News



Priests and bishops bless the 12 newly ordained priests during Mass at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Arlington, Va., on June 7. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)

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They are a day away from becoming Catholic priests, rehearsing for their ordination Mass under the gothic cathedral's arches.

It's a balmy Friday afternoon in June, and they are practicing where to stand, when to kneel. The weekend's rituals will be the culmination of six years of seminary and a lifetime of discernment.

There are so many of them — more than their diocese has ordained at one time in nearly 30 years — that it's a challenge to fit the whole group in front of the altar.

Their bishop likes to call them "the 12." Like the 12 apostles of Jesus, their number has become a mantra and a prayer. It offers hope there can still be joy and renewal in a church riven by division, crises and abuse.

Among the group there are engineers, a tech company founder and two future military chaplains. They range in age from 28 to 56. Most are U.S.-born, but some trace their roots to faraway countries with a strong Catholic presence: Cameroon, Mexico, Peru, Haiti.

They are entering the priesthood at an exciting time, just as the first U.S.-born pope begins his papacy. Yet, there remains an acute shortage of clergy like them. In the U.S., the number of priests has declined by more than 40% since 1970, according to CARA, a research center affiliated with Georgetown University.

During their final year of seminary, these 12 men have served as transitional deacons, offering baptisms, homilies and promising to live in obedience and celibacy. "We've already made the promises that are, I guess, 'the scariest,' " said Ricky Malebranche, one of the ordinands.

Soon they will be entrusted with more sacraments. As ordained priests, they will work at parishes around northern Virginia, with the ability to consecrate the Eucharist, hear confessions and anoint the sick.



Fr. Alfredo Tuesta, right, gives his first blessing as a newly ordained priest to Bishop Michael Burbidge, who leads the Diocese of Arlington, at the Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Arlington, Va., on June 7. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)

For now, they shuffle side to side until they can fit in a row. Carefully they lie down to practice the act of prostration — arguably the most dramatic moment during an ordination ceremony. Elbows bent, hands cradling their heads, the men press their faces to the cold, marble floor.

It's a position of vulnerability that signals absolute surrender.

"We're laying before the Lord," Mike Sampson, an ordinand, explained before the rehearsal. "We're laying our lives down."

Searching for something more

While neighboring dioceses have shuttered parishes and face dire budget shortfalls, the Diocese of Arlington is opening new churches. Its finances are solid.

This year's class of new priests is the second largest in the diocese's 50-year history. The reasons behind that success "are a little bit mysterious," said Fr. Michael Isenberg, the diocese's outgoing vocations director.

He points to one factor helping the recruiting pool: vibrant parishes, full of young professionals drawn to jobs around Washington, D.C.



Ricky Malebranche, who was ordained as a priest June 7, holds the hand of 9-month-old Andres Roman Marquez after baptizing him at St. Louis Catholic Church in Alexandria, Va., May 24. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

Sampson, 42, was a government lawyer and raised a Protestant before he was baptized as a Catholic in 2013. Six years later, he enrolled in seminary to become a priest.

Fr. Tim Banach, 31, worked as a consultant in the same office complex as Sampson. "I enjoyed the work I was doing, but there was something more that I desired."

"I had the dream job," said Fr. Alfredo Tuesta, 40, who earned a doctorate in engineering and was working at the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory when he felt called to the priesthood. "I had the job that I had trained many years to achieve — and it wasn't enough."

At a Sunday family dinner two weeks before ordination, Malebranche's father, Jacques, talked up these "12 great guys."

"This kid already had two master's degrees," he said, pointing to his son Ricky, 37, who worked as a counselor and coach at a Catholic high school before seminary.

"They had good lives. When they say they received a call, they mean it," he said. "They gave up a lot, and this is not easy."

A higher barrier to entry

Prospective priests undergo a rigorous screening process.

"This is going to sound crazy, but they're normal," said Fr. Donald Planty, who mentored several of this year's ordinands. "They can talk to anyone."



