate in an outdoor prayer service on the feast day of The Exaltation of the Cross. “Even though we cannot join other sisters in person, our desire to connect and participate in the spiritual practice continues. It is in the love of our Triune God that binds us together in prayer and in worship,” says Sister Christine Ma. From left, Sisters Christine Ma, MSBT, Joan Lorraine Kreutz, MSBT, Mary Matthew Labunski, MSBT, and Josefina Mendez, MSBT.

## God continues to call people to religious life

By Sister Christine Ma, MSBT

**W**e are celebrating Easter and gloriously singing Alleluia, Alleluia. During the Easter Vigil, we renewed our baptismal call. The baptismal call invites us to be participating in the fullness of life in the sacramental church. Thereby, every baptized person is an apostle and disciple of our loving Lord. We are being sent out to proclaim and be witnesses to the preaching of the Gospels.

God calls us each by name in the path of life whether as a priest, a religious brother or sister, deacon, married or single. It is God’s initiative to inflame and inspire our hearts to pursue the plan that only the Divine can so magnificently lay out for each of us. We travel this road with the support of family, friends, co-workers, and companions of the faithful community.

My own vocation story began in 2000. I was already working for 10 years. There was an emptiness and loneliness in my heart. I decided to take a year off from work and be a volunteer. During the mid-year, all the volunteers were gathered at Blessed Trinity Shrine Retreat in Alabama for a retreat, and Sister Thomasmari Gore, MSBT, asked: “Have you ever considered religious life?”

My heart was bursting with joy by

Where would the church be without invitation and acceptance to ordained and consecrated life?

her invitation and inflamed by the Holy Spirit.

I am forever grateful for her invitation and all the people who continue to invite others to priesthood, religious life and diaconate. Where would the church be without invitation and acceptance to ordained and consecrated life?

Even though we are still in the midst of a pandemic, God continues to call people to religious life even when the whole world is in chaos. What does vocation ministry outreach to discerners look like at this time?

Discernment process sparks some re-imagination, creativity, collaboration and virtual technology. Zoom meetings and practices are in high demand. We already had two discernment retreats and are planning a third one in May 2021, held monthly coffee with the Sisters, Holy Hour for the Catholic Sisters Week and vocation talks in person and in virtual setting with partici-

pants ranging in age from 2 to 69.

The accompaniment journey continues even when all of us are in physical isolation. We are still making valuable connections and building relationships. We continue to share our love of the Triune God with the people.

As this pandemic time has gone on, unmet needs surfaced. God beckons us to serve others in different ways as we are sheltering in place. Sandwiches were made and delivered to the soup kitchen. Snacks and freshly picked vegetables were delivered to the workers at one of the COVID 19 testing sites. An outdoor prayer service for Black Lives Matter was held, as our founder, Father Thomas Augustine Judge, reminded us of the importance of “upholding the dignity and rights of all people.” We participated in weekly vegetable and fruit picking with other faith based groups at the South Jersey farms for the food pantry.

My own ministry life has taken me

to Florida, Alabama, Jamaica, Delaware, Philadelphia and New Jersey. I have been involved in many ministries, including parish home visitations and teaching religion classes; serving as a Eucharistic minister and in evangelization efforts; visiting women in prisons; being involved in after school programs and Catholic social services; and visiting the sick in homes, hospital and hospice.

There are countless opportunities to meet diverse people and culture. The many ministry experiences have enriched my life and opened my heart in witnessing God’s people, both in joyful celebrations as well as immense suffering.

Just as we cannot count the sands in the seashore, we cannot even begin to comprehend the many ways that God has blessed us. My own response to the generous love that God is sprinkling upon me is a Yes to the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience with Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity. My heartfelt question to you is “Have you ever considered being a priest, religious sister or brother or deacon?” You are not discerning alone on this path, as God is your companion and all the faithful community join you in this journey.

*Sister Christine Ma, MSBT, and her community live in Barrington.*

# Vocations fostered by role models and Catholic school

By Mary Beth Peabody

When he was 7 years old, Nickolas Naticchione started saying he wanted to become a priest, “you know, the way some kids say they want to be an astronaut,” said Naticchione, who is now in his third year at The College Seminary of the Immaculate Conception at Saint Andrew’s Hall, Seton Hall University in South Orange.

“My uncle, Father Jim Worth, was my initial inspiration. I wanted to be like Uncle Jim,” he said.

