

# Ordination classes tell story

Catholicism first came to California in 1769, when Spanish Franciscan missionaries led by St. Junipero Serra came from Mexico to San Diego to establish the future state's first mission. Today, California is home to 12 dioceses and 11 million Catholics – 29 percent of the state's population – who are served by 3,620 priests.

A few generations ago, Irish immigrants made up a large portion of California's priests. In the aftermath of the fall of Saigon in 1975, many Vietnamese refugees settled in California and subsequently replaced the Irish as a large source of California's priesthood vocations. Just eight years ago in the Diocese of Orange in Southern California, for example, more than half of the seminarians were Vietnamese.

Many California dioceses today have seminarians of a variety of ethnic backgrounds – predominantly Anglo, Asian and Hispanic – reflecting California's increasing ethnic diversity. Some dioceses are doing better for vocations – Orange, for example, consistently has maintained respectable numbers, and Los Angeles has improved significantly over the past six years – while others are struggling. Our Sunday Visitor contacted four California dioceses to inquire about their vocations to the priesthood.

## Cultures and vocations

The Diocese of Orange is small geographically, but it is home to 1.3 million Catholics and 64 parishes and centers. With 32 men in formation for the priesthood, it is doing better on average than most California dioceses. Yet diocesan vocations director Father John Money Penny noted that, while priesthood ordinations were keeping up with retirements, "we have room for a lot more."

While Vietnamese once dominated Orange's seminary, today seminarians are roughly one-fourth each Vietnamese, Hispanic, Korean and Anglo. The average age is 32. Most come to the seminary either directly out of college or after having pursued a secular career.

Father Money Penny said: "Our diocese has always been good at creating a culture of vocation, which starts with young men seeing happy priests in their local parishes. Once they get to know their priests, they're not afraid to ask questions about vocations. In that sense, all of us priests are vocations directors."

The diocese has a variety of programs to promote vocations, he continued, including an annual priests vs. seminarians basketball game that is open to the general public. After years of the priests dominating the competition, in the most recent game, the seminarians won. He explained: "This event helps people see priests and seminarians as normal people who like sports and through them bond with one another. It also brings an understanding of fraternity in the priesthood; we're not Lone Rangers; we have to learn to work together."

## **Need for vocations**

The Diocese of Sacramento in Northern California is home to 104 parishes that serve nearly a million Catholics. It has 19 seminarians, 60 percent of whom are Anglo and 30 percent are Hispanic. Three are on track to be ordained this year, said vocations director Father Jovito Rata, with Hispanics making up the majority of ordinations in recent years.

Sacramento's seminarians range in age from 19 to 33, with vocations being generated by college Newman Centers, parish missions and retreats. The diocese also held its first annual "Collar Cup" soccer game between priests and seminarians last summer, with a second game planned for this year.

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– **Father John Moneypenny**, Diocese of Orange, Calif.

Father Rata admits the diocese is suffering from a shortage of priests and said, “I’d encourage people to pray for vocations. Jesus is the true vocations director; our role is just to plant a seed.”

The Diocese of San Jose is struggling even more for vocations, with only seven seminarians in a diocese of 600,000 Catholics and 54 parishes. They’re planning on ordaining three new priests this year, and another two the following year.

Four of their seven seminarians are of Filipino descent, including three born in the Philippines. One seminarian is Vietnamese-American, another from Mexico and the seventh from Cameroon. The average age of the seven is 32. Father Joseph Kim, director of vocations and seminarians, admits that the number of seminarians in San Jose is down, and noted that the diocese is working on a promotion plan to improve recruitment. “We have to ordain 45 guys in the next 14 years just to cover retiring priests. We’re aware of the crisis and are making a fully concerted effort to improve the situation,” he said.

He agrees that prayer and positive parish priest role models are keys to a healthy vocations program.

“My work is working with priests to encourage them to preach more on vocations and share their own stories, as well as working with families to encourage vocations,” Father Kim said.

The diocese is home to the Silicon Valley and many wealthy, successful families, he said, but many parents of these families discourage their children from considering priesthood and religious life. “Parents – and mothers specifically – are the biggest obstacles. Parents have misconceptions about the

life of a priest, not believing that we are happy, joyful people who have meaningful lives.”

## **‘Number one concern’**

The Diocese of Fresno in central California is large both geographically and in the size of the Catholic population, with 1.2 million Catholics who attend 89 parishes and 45 missions. The diocese has 20 seminarians, and one ordination to the priesthood scheduled for this year. The following two years, however, will have no ordinations to the priesthood.

Sixteen of the 20 seminarians are Hispanic, and the remaining four include two Anglos, one Filipino and an African. The average age of the seminarians is the early 30s, although one seminarian is 20 and another 45. They typically come to the seminary with a few years of college and secular work experience.

Father Dan Avila, vocations director, said that at a recent meeting of priests, vocations to the priesthood “was our No. 1 concern. How can clergy and laity encourage vocations? We have to help young men hear the call.”

The diocese offers similar programs to promote vocations as other California dioceses, he said, and also enlists the aid of groups such as the Knights of Columbus and Serra Club to provide prayer and financial support.

While it is God who calls the young men, Father Avila said, “We need to be doing what we can to help them hear the call.”

*Jim Graves writes from California.*