

All in the family: Siblings, fathers and sons celebrate ordained ministry

A few months before Father Michael Carrion made his first Communion, he received a prayer book prepared by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Geared to children preparing to receive the sacrament, the missal featured vivid color photographs of a vested priest celebrating Mass.

"That's my uncle," said Father Carrion, sitting inside the rectory at Immaculate Heart of Mary, the Baynesville parish he serves as pastor, as he pointed to images of Father Martin Flahavan. The beloved uncle was a longtime pastor of St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown who died in 1972.

As Father Carrion flipped through the pages of the book, his brother, Father Patrick Carrion, carefully unwrapped his chalice and paten. The pastor of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore showed how the chalice, which once belonged to his uncle, includes his grandmother's wedding ring. The paten features his mother's engagement ring and diamond, while Father Michael Carrion's chalice incorporates his mother's wedding ring.

"She gave us those rings right off her finger," Father Patrick Carrion said.

For the Carrion brothers, the cherished objects embody two components of their lives that are inexorably intertwined: family and ordained ministry.

To celebrate both as they mark 75 combined years in the priesthood, the Carrion brothers hosted an Aug. 21 gathering at Immaculate Heart of Mary for other priests who have siblings or fathers who are priests, deacons or seminarians.

Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, former archbishop of Baltimore, was on hand for the special event which honored eight pairs of family clergy with at least one member ordained in each decade going back to the 1970s.

They included Father Michael Roach and his brother, Jesuit Father Thomas Roach; Father Christopher Moore and his brother, Deacon Timothy Moore; Father Joshua Laws and his father, Deacon Francis Laws; Father Jesse Bolger and his brother, Dominican Brother Justin Bolger, who will be ordained a priest in 2019.

Also recognized were Father John Rapisarda and his father, Father Gregory Rapisarda; Father Andrew DeFusco and his brother, Matthew DeFusco, who will be ordained to the priesthood in 2019; Father Michael Rubeling and his brother, Peter Rubeling, who will be ordained in 2021; and the Carrion brothers.

Nearly all the honorees were able to attend the event.

"Growing up, the priesthood was always an option," said Father Michael Carrion, who, in addition to his priest-uncle, had a great aunt who was a Sister of the Good Shepherd, a cousin who was a priest and another great aunt who was a School Sister of Notre Dame. "We saw that religious vocations were always supported by our family."

Father Bolger and his brother, Brother Bolger, said they, too, found inspiration in a relative who was a priest, Monsignor Joseph Parks of the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y.

"He had great joy and was loved by so many," Father Bolger said. "I really saw spiritual fatherhood realized in his priesthood. It was attractive to me."

Father Bolger, pastor of St. Joseph in Fullerton, said it's important that priests come from families whose members have strong, healthy relationships.

"It's easier to be a spiritual father when you have fatherhood modeled to you," he said.

Father Bolger and Brother Bolger's parents, who have seven children, were very open to the possibility of religious vocations, they said.

"Sometimes parents may be concerned that their son is going away and being of service to the church - or maybe that they won't have grandchildren," Brother Bolger said. "That can be daunting. But, their sons will become spiritual fathers to so many people - serving and shepherding a great flock as a priest."

Parents gain many sons, Brother Bolger added, in the brother priests befriended by their ordained children.

Father Laws, associate pastor of Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville, said one of the “awesome” components of being a priest is that his family welcomes all his seminarian and priest friends into their lives.

“My parents came out to my parish when I first got here,” he said, “and it was cool to introduce them to my new church family. It’s like the expanding of our family.”

Father Laws, who remembers volunteering as an altar server at St. Stephen in Bradshaw when his father, Deacon Laws, preached homilies, said his father modeled a sense of joy in ministry.

“I got to see the joy he brought other people,” he said.

There are practical benefits to having clergy in the family. Several brothers pointed out that they can call on each other when they need help covering a Mass in an emergency. Father Bolger has had his brother, a former professional musician, sing and give talks at his parishes over the years. Priests and deacons celebrate sacramental family milestones.

“We had no baptisms, no weddings and no funerals in the family in the years between the time my uncle died and I was ordained,” Father Michael Carrion said with a laugh. “It just happened that way, but it almost seemed like everyone was waiting.”

There’s also the added benefit of having a trusted confidant connected by blood.

“There’s that closeness that you have with a sibling that you can’t replicate with a friend,” Brother Bolger said.

While it may be somewhat uncommon to have multiple religious vocations in a single family in modern times, it’s historically not unusual.

Father Bolger pointed out that Christ himself picked two pairs of brothers among his apostles: Peter and Andrew, and James and John. Some great saints, such as St.

Benedict and St. Scholastica, were siblings, he said.

“This can be something beautiful for the next generation to continue,” he said. “The love we received from our families is what we are now giving in our church ministry.”

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