

Seminarians embark on journey to the priesthood

Part one of a three-part series

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When Hamilton Okeke stepped into his room at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park for the first time, the enormity of what he was doing seemed to hit him in the gut.

He was alone, literally and figuratively, as he was about to hand his life over to God. No one in his inner circle supported his desire to become a priest.

Just two rooms down the hall on the fourth floor of the massive seminary building that looms over Northern Parkway, Deacon Gregory Rapisarda's room bustled with a family that embraced religious vocations.

At 61, Deacon Rapisarda was reversing an old cliché, turning it into "like son, like father," as he was following the footsteps of one of his sons who had already been ordained to the priesthood.

Later that summer's day, Christopher de Leon arrived at the seminary, leaving behind a successful engineering career and a sleek sports car. He had it all in the eyes of the world, but was looking for a greater purpose in life.

Okeke, Deacon Rapisarda and de Leon were among 74 men from 16 dioceses across the United States who enrolled at St. Mary's for the start of the fall 2008 semester.

The Catholic Review spent nine months following the three seminarians during the first year of their journey to become priests for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

As the universal church enters the "Year of the Priest," set by Pope Benedict XVI to

begin June 19, we explore their formation in a three-part series.

Despite their diverse backgrounds and separate journeys, the trio of seminarians realized they were brothers in a calling. They were diving into a formation process that would challenge them academically, spiritually and pastorally.

“There’s something very motivating about being with a group of guys who have the same goal as you – ordination,” said de Leon, one of 14 St. Mary’s seminarians studying to become priests for the Baltimore archdiocese. “There’s a great sense of solidarity. We all support one another.”

Not an easy decision

That unity was developing last Aug. 21, move-in day.

As Okeke glanced around his Spartan, 9-foot by 12-foot dormitory room at St. Mary’s, he discreetly brushed away a tear and struggled to find his voice.

“This is my new home,” the 29-year-old Nigerian marveled, standing in sandals at the entryway while clutching a pair of suitcases filled with clothes.

“At last,” he said.

No one wanted him to be a priest. Before they died, both his parents discouraged their only child from following his vocation – although his mother relented two days before she died.

His friends adamantly opposed the idea.

“They told me I was wasting my life,” Okeke said, his eyes still moist as he started unpacking his few modest belongings.

“My friends said it would be better for me to get married and continue the family line,” he explained. “It wasn’t an easy decision for me, but I know this is what God is calling me to do. These tears are tears of joy.”

Okeke had previously spent four years in a Nigerian seminary. He came to the United States, he said, because he believed there was a greater need for priests

here. He's hardly the only international student at St. Mary's, as nearly a quarter of those enrolled hail from overseas.

Most are from nations in Africa and South America, with Poland and Vietnam also represented.

Raised in the Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria, Okeke would find support in Middle River, at Our Lady Queen of Peace, his sponsoring parish. He was warmly received by the pastor, Father Jason Worley, and parishioners.

The parish donated the proceeds of one of its poor box collections to Okeke so he would have money to purchase school supplies, linens and clothing. It was the parish cook who dropped him off at the seminary on his first day.

"I owe everything to Queen of Peace," Okeke said. "I feel only love from the people there. They love me as their son."

'Live the life God meant you to live'

While Okeke was alone as he settled in on a sunny summer day, several members of Deacon Rapisarda's family helped him carry boxes and unpack family photos.

They included Father John Rapisarda, the deacon's son, who was ordained to the priesthood in 2008 and now serves as associate pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Essex.

Deacon Rapisarda never thought he would become a priest. Ordained to the permanent diaconate in 2003, the parishioner of St. Margaret in Bel Air was happy - in his ministry and in his career as an attorney.

After cancer claimed the life of his beloved Carol, his wife of nearly four decades, the deacon began to ponder the priesthood. It was Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien who first asked Deacon Rapisarda to consider the calling.

Sprinkling holy water in his seminary room as he said a prayer of blessing, Deacon Rapisarda choked with emotion as he thought of his wife.

"That's just my Italian tear ducts," Deacon Rapisarda joked as tears rolled down his

cheeks and his son rested a hand on his shoulder.

Turning serious, he said he felt his wife's presence in the seminary room. He had her support.

"We're giving two men in our family to the church as priests and it's through my wife's prayers that we're here," Deacon Rapisarda said. "It's a great blessing."

The seminarian also has a married son, a married daughter and another daughter studying theology.

Before he entered the seminary, Deacon Rapisarda put his condominium up for sale and wound down his law practice. Among the many photos and letters he brought with him was a cherished note from his wife.

"My love did not die," it said, "only my body. Support one another and live the life God meant you to live."

Helping people get to heaven

De Leon didn't arrive at St. Mary's Seminary until later in the afternoon of move-in day.

Entering the grand foyer, he was greeted by a statue of St. Mary, Seat of Wisdom - a special patroness of the Sulpician priests who founded the seminary in 1791 as the first Catholic seminary in the United States.

The original seminary building, the chapel of which still stands, was located on Paca Street in downtown Baltimore. The program began to relocate to the current Roland Park structure in 1929.

With a brilliant shield of sunlight behind him as the 34-year-old parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville stepped into the hall, de Leon knew he was turning his back on a bright future in the secular world.

In anticipation of a new phase in his life, he put his stylish 2005 Lotus Elise up for sale on CarMax before he set foot in his third-floor seminary room.

“I was compensated very well where I worked and I was good at what I did, but something was still missing,” said de Leon, who holds a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and who most recently worked for NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt.

“I was helping design next-generation radio for satellite communications,” de Leon said. “How does that help anyone get to heaven?”

The son of Filipino immigrants who gave him their blessing to pursue the priesthood, de Leon first thought about becoming a priest when he was in the eighth grade. Twenty years later, a deacon escorted him to St. Mary’s Chapel and prayed over him.

“Wow,” he said. “It’s like I’m finally there.”

Read part two here.

Read part three here.