

From Rome and about seminarians

This week finds me away from Baltimore and enjoying, absorbing the spiritual grandeur of Rome, the world's Eternal City.

Over the past eight years, I have served as chair of the Board of Governors of the Pontifical North American College in Rome, a privilege I will relinquish this November when my term expires.

"The College" is owned and supported by the bishops of our country who, since 1859 (with a brief interruption during World War II), have been sending candidates for the priesthood to be formed *sub umbra Petri* (beneath the shadow of Peter). In fact, the present seminary building, completed in 1959, stands on the Janiculum Hill overlooking St. Peter's Basilica.

The original site of the seminary in the center of Rome dates back to 1599 when the building served as a Visitation Convent. Now called the Casa Santa Maria, it houses the graduate programs of the College, with some 75 priests studying for further degrees in the theological sciences.

Each year, as well, some 76 American priests, relative veterans in priestly service, spend 12 weeks under the auspices of the College's Institute for Continuing Theological Education. As they brush up on their theology, they also experience the age-old secrets of Rome from within.

I am drawn to the "NAC" this particular week to help celebrate the annual Rector's Dinner, a major fundraiser and a rare opportunity for Italian Catholics and some American pilgrims to sample a modern seminary community. Our seminarians host the event - direct traffic, transform the refectory into a banquet hall, wait tables, and provide some fine entertainment for many on hand whose sorry stereotypical image of a seminary and its seminarians would tend to resemble that of a 19th century monastery.

What our visitors see, however, is a large house of happy and healthy young men with a deep love for Christ and his Church and a strong desire upon ordination to return home as parish priests. These days, gratefully, our numbers are strong, with

180 seminarians and newly ordained priests representing 82 dioceses across the U.S.

In recent years I have noticed a trend or two at the College that might say something about the state of vocations in North America. There has been a decided shift in population from the Northeastern and Western dioceses to those of the Midwest. Archdioceses such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have not been sending seminarians in recent years, but there is a virtual roll call of dioceses from farm and ranch states such as Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Texas. I suspect this reflects the vocation situation in various parts of our Land, and one might ask why such heavily populated Archdioceses are not attracting vocations in proportion to the smaller, close-to-the-earth dioceses.

Another impressive and, indeed, inspiring hallmark of today's seminarians, in Rome and in our own distinguished St. Mary's Seminary in Roland Park and Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, is a return to a Eucharistic-centered spirituality. At NAC, all are "on deck" at 6:15 a.m. for morning prayer and 6:30 a.m. community Mass before walking a typical 25 minutes to classes across town. Come evening, one would have to be impressed by the numbers in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament during the voluntary holy hour of exposition.

Many seminarians volunteer the fact that they discovered their vocation through devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in parishes where Eucharistic adoration was regularly scheduled with special prayers for vocations.

Nationally, I am told that there are dioceses such as Wichita, where an abundance of priestly vocations can be traced to diocesan-wide Eucharistic adoration. Nor do I think it a coincidence that the three parishes in our Archdiocese with the most success at present in "growing" seminarians for Baltimore all offer parishioners opportunities for Eucharistic adoration outside of Mass:

St. Louis, Clarksville - 4 seminarians

St. John, Westminster - 3 seminarians, 2 applying

St. Peter the Apostle, Libertytown – 2 seminarians, 1 applying

These three parishes provide half of our homegrown seminarians. They have taken seriously the Lord's solution for great harvests, but too few laborers: "Pray the harvest-master to send laborers into his harvest."

We are blessed, indeed, to have many deacons, religious, and laypeople working the harvest. But without the priest, there is no Eucharist. Without the Eucharist, there is no Church.

How fitting, how necessary, to turn to the Eucharist in our prayer for priests.