Naticchione graduated from Our Lady Star of the Sea Regional School in Atlantic City and Holy Spirit High School in Absecon. Although he says he became less vocal in high school about his future plans for the priesthood, his intention only grew stronger. He doesn’t think any of his classmates were surprised when he entered the seminary.

“My nickname in high school was Monsignor,” said Naticchione, who was also president of Holy Spirit’s Liturgy Club. In that role, he worked closely with the Director of Catholic Identity at the school, who placed a heavy emphasis on ministry.

Although the seeds for priesthood were planted early by his Uncle Jim, Naticchione said Catholic school gave



NICKOLAS NATICCHIONE

him a place to take his vocation seriously and to get fellow students interested as well.

“It was an experience I never would have had without the benefit of Catholic school,” he said, adding that it would be harder for someone to stand up and proclaim their faith in a non-Catholic school setting.

“In Catholic school, that is the goal. That’s why we have Directors of Catholic Identity. Whatever [a person’s] vocation is — marriage, the priesthood — we need that formation,” he said.

A year ahead of Naticchione, Timothy Mulranen’s path is similar. A Catholic school “lifer,” he began his education in Pre-K at Saint Margaret Regional School in Woodbury Heights. From Saint Margaret he went to Paul VI High School in



TIMOTHY MULRANEN

Haddonfield, where he graduated in 2017.

Like Naticchione, Mulranen felt the call to the priesthood from a young age and was influenced by an uncle who is a priest in Philadelphia.

“I always knew. I always had a desire to be a priest. I used to play Mass in our basement,” said Mulranen. “I imitated it as a kid because I’ve always loved the Mass.”

As he moved from play Mass to “real” Mass, Mulranen became an altar server at his parish, Church of the Incarnation in Mantua. There, in fourth grade, he was inspired by the new, young associate pastor, Father Michael Romano.

At Paul VI, Mulranen was active in the school’s Liturgical Committee, where then-chaplain Father John Rossi was his spiritual director and a strong influence on his vocation.

Although he knew he would end up in the priesthood, Mulranen decided to go the traditional route for college and enrolled at Neumann University, where he majored in communications and digital media. But the call was too strong, and after a year, Mulranen knew he did not want to delay his path to the priesthood. He transferred to the College Seminary at Seton Hall, where he is now a fourth year student.

As luck would have it, Father Romano became Director of Vocations for the Diocese of Camden. While Mulranen says Father Romano was his most influential mentor through the discernment process, he also acknowledges the role of his Catholic school education.

“Catholic schools kept my vocation alive,” said Mulranen, beginning with his strong attachment to the Franciscan Missionaries of the Infant Jesus (FMIJ) Sisters at Saint Margaret.

He said he was vocal about his desire to become a priest in high school and comfortable sharing his plan with Paul VI friends.

“All my friends were supportive. I was able to be myself in Catholic school, not just in religion class,” he said. “You could see Christ in every subject. It’s a living out of your faith. You can’t really put a price on that.”

## ‘Profound and unexpected horizons’

Religious and priestly life must be filled with the simple joy of caring every day for what really matters — faithful friendship with God and one another, Pope Francis wrote in his message for the 2021 World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

“God does not like to reveal himself in a spectacular way, pressuring our freedom,” Pope Francis wrote. “He conveys his plans to us with gentleness,” speaking through one’s thoughts and feelings, and unveiling “profound and unexpected horizons.”

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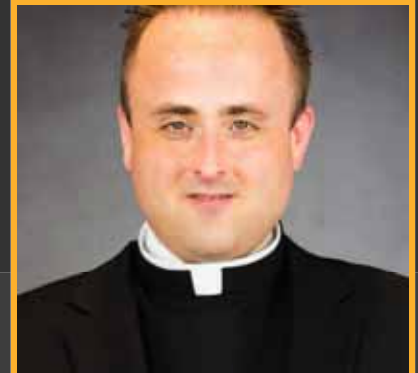
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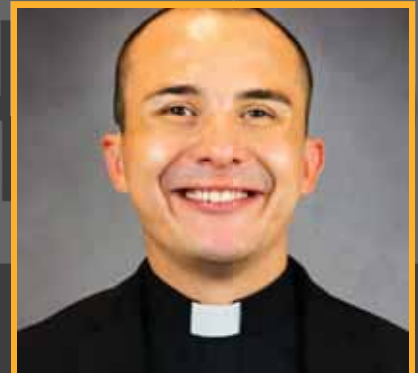
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