

Air Force hopes scholarship draws more service chaplains

WASHINGTON - To help fill vacancies and meet the underrepresented faith needs of airmen, the Air Force is offering a scholarship for individuals who want to become service chaplains.

The religious professional scholarship program will be available to any commissioned officer or anyone currently enrolled in a commissioning program, such as the Air Force Academy or Air Force ROTC. The scholarship will cover the cost of seminary tuition for candidates who meet the requirements.

There are currently about 20 Catholic cadets at the Air Force Academy in Colorado discerning whether they have a vocation for the priesthood, according to Father Robert Bruno, who holds the rank of colonel in the Air Force and is joint staff chaplain at the Pentagon.

The scholarship would allow candidates to enter the military and pursue the priesthood simultaneously.

"The kind of people who serve as chaplains probably share some of same qualities as people who serve their countries," said Craig Duehring, assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs. "They're both willing to make sacrifices. They're educated, motivated self-starters," he continued.

"In the past, I would guess that people in uniform would find they had to choose between serving their country or following their vocation. Now we're saying you can do both," Mr. Duehring told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview.

"This program is a huge step forward in providing qualified chaplains for the Air Force," he said. "Our chaplains are such an integral part of our Air Force, and we have a responsibility to provide their support to airmen and their families," he added.

Individuals who accept the scholarship must commit to eight years of service, but do

not have to complete the service obligation before entering the seminary, said Mr. Duehring. Scholarship awardees would go to the seminary after they have already been commissioned as officers.

The Air Force requires 120 Catholic chaplains. Currently, 79 of the 535 active duty chaplains in the Air Force are Catholic. Two of those chaplains will either retire or complete their military service by the end of April this year. The limited number of Catholic chaplains serves 25 percent of the airmen and their families, said Air Force chief of chaplains Cecil Richardson, a Protestant chaplain who holds the rank of major general.

At the moment, 19 Air Force bases are operating without a Catholic chaplain, said Mr. Duehring.

“Right now, it just so happens we have a shortage in priests, but in the future we may need more rabbis or clergy from some other faith group. Either way, the provisions will apply as the needs of our Air Force change every year,” Richardson said in a statement.

More information about the scholarship program is available on the Web site www.usafhc.af.mil/howtobecomeachaplain or by sending an e-mail to: chaplains@randolph.af.mil.