

World Day for Prayer for Vocations is May 15

As a pediatric gastroenterologist at The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maria Grazia Clemente has devoted the last several years of her life to helping sick children and researching liver disease. The 47-year-old parishioner of Our Lady of Victory in Arbutus is now on the road to becoming a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur – hoping to serve as a kind of spiritual physician who can lead others closer to Christ.

Evan Ponton had thoughts of becoming an engineer before his pastor at St. Peter the Apostle in Libertytown asked him to consider the priesthood. Although he had been active in the youth group and had thought of religious life in the past, hearing that question was the first time the 21-year-old church musician seriously considered it. He's now a seminarian studying for the Archdiocese of Baltimore at the Theological College in Washington, D.C.

Edmund Thomas McCullough III, a 24-year-old graduate of Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, spent the last two years ministering to young adults on two secular college campuses in New York as a lay missionary with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. He has been accepted into the Dominican order and will report to their Washington formation house in July to begin studies to become a Dominican priest.

As the Catholic Church prepares to celebrate the 48th World Day of Prayer for Vocations May 15 – “Good Shepherd Sunday,” Clemente, Ponton and McCullough are tangible signs that people are responding to the call to religious life. In addition to several young people who have begun formation with religious communities like the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Dominicans, there are currently more than 30 seminarians studying to become priests for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien is encouraging parishioners throughout the archdiocese to pray that more people respond to the call to religious life. The theme for this year's World Day of Prayer for Vocations is “Proposing Vocations in the

Local Church.” It is an appropriate message, Archbishop O’Brien said, “because it reminds each of us of our responsibility to encourage vocations – especially those to the priesthood.”

“The Holy Father invites us to take advantage of ‘every moment in the life of the Church community’ for prayer and pastoral activity that give children and young people a sense of ‘belonging to the church and of responsibility for answering the call to priesthood ... by free and informed decision,” Archbishop O’Brien said in a May 6 letter to priests.

The World Day for Prayer for Vocations won’t be a one-day event in the Baltimore archdiocese. With the support of Dr. Barbara McGraw Edmondson, superintendent of Catholic schools, Archbishop O’Brien is asking priests to arrange visits to Catholic schools on May 16. They will tour schools and encourage students to consider and pray for vocations.

The archdiocese will honor those who have already answered the call to religious life with a special May 14 celebration honoring religious men and women marking jubilees. The event will begin with a 5 p.m. Mass at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland and will be followed by a dinner at the cathedral’s parish center.

Ponton, who will be ordained in 2017, said he and other seminarians feel supported by the prayers of Catholics.

“I think there are a lot of people who are being called,” he said, “but they might not be listening to what God might be calling them to do. They are afraid they won’t be happy down the road.”

Ponton discovered that there is a great support network among brother seminarians.

“If you’re not afraid to follow (God’s) will,” Ponton said, “he will make you happy in the end.”

Clemente, who hopes to continue her work as a medical doctor and researcher after she professes her final vows as a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, is currently a postulant with her religious community. She will begin two years in the novitiate this summer. During part of her formation, she will temporarily step away from her

medical duties.

An immigrant from Sicily who first came to Maryland to work on a research project at the University of Baltimore, Clemente said becoming a religious sister with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur was a natural fit.

“The sisters are dedicated to the most needy people,” Clemente explained. “I recognized in the sisters how they lead their ministry and how they really reflect the values of their foundress. I was attracted by their simplicity, courage and charity.”

While living in Arbutus, Clemente has come to know other immigrants from around the world. She hopes her ministry as a sister will allow her to reach out to the immigrant community.

In addition to those entering active religious communities, there are also young people who are exploring contemplative ones. Elizabeth Hartley, a former parishioner of St. Philip Neri in Linthicum, professed her solemn vows earlier this year with the Carmelite Nuns of the Ancient Observance in Wahpeton, N.D. She is now known as Sister Veronica of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

For more information about the priesthood, visit www.becomeapriest.org. There are also links to information about women’s and men’s religious communities.