

# Fifteen Catholic students awarded fellowships for religious studies

WASHINGTON – Pursuing a master of divinity degree “certainly isn’t the path to riches in this world, but it’s something I really like to do,” said Joe Kolar, a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

“I know I would like to make a career out of ministry in some way, shape or form,” he said.

Kolar is one of 15 Catholic students to receive a fellowship this year from the Fund for Theological Education. The Atlanta-based fund is an ecumenical organization that annually grants more than \$1 million in awards to undergraduate, seminary and doctoral students across the United States and Canada who demonstrate great potential as future church leaders.

“Since 1954 (we) have been working to notice, name and nurture the next generation of pastoral leaders for the church and society,” stated the Rev. Trace Haythorne, a Presbyterian clergyman who is president of the fund.

Rev. Haythorne said his organization identifies fellowship candidates by networking with U.S. and Canadian churches. The fund relies on congregations and clergy from more than 40 different denominational and nondenominational communities to identify gifted young people who have considered ministry but “need that extra nudge,” he said.

It sponsors seven fellowship programs for students: four for those considering ministry and three designed specifically to aid minority students pursuing doctorates in theology and divinity.

The fund receives its financial support from foundations, organizations, congregations and individuals. Among its current donors are the Lilly Endowment and the Arthur Vining Davis, Henry Luce and William Randolph Hearst foundations.

Kolar received a Volunteers Exploring Vocation fellowship, a \$2,000 stipend given to

students exploring ministry. He heard about the education fund at a conference while participating in a Lasallian volunteer program.

“(Some of the volunteers) just started thinking about theological education as a way we can expand on our service,” Kolar told Catholic News Service. He said the fellowship money he received was helping pay for his housing costs as he continued his studies.

Through his volunteer work and studies, Kolar has developed an interest in the spiritual formation of young people. He is currently considering the priesthood and hopes to work in campus ministry.

Laura Johnston, another Catholic fellow who is a graduate-level divinity student at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., received a grant from the fund’s Ministry Fellowships program. Johnston told CNS she was unsure of her specific career plans and does not know if she will ever work directly for the church. However, there are specific areas of ministry she wishes to pursue.

“I am interested in working with the immigrant population and I’m also interested in community gardening and urban farming,” she said.

Johnston added that she was drawn to theology by her desire to better understand the human person.

“Studying religion is really studying the human condition and (people’s) relationship with God or what is beyond themselves, the transcendent,” she said. “Just by studying religion I’m learning about humanity.”

Johnston plans to use her \$10,000 fellowship to develop a summer project that will give her the flexibility to study issues outside the rigid curriculum of her master of divinity program.

Both Kolar and Johnston praised the fund for allowing students to engage in dialogue across denominations.

“In June, (all of the fellows) had a retreat and a conference,” Johnston said. “It was a pretty amazing experience for me to step outside my Catholic denomination and

work with leaders (from other denominations) and to see that despite all of the differences and technicalities, really we are honestly going toward the same thing. We really all are working to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.”

The Rev. Ellen Purdum, a priest of the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta and director of ministry fellowships for the fund, said the promotion of dialogue among various Christian faiths is one of the goals of the fellowships.

“As much as we can, we try to create a cohort of diverse candidates,” she told CNS. “One of the best rewards (for the fellows) is that they get to come together after they are awarded the fellowship. The kind of relationships they build and the practices that they develop within worship and small groups are the kind of skills they (will use) in the work on the ground.”

Rev. Haythorne and Rev. Purdum believe it is essential for Christian churches to identify more young leaders like Kolar and Johnston.

“I think the church needs these young people in ways it knows at the depths of its being and in ways it hasn’t even imagined,” Rev. Haythorne said. “The richness of our traditions (is) meeting the creativity of the age to yield a church that the world needs ... and these young people are going to be the ones who lead it.”

Christian churches are currently facing a shortage of young leadership. The fund estimates that less than 7 percent of the clergy in most denominations is under the age of 35.

“Churches have forgotten what it’s like to have 20-something-year-olds as their leaders,” Rev. Purdum said.

According to her, the Catholic Church has provided a strong stream of candidates for fellowships in recent years, particularly in the Volunteers Exploring Vocation fellowships. She credits the strength of Catholic service programs that address community and social justice issues.

“(Catholic volunteers) have a rich reservoir of experience that makes them stand out as candidates for our awards,” she stated. “Catholic fellows bring a great commitment to social practices and teachings. Sometimes they don’t realize what

great gifts they are bringing.”

While many Catholics make strong fellowship candidates, Rev. Haythorne and Rev. Purdum said relatively few Catholics apply for their organization’s Calling Congregations fellowships, which “equip individual congregations to nurture gifted young people for ministry.”

The fund partners with individual congregations to help pay for the education of first-year seminarians 35 years of age or younger. The fund matches dollar for dollar a congregation’s \$2,000-\$5,000 contribution to the fellow’s first-year costs.

*More information about the Fund for Theological Education and its October Calling Congregations conference in Atlanta is available online at [www.thefund.org](http://www.thefund.org).*