

Candidates to the priesthood reaches 19-year high

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Thirteen is no unlucky number for Father Gerard Francik, vocations director for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

That's how many men have entered formation this year to become archdiocesan priests - five more than last year and the most seen in America's founding archdiocese in nearly two decades.

"We're on a great roll," said Father Francik, noting that he has already received three priesthood applications for next year - a rarity for this time of the year.

"God is certainly working and the only explanation I can give is that it looks like our programs are finally paying off - thankfully," he said.

The vocations office has introduced a variety of new programs in recent years to encourage young men and women to consider religious vocations as priests, brothers, sisters or deacons.

"Operation Genesis" and "Dare to Dream," two daylong priesthood vocations camps for boys and teens, have attracted young people from throughout the archdiocese. A similar program was recently started at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park to introduce high school juniors to religious life.

Father Francik said he speaks about vocations in parishes and schools across the archdiocese. Many parishes have introduced vocation awareness committees, he said, and Catholic schools have dedicated part of their curriculum to vocations while others hold vocation awareness days.

The Serra Club, a lay group devoted to promoting religious vocations, has also stepped up its efforts, according to Father Francik, who is assisted by Andrew

Veveiros.

Cardinal William H. Keeler himself has taken a personal interest in promoting religious vocations, holding pasta dinners at his residence several times a year for young men considering priestly life. An affiliate program with the vocations office also offers monthly “pizza, prayer and discussion” nights for men in the early stages of discerning a religious vocation.

“We’ve been bombarding the vocation idea from so many angles that my hope is that the word is getting out,” said Father Francik.

Unlike previous years when he saw candidates first coming forward in their late 20s and early 30s, Father Francik said the men who are approaching him now are much younger. He regularly receives inquiries from 16 and 17-year olds.

Most of those who have been accepted into formation this year are young, Father Francik said, with the candidates’ ages ranging from 19-42. They include two Spanish-speaking candidates from Colombia and one from El Salvador who Father Francik recruited to help meet the needs of the growing Hispanic community in Maryland. One man is preparing to become a military chaplain.

“I think this generation is more service-oriented and looking for meaning in life and finding it in faith commitment,” he said.

Dan Miller, a 21-year-old parishioner of St. Clement I in Lansdowne, is one of the new seminarians. As a college candidate, Mr. Miller will attend Seton Hall University in New Jersey where he will also receive religious formation.

“When people heard that I wanted to become a priest, their eyes bulged out,” said Mr. Miller, a former high school homecoming king, president of his class and a lineman on his football team.

“They don’t understand that we’re just normal guys with an extraordinary call,” he said.

Mr. Miller said he discerned the call to the priesthood after praying about his future. He felt that God was asking him to devote his talents to the church.

"I have so much to give with my love for the church," said the former altar server. "I've always had great admiration for priests. I thought priests were cool and I respected what they did."

Andrew DeFusco, a 25-year-old parishioner of Immaculate Conception in Towson, said he too decided to become a priest this year as a way of serving the church. The former altar server has been a teacher in a Catholic high school in New Hampshire for the past two years.

"As long as I can remember I've loved the sacraments and I've been devoted to the Eucharist," said Mr. DeFusco, who said he was inspired by the priestly example of Pope John Paul II and his parish priests.

"I have a desire to imitate Christ as fully as possible," he said.

Mr. DeFusco will study at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg.

Juan Pablo Flores, a 27-year-old native of San Salvador, said he wants to serve as a priest in the Baltimore archdiocese because he has a desire to reach out to Spanish-speaking Catholics in the United States. Mr. Flores previously spent several years in religious formation with the Comboni Missionaries before coming to Baltimore six months ago.

"I always tend to help the other people and listen and I try to always help when the other people are suffering," said Mr. Flores, who has learned English only in the last several months. "I try to identify with the other."

Mr. Flores, who ministered four years in Costa Rica, two years in Mexico and one year in Guatemala, will study at St. Mary's Seminary and University, Roland Park.

Parents are the biggest challenge in attracting men to the priesthood today, according to Father Francik. This year, there would have been 14 men enrolled in priestly formation were it not for the father and grandmother of one 25-year-old man who discouraged him from entering the seminary, the priest said.

"I tell parents to let their children do what God wants them to do," Father Francik said. "Stop dreaming for them or making your dreams theirs. Let them dream what

God dreams for them.”

While it might seem counterintuitive that more young people are stepping forward to become priests in the wake of the clergy sex abuse scandals, Father Francik said he isn’t surprised. Young people are being challenged to defend their faith and they’re stepping up to do just that, he said.

“I’m sensing right now that either young people are not going to church and don’t care or they’re really into church and they’re head-over-heels in love with their faith,” said Father Francik, noting that the men who enter this year will undergo five to seven years of formation, depending on whether they need to complete college.

Two of the 13 new seminarians, James Boric and Ned Conklin, hail from St. Louis in Clarksville. The home or sponsoring parishes of the others are: Chet Collins of St. Mary of the Mills in Laurel, Jaime Garcia of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Roland Park; Jonathan Gibbons of St. John in Westminster, Alberto Herrero of St. Isidore the Farmer in Orange, Virg., Clark Miller of St. Francis of Assisi in Fulton, Michael Quigley of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Ellicott City, Steven Roth of the Parish Community of St. John, St. Joseph, St. Casimir and St. John the Baptist in Pittston, Penn., and Yohan Serrano of St. Ursula in Parkville.

Father Francik said other dioceses around the country have also reported higher numbers of men stepping forward for the priesthood. While the vocations director said he is “elated” with this year’s high number of priestly candidates, he’s not satisfied at 13.

“This is a record, but I’m hoping next year will be a record also,” he said.