

Students encourage seminarians with letters

In the late 1990s, John Tirado could see the writing on the wall. Catholic schools and churches in the United States were either closing or being consolidated, and the priesthood wasn't growing.

"We had a large population of priests growing old and no seminarians to take their place," said Tirado, a Knight of Columbus in the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey. "Something needed to be done."

Tirado explained that he has always viewed the Catholic priesthood as something noble and has the upmost respect for seminarians. "Seminarians are guys who are in their early 20s and aren't sure what they are getting into. However, they've heard God calling and have stepped out in faith. They need our support," he said.

With that in mind, Tirado explained that he was inspired by God to start the Seminarian Letter Project to help the Catholic Church grow by supporting vocations.

"The way it works is simple," he said. "Catholic schools, CCD programs or parish youth groups are sent a list of seminarians and asked to write a letter of support to each of them." The program is an apostolate of the New Jersey State Council of the Knights of Columbus. "As the chairman of the project, I request local New Jersey Knights Councils to promote the project in their local dioceses," he said.

Powerful words

Tirado told Our Sunday Visitor that there are many ways to support seminarians, but he has witnessed the power of a handwritten letter to a young man in formation.

“Words have power,” Tirado said. “Yes, a letter of support from your parish’s Rosary group is wonderful, but words of encouragement from an 8-year-old or an eighth-grader have special meaning.”

Elsie Tedeski would agree. The principal at Holy Angels grade school in Woodbury, New Jersey, said that her students look forward to participating in the letter-writing project every year.

“It just amazes year after year at the depth and insight the students here put into it,” she said. “We have our eighth-grade students team up with their kindergarten ‘prayer partners’ and work together on this. The stuff they come up with is really touching.”

She added that the eighth-graders will write the letter, and the kindergarten students will add the artwork.

“Often the seminarians will write back to our students thanking them or answering questions that our students might have had,” the principal noted.

Two-fold blessing

The vocations director for the Diocese of Camden, Father Michael Romano, is also a firm believer in Tirado’s efforts. Like Tedeski, Father Romano told OSV that the letter-writing project has been a blessing on several levels.

He said, “First, it simply raises awareness among the children in our diocese about vocations. It helps them see that the priests of the future come from their own area, and it plants a seed that God may be calling them. Second, it gives our seminarians a connection with home as we do not have a seminary in our diocese. Third, it reminds our seminarians that the people of the diocese are praying for them and their continued discernment.”

Peter Gallagher, a second-year theology student from the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey, has definitely been encouraged by these letters. He related that he recently received a letter from a fourth-grade student at St. Andrew's religious-ed program in Gibbsboro, New Jersey.

"He listed beautiful things a priest can do," explained Gallagher. "But what really struck me was his petition to me that I pray for his mom undergoing chemotherapy. How could one resist the petition of a child who writes a handwritten letter asking you to pray for his suffering mom? The letter has been on my windowsill since I got it as a reminder to pray."

Lasting fruits

In 2017, Tirado was honored at the National Catholic Education Association's annual convention for his efforts to nurture the mission of Catholic education through his innovative approach.

Since Tirado began the Seminarian Letter Project almost 20 years ago, letters have been sent mainly from the dioceses of New Jersey to students around the globe. Among the seminaries included in the program have been the Pontifical North American College in Rome; St. John's Seminary in Guilford, England; St. Mary's Seminary, Houston Texas; and Conception Seminary in Missouri.

But he is not resting on his laurels. He knows there is still much work to do. In particular, he wants this project to grow beyond New Jersey.

"This is a movement without a lot of rules or regulations," Tirado said. "Any school or religious-ed teacher can go to their office of vocations and get a list of seminarians and begin to write. With a big envelope you could send out 100 letters for less than five dollars."

He added that the effects of these letters often last longer than just the day they are first opened. "I have heard from

ordained priests who continue to be inspired from the letters they receive many years ago.”

Eddie O'Neill writes from Michigan.