Fr. Donald Planty, left, assists Fr. Tim Banach with a microphone before Banach's first Mass at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church in Arlington, Va., on June 8. (AP/Jessie Wardarski)

In the wake of the clergy sex-abuse crisis, there is a greater emphasis on applicants' psychological health and emotional well-being. They go before an admissions board that includes women and laypeople, and as ordinands, meet with abuse survivors.

They ultimately answer to Bishop Michael Burbidge, the diocese's avuncular prelate.

"A thing that has changed for the positive in the church is that bishops really know their men," said Burbidge, who calls, texts and meets with seminarians regularly. "When I was in seminary, there was no expectation that you would know the bishop."

Politically and theologically, young U.S. priests are more likely to identify as conservative or moderate than their clerical elders who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, according to a 2023 report from The Catholic Project at Catholic University of America.

For these men in Virginia, the rightward tilt of the U.S. Catholic Church is not a deciding factor in their priesthoods. They have pledged, though, to uphold the church's teachings, which remain conservative on issues such as gender identity, sexual orientation, contraception and abortion.

"I look at the young adults in our parishes, growing up in a world where in many ways the sacred has been removed," Burbidge said. "They're looking for something more. 'Give me beauty. Give me truth. Give me clarity.' I see that in young adults in our church, and these men are products of that."

The sacrifices of priestly life

For many of the men, priesthood means forgoing dreams of an ordinary family life.

"I thought I was going to be a great dad and have a wonderful family," Malebranche recalled. "And I was like, 'Lord, why would you not want that for me?' "



Alfredo Tuesta opens the door to the sacristy after a Mass at St. James Catholic Church, Falls Church, Va., on May 24. He was ordained as a priest June 7. (AP/Luis Andres Henao)

For many, there's a grieving process in letting go of that vision, even for deeply Catholic families.

"Every parent wants grandkids," said Banach, whose career change initially surprised his supportive Catholic parents. Priests give up biological children, he said, but are privileged to raise "spiritual children."

His fellow ordinand Malebranche ministers to families out of what he calls a "deep love of my own for a family."

Two weeks before ordination, Malebranche channeled that love into a baptism conducted in Spanish, the parents' native tongue.

He was nervous beforehand. A gregarious, gifted speaker, he is less confident in Spanish — though it's necessary in a diocese where nearly half the parishioners are

Latino.

"It was a beautiful ceremony," Gloria Marquez told him after, beaming and holding her 9-month-old. She said she and her husband had tried for nearly 20 years to have a baby.

Malebranche teared up, grateful to be part of the longed-for moment.

He wants the Catholic Church to be welcoming, especially for those who have been hurt. "I really just want to make Catholicism warm," he said.

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Like all the ordinands, he is very aware that in his clerical garb, he represents the church and the presence of Jesus.

"I have to be on every time I'm in this collar," Malebranche said. "That is a fitting weight for the gift of the priesthood, but it is a weight nonetheless."

A new chapter

Ordination-day morning had the nervous energy of a wedding, an apt parallel for the impending commitment and pageantry. Anxious parents took their places in pews alongside friends and family who traveled from around the world to witness the ceremony.

The evening would bring receptions in honor of the new priests, who would then have two weeks off before their new ministry assignments began.

Sampson was going to Italy with a priest friend. Banach was hiking part of the Appalachian Trail with a small kit for the Eucharist in his pack. Tuesta was flying to Lima, Peru, his birthplace, to celebrate with family.

Malebranche planned to visit loved ones in his native Virginia. "I'm kind of looking to show off," he said, laughing. "I'll have my confessional stole on me at all times."

When their ordination Mass got underway, it was standing room only, with more than 1,200 well-wishers crowded into the cathedral.

As part of the three-hour service, nearly 200 priests lined up to embrace and welcome into the fold their new brothers, now cloaked in ivory and blue robes.

At the close of Mass, they walked down the aisle to cheers and applause, and the 12 priests were sent out, like the apostles who had come before them.