

Sulpician formation guides future priests

Part three of a three-part series

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Wandering a long corridor flooded with light that poured in through large arched windows, Deacon Gregory Rapisarda could hardly believe St. Mary's Seminary and University in Roland Park was his home. Thousands of men had walked the seminary's terrazzo floors before him, and he was now following in their footsteps to the priesthood.

"It's such an honor to be here," said the 61-year-old parishioner of St. Margaret in Bel Air. "It's a truly historic institution – the first Catholic seminary in the United States."

Deacon Rapisarda's sense of awe was shared by two classmates from Baltimore, Christopher de Leon, 34, and Hamilton Okeke, 29. Each viewed the 300,000-square-foot seminary not only as a stately training ground for the priesthood, but as a center of Christian fraternity.

In the final installment of Path to the Priesthood, a three-part series examining the first year of the trio's seminary experiences, The Catholic Review takes a closer look at St. Mary's Seminary and its method of priestly formation.

'After the heart of Christ'

What makes St. Mary's different from other seminaries is its Sulpician approach to preparing men for the priesthood, according to Sulpician Father Thomas Hurst, president-rector.

Formally known as the Society of St. Sulpice, the Sulpicians are an international association of diocesan priests whose ministry is focused on educating fellow priests. Founded by Father Jean Jacques Olier in 17th-century France, the Sulpicians believe the church can be renewed through the solid formation of the clergy.

“We have a tradition of over 350 years of seminary formation,” said Father Hurst, a 1973 alumnus of the seminary he now heads. “We try to shape men after the heart of Christ, the Good Shepherd, so they can truly represent the teachings of Christ and the church.”

Modeling what it means to be a good priest is central to formation at St. Mary’s. Most of the 12-member faculty is composed of Sulpicians – all of whom live on campus in community with the seminarians.

Each student individually works with two Sulpicians throughout his formation, one who serves as a spiritual director and one who is a mentor. They also join Sulpicians in daily Mass and prayer and often enjoy meals together.

“We hope this personalized and individualized attention complements the community life so the seminarians internalize the values of the program,” said Father Hurst, adding that commitment to the priesthood, apostolic zeal and a collegial governing style are other marks of a Sulpician seminary.

Father Hurst called it “delightful” to live in community with seminarians. Those studying for the priesthood today entered the seminary in the wake of the clergy sex abuse crisis. They show tremendous courage and faithfulness to the church, Father Hurst said, and they are trying to become more virtuous Christians so they can be effective priests.

“They are eager to be of service and they are zealous in their faith,” Father Hurst said. “They have come here knowing there’s been a diminishing number of priests, and they are going to have to accept more responsibility earlier in their priesthood than past generations. They are very willing to do it.”

The average age of seminarians at the time of their ordination is the mid-30s, Father Hurst said. That’s a number that has held steady for a decade.

To be ordained, students must complete two years of philosophy and four years of theology. Seminarians from the Archdiocese of Baltimore must additionally complete a pastoral year working in a parish.

While de Leon is undergoing the full seven-year formation process, Deacon Rapisarda and Okeke will spend less time in the seminary because they had previous theological training. Deacon Rapisarda spent several years studying at St. Mary's to become a permanent deacon and Okeke spent four years in a Nigerian seminary.

All three said they found support from their brother seminarians throughout their first year of study at St. Mary's.

"I eat, study, hang out and pray with these guys," said de Leon, a parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville and a former electrical engineer. "There's a great sense of solidarity - of trying to help one another and motivate one another. The friendships I make here will last the rest of my life."

'Am I doing the right thing?'

About 80 percent of those who enroll make it to ordination, Father Hurst said. At the start of the current academic year, there were 74 seminarians from 16 dioceses at St. Mary's. Five dropped out by the end of the year and two newcomers were accepted in January.

"Some discern that the priesthood isn't for them," Father Hurst said. "For some, it may be the public demands of the life of a priest. For others, it may be certain tasks like preaching or teaching - or it may be celibacy. For some, it's obedience."

At every stage of formation, students examine issues related to the celibate life. That includes the spiritual dimensions of celibacy, of living in the image of Christ and being freed for pastoral service. It also includes the human dimensions, of understanding the practical implications of being celibate and how to foster healthy relationships, Father Hurst said.

Unlike Deacon Rapisarda, who once was a married man before his wife died, de Leon and Okeke will never have their own families if they become priests. That's a reality both of them acknowledged to be one of the most challenging aspects of their

vocation.

“In embracing the celibate life, it’s almost like you could say this isn’t my will,” de Leon said. “I’m committing myself to the church because it’s God’s will. It’s something I pray for – that my will be united to his. I’ll be honest with you, I’m not entirely there yet.”

As the only child of deceased parents, Okeke felt added pressure from his friends to continue his family line. He had a girlfriend in Nigeria, but believed God was calling him to devote his life wholly to the church – a commitment he doesn’t think would be possible if he were married.

“At times, it is a real challenge,” said Okeke, noting that discipline is a key to living a celibate life. “Am I really doing the right thing?”

Rigorous academics

Throughout its long history, St. Mary’s has been recognized for its rigorous academic training.

It was founded in 1791, with a location on Paca Street in Baltimore. In 1822, Pope Pius VII permitted St. Mary’s to become the country’s first pontifical faculty with the right to grant degrees in the name of the Holy See.

It began relocating its programs to the current Roland Park building in 1929.

Today, every faculty member holds an advanced degree in philosophy or theology and nearly all are published. All the priests are trained in spirituality and spiritual direction.

Throughout their formation, the seminarians complete pastoral work in parishes, charities, hospitals, prisons and other institutions. There are 14 learning parishes in the archdiocese where the seminarians minister.

Annual tuition, room and board costs approximately \$24,000 at St. Mary’s – expenses that are picked up by each seminarian’s sponsoring diocese. Students only have to pay for books, which can cost several hundred dollars or more each

semester.

As they completed academic papers and took final exams at the end of their first year of study at St. Mary's, de Leon, Okeke and Deacon Rapisarda seemed committed to remaining on the path to the priesthood.

Sitting in the seminary's elegant dining hall, surrounded by oak paneling, stately wooden columns and large arched windows, Okeke knew the seminary would never be able to prepare him fully for the world he would confront as a priest outside the handsome building's limestone walls. But he believes he is receiving the fundamental tools to deal with whatever comes his way.

Reflecting on the support given by his brother seminarians, his sponsoring parish of Our Lady Queen of Peace in Middle River, his teachers and mentors, Okeke said he plans to live, serve and die in his new archdiocese if that is God's will.

"I keep asking myself, am I so special that God is really taking care of me this way," he said. "I appreciate the opportunity that has been given to me. I just pray that God will continue to guide me."

Read part one of this series [here](#).

Read part two of this series [here](#).