News
Friars at Mass

Augustinian Fr. John Lydon celebrates daily Mass at the Augustinian theologate chapel in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood May 23, while Brother Nicholas Anderson serves as acolyte. Lydon, the seminarians' formation director, is a college classmate and longtime friend of Pope Leo XIV's from their missionary days in Peru. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)



by OSV News

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The Augustinian order has been in the spotlight since May 8, the day one of its own was elected pope. Interest in Pope Leo XIV, the first pope from the United States, has been steady, and so have the inquiries into joining the U.S. provinces of the men's Order of St. Augustine.

Augustinian Fr. Jeremy Hiers of the Province of St. Thomas of Villanova on the East Coast said in the weeks since then-Cardinal Robert Prevost became pope, the office of vocations for the Midwest and East Coast counted 200-plus inquiries that have passed the first level of screening.

"Just yesterday, I had three new ones," Hiers said. "I'm used to getting maybe three in three months."

The vocations director for the Midwest province, Augustinian Fr. Tom McCarthy, said the order's website for inquiries about joining had 39,000 hits in the first week since

the pope's election.

"We have never had volume like this," said McCarthy, a vocations director of 15 years. "A lot of that is people trying to find out who the Augustinians are and what we do."

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For Br. Nicholas Anderson, a first-year seminarian from Villanova Province, many of those Augustinian questions were answered during a rehearsal dinner for his brother's wedding, in 2019, when he had already been pondering religious life and the priesthood. He said he was truly seeking a sense of community with others whom he now says have helped him try to "live in harmony and mutual love" despite very distinct differences.

He told OSV News he "was in the right place at the right time," having gone to an Augustinian prep high school and seeing one of its friars at the rehearsal. In another sign, he visited an elementary school in a Philadelphia suburb, which though not Augustinian, was attached to a church whose stained-glass window depicted a scene from St. Augustine's life.

"I really grew up in Augustine's shadow," said Brother Nicholas, 31, a former bilingual client services trainer at a top-three fund manager.

After he discerned with two other orders, he returned to the Augustinians.

"They welcomed me, and then welcomed me back. But all throughout, they were challenging me. They were inviting me to examine my motives for doing things. Not only did they not … take advantage, they helped. And whatever that capacity for patience and attentiveness and prudence is, I wanted to tap into it. And here I am three years later," he said while sitting in the cozy consultation room of the theologate friary in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood.

Br. Nicholas Anderson

Br. Nicholas Anderson, an Augustinian seminarian, serves as acolyte during Mass at the Augustinian theologate chapel in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood May 23. (OSV News/Simone Orendain)

When white smoke was first reported rising from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, news footage shows Brother Nicholas in a viewing room across the street at Catholic Theological Union. The pope went there in the late '70s to early '80s. Faces flushed with excitement, Brother Nicholas and his brothers watched with eyes wide open and mouths agape as Prevost's name was slowly announced in Latin.

But even with all the hype surrounding Pope Leo and his influence on potential friar vocations, McCarthy said he would not want the vocations office to start cutting corners just to get more potential friars. Like other orders, its numbers have dwindled due to its aging population, combined with an ongoing worldwide decline in interest in the priesthood and religious life. He said that there are about 2,400 friars worldwide, and he did not anticipate any change in how the order discerns a candidate is the right fit.

After a first screening, the vocations directors have initial conversations with the person, answering general questions and then assess whether to set a longer meeting over a meal. McCarthy said these long lunches or dinners cover many more questions.

"Three hours, three and a half hours because it's something about talking to someone on the phone, but when you're talking to someone face-to-face, then you just see the ease of the conversation. That's the way we always do it. It's very Augustinian, you know, getting to know the person one-on-one," he said.

What usually follows is an invitation to stay a few days with the Augustinians, to experience their charisms of unity, truth and love by praying with them, learning about their various ministries and gaining a sense of their way of being community. That's something the order and its namesake St. Augustine, a doctor of the church, have placed very strong emphasis on.

"This is our ideal and we hold it as a flag, a banner in front of us to challenge ourselves with it," said Brother David Marshall, who has lived within the community for almost four years. He said he "love(s) being an Augustinian" and has just completed a master's in pastoral studies at CTU in the spring.

Brother David, 28, entered the Augustinians in 2021 after discerning for three years, during which he finished his bachelor of arts degree in music at the University of Rochester, New York, and then pursued a master's in sacred music at the University

of Notre Dame in Indiana. Since he started discerning, Brother David said he has felt a very strong call to brotherhood. He said it solidified after his first profession of simple vows, which he is scheduled to make a third time in August.

"Now that I'm in vowed life, it feels like that just affirms the close relationship that I've felt like I've had with Christ, that Christ was forming with me over the years," he said. "Like God was really making me for himself. Even if I've been in other relationships, none of them compares to my relationship with Christ, honestly."

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For Brother Miguel Antonio Moreno of Live Oak, California, the road to priestly formation was long and winding and so was the way back to God. While serving in the Air Force as a young adult, he said he was starting to feel the strain of being distant from the faith.

In 2009, after returning to church and becoming heavily involved in multiple ministries, flying high in pharmaceutical sales, the MBA holder said it all still felt "not enough." So he entered San Diego's diocesan seminary, which, he said, after a year, was not the right fit. Disappointed and back in pharmaceuticals, Brother Miguel Antonio discerned with a religious order he stayed with for a number of years.

Then, months from professing final vows, Brother Miguel Antonio's former diocesan classmate, now an Augustinian priest, asked whether he wanted to consider the Augustinians. Much like Brother Nicholas' Augustinian story, a series of common connections and other incidents, led him to the pre-novitiate in San Diego in 2021.

Today, Brother Miguel Antonio, also a 2025 CTU graduate, said he has a long list of what he likes about being in an Augustinian community. He said he especially appreciates prayer, meals and everyday chores together. Also, wearing the black habit as a sign of community.

"People smile when they see us in our habit, especially when there's two or three of us," he said.