

Many new U.S. priests are in their 30s and foreign-born, study says

WASHINGTON - The age and nationality of many of the new priests to be ordained in the United States this year continues a trend of recent years as more foreign-born men in their mid-30s are entering the priesthood.

The average age for this year's ordinands is 36 for diocesan priests and 39 for priests joining religious orders. About 30 percent of new priests are between 25 and 29 years of age and about 39 percent are in their 30s, according to a national study.

The annual survey of new priests is conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. The survey was initially developed in 1998 by the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Vocations and Priestly Formation. Two years ago, CARA began conducting the survey for the U.S. bishops.

The study of the ordination class of 2008 shows that one-third of this year's new priests were born outside the United States. The largest numbers are from Mexico, Vietnam, Poland and the Philippines. The percentage of foreign-born ordinands is nearly the same this year as last year (32 percent compared to 31 percent), but is a significant increase from the 22 percent in 1999.

Of this year's 401 ordinands, 335 responded to the CARA survey; they included 242 ordinands to the diocesan priesthood and 77 ordinands to religious orders. Another 16 ordinands did not specify whether they were being ordained diocesan or religious-order priests.

The report found that most ordinands have been Catholic since birth, although close to one in 10 became Catholic later in life. Fifty-one percent of the respondents attended a Catholic elementary school, similar to 49 percent of U.S. Catholic adults. Ordinands are somewhat more likely to have attended a Catholic high school and they are much more likely to have attended a Catholic college. They were also predominantly active in parish ministries before entering the seminary.

The youngest ordinand in this year's class is 25 and the oldest is 76. Five ordinands

are 65 or older.

Among those who became Catholic later in life, the average age at their conversion was 20. Ordinands who came from another faith tradition or denomination are about evenly divided among mainline Protestant traditions, evangelical or conservative Protestant traditions and those raised without a faith tradition. Three ordinands converted to Catholicism from Judaism.

Deacon Brandon Jones, a transitional deacon for the Diocese of Charlotte, N.C., who will be ordained a priest in June, grew up as a Southern Baptist with his twin brother, Chandler. The Rev. Chandler Jones is now an Anglican minister.

The ordination class of 2008 reflects a wide variety of ages and experiences. Among the ordinands are a widower who is a former dean of the University of Notre Dame Law School; a former U.S. Marine officer and engineer for Texaco; and a former Walt Disney programmer, project manager and systems analyst.

The Archdiocese of Chicago will ordain 11 men, each 38 or younger.

This year the Diocese of Rockford, Ill., will ordain seven men ranging in age from 27 to 42. The Diocese of Saginaw, Mich., will ordain four men, the most since 1982. In the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the three men being ordained are all in their 20s.

"We are blessed with the enthusiasm the newly ordained will bring to the mission of the church," said Boston Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations. "We pray that through their good work and example more men will generously respond to the Lord's call to serve as priests."