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**Diocese of St. Augustine seeing dramatic increase in number of men preparing for priesthood**

*'It's the work of the Holy Spirit,' says church official*

By [**David Crumpler**](http://members.jacksonville.com/authors/david-crumpler)

Lawrence Peck didn’t know when he began preparing for the priesthood in 2008 that he was part of one trend, and soon to be part of another.

The first was a steady decline in the number of men studying to be Catholic priests.

The second was a steady increase in the number of men studying to be Catholic priests — which, in the case of the Diocese of St. Augustine. could be described as dramatic.

In less than six years, the number has gone from seven to nearly 30, according to figures provided by diocese officials. That reflects a growth of more than 400 percent.

The Rev. David Ruchinski, vocation director for the diocese, which comprises 17 counties, explored explanations for the increase.

“The simple answer is that it’s the work of the Holy Spirit,” he said. “Those who are not people of faith may be looking for a natural explanation of a supernatural phenomenon. To them, I would say there is a renewed spirit of devotion among young Catholics who continue to practice their faith.”

“We hear about those who don’t stay with the church,” Ruchinski said. “We hear less in the public dialogue about the faith of those who stay.

“That group is much more devout, they’re much more zealous about religion and the practice of their faith. They’re interested in knowing what the Church teaches, the practices of prayer and devotion.”

**‘THE LORD CALLS WHEN HE WILL’**

“Honestly, I wasn’t aware of the shortage at all until I first got to the seminary [St. John Vianney in Miami], and realized how few students there were from the diocese,” Peck said.

He was speaking by telephone from the campus of St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, where he has two more semesters of graduate studies before he’ll be ordained a priest. Peck is 43, and observed that “most of the guys around here are younger.”

But “the Lord calls when he will,” said the former new media director for the St. Augustine Record.

Mac Hill, who is 21, will be a pre-theology student when he enters St. John Vianney this fall. The Bishop Kenny graduate, who is finishing his studies (he’s an economics major) at the University of Florida, did a lot of praying and soul-searching before he decided to become a priest. In fact, he went back and forth on the issue frequently from the time he was a freshman until he had almost completed his junior year in college.

Toward the end of his freshman year, Hill crashed his vehicle while driving with alcohol in his system and ended up spending the night in jail. The experience initiated what he considered the beginning of a “conversion experience,” he said in a telephone interview from Gainesville. “I was born and raised Catholic, but I wasn’t that serious about my faith. I never took ownership of it. After that night in jail, I looked around the cell at the people around me. I had a moment, sitting on my cot, when I wanted to cry, and I remember turning to the wall and making a promise to God that I would change my life and turn it around.”

Hill eventually joined two religious groups at UF, he said. One was a non-denominational Bible study, the other the Catholic Student Center (Catholic Gators), and he felt a strong pull from each of them. He left the Bible study as his commitment to Catholicism grew deeper. Though Hill began to entertain thoughts of becoming a priest, he held on to the possibility of getting married and starting a family as well.

The decisive moment came during a Catholic Student Center retreat Hill’s junior year. After a considerable amount of prayer, he decided to prepare for the priesthood.

Hill said he’s noticed the growth in the number of young people with an interest in entering the seminary.

“I would say that it’s a huge result of the Holy Spirit working in the entire American Catholic church,” he said. “It’s not just a local thing. From my own experience, I think a big reason for it is a more involved Catholic youth, whether it’s at the high school or college age. It’s kind of a revival. Is that the only cause? No, but it’s a part of it. Things like that make a difference.”

**‘EXCEPTIONAL’ INCREASE**

Ten years ago, the Diocese of St. Augustine had 12 men preparing for the priesthood. The number fluctuated only slightly for the next few years, but then, in 2008, the number dropped from 10 to seven, and remained there through the 2009-10 academic year, according to Kathy A. Martens with the Office of Vocations.

The following year, the total of seminarians grew to 9, then 18 in 2011. The total soared to 30 in 2012, was only slightly less — 29 — in 2013.

“That’s really a remarkable increase for that span of time,” Ruchinski said in a telephone interview from his office in Gainesville. “It’s quite exceptional.”

