

# **New priests ready to heal a wounded Church**

The woman behind the register at the coffee shop barely looked at Deacon Charles “Gino” Galley as he ordered his coffee after Mass one Sunday morning.

Deacon Galley, 32, was wearing his clericals after having just been ordained to the transitional diaconate for the Diocese of San Bernardino, California. The cashier gave him a disgusted look of disapproval and did not say one word to him during the transaction.

“After placing my order, I walked away from the counter and thought, ‘Golly, Gino, what did you sign up for?’” said Deacon Galley, who remembers waiting for his coffee when a man approached him a few minutes later, shook his hand and asked for his prayers.

“One minute I was hated, and the next minute I was a sign of hope,” Deacon Galley told Our Sunday Visitor in a telephone interview a few days before he was scheduled to be ordained a priest on May 18.

“While you’re in seminary, you’re hitting the books. You’re in the rigorous seminary schedule day in and day out and you don’t have time to think about the reality that, ‘Hey, I’m going to be a priest some day,’” said Deacon Galley, who is one of 481 men this year who are being ordained to the Catholic priesthood in the United States.

## **Under cloud of abuse crisis**

According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, the average man entering the priesthood this year is a 33-year-old cradle Catholic who has a college degree and had a full-time job before entering the

seminary.

The new priests have another thing in common: They spent their last year of formation under the dark cloud of the clergy sex abuse scandal.

“We had to come together as brothers in formation. We prayed with each other and just took it one day at a time, keeping the focus on our own formation and pursuing what the Lord was calling us to,” said Deacon Brendan Rowley, 34, who will be ordained this year as a priest for the Diocese of Providence, Rhode Island.

The clergy sex abuse crisis broke out again last summer, just before the current formation year began, with revelations that former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick had sexually abused minors and seminarians for several decades. Last August, a Pennsylvania grand jury reported that 301 priests in that state had sexually abused more than 1,000 minors over a 70-year period.

Those scandals prompted dozens of dioceses to release lists of credibly accused priests, motivated state attorneys general to launch their investigations and generated new calls for accountability measures for bishops. Meanwhile, seminarians found themselves preparing for a priesthood that once again was under suspicion from the wider culture and its very nature questioned by those in and outside the Church.

But several men who are being ordained priests or transitional deacons this year in the U.S. told OSV that the crisis has not discouraged them. The scandals appear to be strengthening their resolve to become the priests that God is calling them to be.

“If anything, it’s motivation,” Deacon Rowley said. “The Church needs more holy priests, priests who are dedicated to serving the Lord and laying their life down for others. We’re in a tough spot right now, but it only makes it more necessary

for us to do what needs to be done.”

## Healing the Church

Deacon David Roman, 34, will be ordained a priest for the Diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut, on June 1. He told OSV that the scandals have strengthened his fellow seminarians' desire “to be men of courageous virtue.”



A priest puts his hands on the head of newly ordained priest during an ordination Mass celebrated by Pope Francis at the Vatican on May 12. CNS photo by Yara Nardi, Reuters

“In speaking to my brother seminarians I got the sense that there was justifiable anger and dismay with the severe violation of trust and harm that so many have endured at the hands of wayward priests and bishops,” Deacon Roman said.

The new priests told OSV that their seminary rectors and faculty staff members over the past year had frank discussions with them about the scandals. Many encouraged the seminarians to ask questions or to express their thoughts and concerns about the crisis and the way forward.

“We want, like everyone else, for there to be no more hiding, no more secrets, to put it all out on the table,” said Deacon Patrick May, 31, who will be ordained a priest for the Diocese of Savannah, Georgia, on June 1.

“Yes, all this does hurt the Church’s public image, but the spiritual heart of the Church needs this to move forward, for all this to just come out and be purified so we can move forward and help those people who have been hurt by this,” Deacon May told OSV.

Rather than discouraging him from the priesthood, Deacon May said the crisis actually encourages him “to invest more in the priesthood through my own spiritual life, to be the best priest I can be and that the People of God deserve.”

Deacon Matthew Ikechukwu Nwafor, 38, who was ordained a transitional deacon for the Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina, on April 27, told OSV that while what is happening in the Church is “painful and discouraging,” it motivates him to continue on his path to priestly ordination.

“I feel more energized to go out and what I can do to contribute to healing in the Church and to wipe the face of the suffering Jesus,” said Deacon Nwafor, a native of Nigeria who immigrated to the United States while pursuing his graduate studies.

## **Being ‘men of prayer’**

Deacon Gino Wilcox, 44, who will be ordained a priest for the Diocese of Las Cruces, New Mexico, on May 24, said he is more determined than ever to be a good priest, and added that he

prays for sex abuse survivors.

“I believed then, and I believe now, wholeheartedly, that the priesthood is my vocation,” Deacon Wilcox said. “The recent scandals have reaffirmed my resolve that was already there. In this climate, my goal is to be formed well and virtuous, so that I may serve the People of God in love and sacrifice.”

On June 1, Deacon Daniel Niezer, 26, was set to be ordained a priest for the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana. He said the scandals do not discourage him, because people still need Christ in their lives and priests who can bring the Lord to his people through the sacraments.

“Knowing that Christ is still calling me to be a priest, that there is still a lot of really good and beautiful work that can be done through priests, is a big motivation for me to really step up to the plate, and really answer the call that God has given me,” Deacon Niezer said.

Deacon Galley, from the Diocese of San Bernardino, added that he learned through his seminary formation that virtually every priest who falls into serious sin has in some way lost touch with his relationship with God through prayer.

“We are done with watered-down Catholicism,” Deacon Galley said.

“We are done with watered-down spirituality. ... We want to embrace the hard life. We recognize, more than ever, that we have to be men of prayer.”

Deacon George Staley, 26, who will be ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of St. Louis on May 25, told OSV that his seminary faculty leaders encouraged open and candid discussions about the sex abuse scandals. They even invited a clergy sex abuse survivor to address the seminarians and share his harrowing faith journey. Deacon Staley described that moment as powerful.

“Overall, there was a sense of hope in all that we had talked about,” Deacon Staley said. “But there was also a real sense of anger as well at what had happened, and a desire that justice be done properly.”

Despite the difficulties of the recent scandals, Deacon Staley said he still feels called by Jesus Christ to know and follow Him by serving the Church as a good, holy priest: “As messy as it can all be sometimes, I’m following the one I love.”

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*