

Catholic college seminarian enrollment increases

WASHINGTON - There is an uptick in the number of Catholic seminarians in undergraduate college programs, according to Mary L. Gautier, a senior research associate at the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, based at Georgetown University in Washington.

For the 2006-07 school year, there was a total of 1,365 college seminarians, up from 1,297 the year before, and up from 1,248 - the lowest number reported in CARA's 40 years of surveying - in 2004-05. The last time the number of college seminarians was this high was in 2002-03, when 1,376 students were enrolled.

Still, the numbers have been trending downward over the past four decades. The 2006-07 number of 1,365 college seminarians is barely 10 percent of the number reported by CARA's first survey in 1967-68: 13,401.

The numbers are in the CARA report "Catholic Ministry Formation Enrollments: Statistical Overview for 2006-2007," which was released Sept. 21.

In the 40 years CARA has been reporting seminary enrollment numbers, college seminary enrollment figures have gone up 10 times. "We've seen upticks before," Ms. Gautier said in a telephone interview with Catholic News Service.

"The numbers do fluctuate from year to year," she said. Even though the numbers are slightly up two years in a row, "I would hesitate to call this a trend," she said. "We'll know better after this year." CARA's 2007-08 survey will be distributed to schools later this fall.

Two factors have blunted college seminary enrollment figures, according to Ms. Gautier.

“There are a lot fewer college seminaries now” than there were a generation ago, she said, and dioceses are encouraging prospective priest candidates to complete their bachelor’s degree at their current college, followed by “pre-theology” seminary study to take the philosophy courses that will serve as the basis for study in a graduate-level seminary, or theologate.

Pre-theology work often takes two years to complete, Ms. Gautier said. Most graduate seminary programs run four years, and some have added a fifth year for a pastoral year of service in a parish or other ministry setting.

The overall numbers for graduate seminaries are down, from 3,306 in 2005-06 to 2,374 in 2006-07. Enrollment at diocesan theologates was up slightly for the second year in a row, while enrollment at religious-order theologates was down for the second year in a row.

The number of pre-theology students for 2006-07 was 623. They represented 19 percent of all theology students.

Ms. Gautier told CNS she had received several phone calls since the 2007-08 school year began from college seminary staff “anecdotally” reporting “record” numbers. “I don’t know what ‘record’ means,” Gautier said. “It could be six (students) instead of two.”

Those seminaries, she added, are “asking if this is a trend that’s going on. I have to tell them, ‘I don’t know yet. I’ll get back to you next spring.’”