Nationally, “there has been a steady uptick of seminarians in the Catholic diocese,” Ruchinski said, so that many seminaries are at or over capacity.

“We’ve got people committed to their faith who are asking, ‘What is God calling me to do? What does God want me to do with my life?’ An increasing number are saying, ‘Oh, maybe it’s the priesthood.’ ”

“I see it because I work with students at the campus ministry at the University of Florida,” he said.

This has helped create a welcome sense of optimism within the diocese, he said.

“I can remember quite vividly conversations at the diocesan level about consolidating parishes, closing them down. A lot of people were talking in terms of changing our idea of what the church looks like. Now the picture looks so radically different that it’s not the conversation we’re having.”

“I talk about the red zone for retirements. How many priests are within five years of retiring and compare that to the number who are five years or less from ordination.”

He said he was encouraged by the abundance of seminarians.

“Next year is the first time in a long time that it’s going to tip the other way,” he said. “It changes the dynamic tremendously, and how I talk with seminarians and potential candidates. You may be asked to do other ministries outside the diocese, such as in the military or hospitals — other ministries we couldn’t consider five years ago.”

**THE PROCESS — AND COST**

The process of becoming a priest takes about nine years after high school, Ruchinski said.

That number includes graduate studies and an internship. There are three levels of seminary: philosophy, pre-theology and theology. In philosophy, or college seminary, students pursue normal college studies. Pre-theology is for those who already have a college degree but need to meet additional requirements and complete the study of philosophy before entering a major seminary. Those at the theology (graduate) level of studies have either attended college seminary or pre-theology and are now entering the final four years of preparation for the priesthood.

“That’s equivalent to the amount of study it takes to become a doctor or lawyer,” Ruchinski said. “Or the equivalent to another highly trained, very capable profession.

“There’s no free agency. Everyone who studies for the priesthood is sponsored by a diocese or religious order,” he said. “He is sent as a candidate for the Diocese of St. Augustine.” Subsequently, the decision of where a seminarian will study is made by the bishop in consultation with the vocation director.

The diocese asks college seminarians to pay for one-quarter of the cost of their education. Once a seminarian reaches the graduate level of study, the entire cost of his education is paid for by the diocese, said the Rev. Michael Houle, Episcopal Vicar for Development, Finance and Stewardship for the diocese.

All this adds up. The average cost per year is $45,000 to $50,000 for each seminarian, particularly at the graduate level, Houle said.

The diocese depends on donations from parishioners to support the development of seminarians. Houle thought back to the period “when the number of seminarians was seven or eight, and the amount of money budgeted for their education was $300,000.” Clearly, adjustments have been necessary. This year, the Bishop’s Annual Stewardship Appeal — which Houle oversees — seeks to raise $1 million for that purpose, just as it did last year, he said.

That the amount was raised in 2013 with “just one appeal” told Houle that “it’s very clear that the people want to support the education of future priests. We feel very blessed.”

**EAGER TO SERVE**

“I actually loved working at the St. Augustine Record,” said Peck, reflecting on his work prior to entering the seminary. “The newspaper is different every day, and it’s exciting every day. It was fun.”

But Peck, who is scheduled to be ordained a deacon in April, said, “I knew when I wanted to actually face the reality of it that this was something I wanted to try and I would regret it if I didn’t. I remember talking with Father Tim Lozier [pastor at Most Holy Redeemer Catholic Church on Jacksonville’s Westside]. I was kind of hoping he would laugh at me, but he said, ‘I think that would be a great idea.’ ”

Peck “went back and forth for about two years, until I came to the point that I needed to apply, to serve the Church and to serve the people of God.”

He credits his decision in part to the current and past leadership in the diocese, which may also be serving as an inspiration to others preparing for the priesthood, he said.

“It’s a beautiful experience to know that the Lord has used you to help someone else,” said Peck. “I look forward to the day that I can be a priest and serve the Lord.”

Hill, the UF student, recalled how he felt when he decided he wanted to become a priest.

“It’s kind of like a chill down your spine, but for your whole body,” he said.

“At this point, a big weight was lifted off my shoulders,” Hill said. “That peace, and the certainty that this is what God wants me to do, hasn’t left.”