

Seminarians face challenges in academics and pastoral work

Part two of a three-part series

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Halfway through his first year at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park, Christopher de Leon looked spent.

Plopping down on a leather chair in the library, the first-year seminarian admitted that studying philosophy, producing academic papers and preparing for exams was weighing on him.

"It's definitely more challenging than I anticipated," said de Leon, a former electrical engineer who worked for NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt before entering the seminary.

The parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville was far from giving up. He wanted to be a priest and knew his studies at the seminary will be crucial in his future ministry.

"Every time I make a concentrated effort to power through," he said, "I'm saying yes to God."

De Leon wasn't alone. Many seminarians at St. Mary's experience the same stresses in an institution with a long history of academic excellence and pastoral formation.

Nonetheless, De Leon, Hamilton Okeke and Deacon Gregory Rapisarda, three seminarians preparing to become priests for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, experienced many joys and struggles in their first year at St. Mary's.

The Catholic Review spent nine months following the Baltimore trio. In the second of a three-part series, we look at how the seminary is preparing them to live out their

calling.

Classroom learning

Standing in front of a homiletics class filled with fellow seminarians watching his every move, Deacon Rapisarda delivered a homily on repentance just as he had many times at his home parish of St. Margaret in Bel Air.

A permanent deacon who decided to pursue the priesthood after his wife died, the 61-year-old father of four focused the message of his Lenten homily on St. John the Baptist's admonition to "repent and believe in the Gospel."

"Lent is a time that we examine our lives and decide whether we are going in the right direction," said Deacon Rapisarda, speaking from notes with phrases bolded for emphasis as he gestured casually with his hands.

"This time of 40 days," he said, "is a gift from a merciful God, who is always forgiving and who allows us to move on with our lives even if we have crossed the center line or run off the road."

The professor invited the class to give a critique. The deacon received high marks for having good eye contact and for providing hands-on suggestions like going to the sacrament of reconciliation and being honest with God.

But his peers and his instructor noticed that Deacon Rapisarda wasn't as conversational as he had been in earlier exercises. The Sulpician professor heading the class picked up on the deacon's use of the word "confession."

"The preferred term is 'reconciliation,' " the professor said. "It's not about telling sins; it's about being reconciled to God. When we're preaching, even the words we use for the sacraments convey meaning."

Deacon Rapisarda learned from the critical eyes, saying it makes him a better preacher.

"I think what we do in those classes is to offer each other feedback," Deacon Rapisarda said. "You need to be open to the Holy Spirit because you need to be

vulnerable and also apply what they said. That's what I've really enjoyed about the seminary. The teacher is there to help you gain insights."

Whether the topic is church history, philosophy, doctrine, liturgy, morality or sacred Scripture, Deacon Rapisarda said, seminarians are challenged to stretch themselves intellectually.

"I'm overwhelmed at the wealth of knowledge the church has accumulated over the centuries," he said. "Being at the seminary gives us the chance to understand the teachings not in a superficial way but in a really deep way."

De Leon knows how thought provoking classes can get. Earlier in the year, a philosophical ethics professor posed a question: to save another's life, is there a moral difference between a shipwrecked person giving up his floating plank and a person offering himself to be cannibalized to pagan gods?

It was a metaphysical question far different from the mathematical and scientific concepts he had contemplated as an engineer.

"Thinking in those terms orients your mind to understand theological concepts and look at them from different angles," de Leon said.

Hands-on experience

In his philosophy class at St. Mary's, de Leon studied how God has a place and a purpose for every person in creation.

Sitting in the Timonium living room of a Gallagher Center group home for men with developmental disabilities, the 34-year-old was about to put some real-life experience on that academic supposition.

One man, dressed in a T-shirt and checkered pajama bottoms, pressed his ear close to a speaker to enjoy the Elvis Presley CD de Leon made for him. Another joyfully twirled around the room to the rollicking music. A third wore a helmet and silently spent all his time cranking the gears of a pre-school toy to make brightly colored objects pop up.

Noticing one of the eight residents sitting alone, de Leon pulled out a guitar and settled down next to him. De Leon had accidentally broken the string of the man's instrument a few weeks earlier, so he gave him one of his spare guitars as a gift. The two sang "Edelweiss" from "The Sound of Music," the young man's favorite - bringing smiles to both their faces.

"These guys are fully human, even though society may treat them as less than that," said de Leon, speaking over a cacophony of joyous noise.

"You can see how they crave relationships," said the former saber squad captain on the fencing team at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "Spending time with them gives me a better appreciation for who they are and for the sacredness of all human life."

De Leon's Wednesday night visits to the Catholic Charities-run group home constituted his pastoral assignment for his first year in the seminary. In addition to their academic work, seminarians work in parishes, hospitals, charities, prisons and other institutions every semester to give them a well-rounded preparation.

Before receiving his pastoral assignment, de Leon had no interaction with people with mental retardation.

"It's been a great experience," said de Leon, who has also given spiritual reflections at the group home. "I've learned a lot."

Spiritual development

Consistent with the Sulpician approach to formation, the priests who serve on the St. Mary's faculty live on campus and model the priestly life for future clergymen.

Each seminarian works closely with two priests throughout his formation. One serves as his confidential spiritual director, the other acts as his mentor and represents the student to the faculty.

Before ordination, seminarians must complete two years of philosophy and four years of theology. Students from the archdiocese must also complete a pastoral year serving in a parish.

A self-described shy person, Okeke admitted that he faced some difficulties on his pastoral assignment at St. Joseph in Fullerton. A priest there wanted the reserved Nigerian seminarian to be more outgoing.

“I was so scared when I first started,” said Okeke, a warm man with a ready smile. “For two weeks, I was very anxious, but I became more comfortable and I enjoyed going out to the people and being with them.”

During his time at St. Joseph, Okeke wrote two-page essays on how the parish was run.

Okeke found support by talking with his spiritual director, a Sulpician priest from Vietnam who encouraged him to maintain a commitment to prayer and to read spiritual books.

The seminarian prays the rosary daily and has a devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Every Wednesday, he participates in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Like all seminarians, he attends daily Mass.

“There are times when I don’t feel like praying,” Okeke said. “You have to force yourself to be there - it’s a sign that you are interested in what you are doing. Making the attempt to pray is a prayer in itself.”

Okeke is inspired by the priests and other seminarians at St. Mary’s.

“I can’t describe my joy in being here at St. Mary’s,” Okeke said. “My heart’s desire is to be a priest and God is making a way.”

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Read part three here.