

Military archdiocese sees increase in Catholic military chaplains

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services is reporting an increase in the number of seminarians who want to become military chaplains.

For the 2011-2012 academic year, there are 31 co-sponsored and military-affiliated seminarians. Last year there were 23; in 2009-2010 there were 12 and the previous year only three.

Co-sponsorship means that a diocesan bishop agrees to accept the seminarian who will participate in the chaplain candidacy program of one of the branches of the U.S. armed forces. The bishop agrees to release him for service as a military chaplain after three years of pastoral experience as a priest in his diocese. When the priest leaves military service, he returns to the diocese.

Conventual Franciscan Father Kerry Abbott, director of vocations for the military archdiocese, called the increase one of the “untold stories” of spiritual blessings. He said Catholic seminaries in the U.S. and the Pontifical North American College in Rome are straining to accommodate the influx of seminarians and many seminaries have converted guest rooms to seminarian quarters.

The outlook for future vocations is just as bright, he said. The archdiocese is currently processing hundreds of inquiries from prospective military chaplains. Father Abbott expects anywhere from five to 10 more to enter seminaries next year, with still more to come in years to follow.

The timing could not be better. The U.S. armed forces have seen a steady decline in Catholic military chaplains over the past 10 years as priests reach the military retirement age of 62. Their numbers are down from more than 400 active in 2001 to 274 this year.

Father Abbott attributes the increase to the support of bishops and successful recruiting over the past three years.

The growing influx of new co-sponsored seminarians poses an increased cost for the military archdiocese, which pays for half of the five-year education. The archdiocese splits tuition and related costs evenly with each diocese where the co-sponsored seminarian is educated and ordained. In just three years, the archdiocese's annual seminary bill has climbed from less than \$40,000 to more than \$350,000.

The Knights of Columbus recently announced a new Venerable Father McGivney Military Chaplain Scholarship that will provide \$200,000 a year over the next five years. The archdiocese is now in search of additional funding sources to make up the difference.

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio of the military archdiocese recently urged a group of military chaplains to model their ministry after Maryknoll Father Vincent R. Capodanno, a chaplain who was killed in 1967 while performing last rites for dying soldiers in Vietnam.

During a Sept. 6 memorial Mass for the priest at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the archbishop said he was certain that Father Capodanno was only doing his duty when he died.

"We honor him so as to cultivate within ourselves that same spirit of devotion and fidelity. Putting into practice his example would be the highest form of praise," he said.