

Soldiers set sights on priesthood

Judy Gross | May. 24, 2011

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Chris Christensen

The Archdiocese for the Military Services, the church structure that serves the men and women of the U.S. armed services, has seen a dramatic increase in the number of soldiers and former soldiers who want to serve as military chaplains.

Currently, military chaplains serve 1.5 million Catholics in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, at 220 military installations in 29 countries, and in 153 Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities. A report by the military services archdiocese lists 285 priests on loan and on active duty as chaplains.

Typically, the military services archdiocese has four to six men who after completing military service enter the seminary with the idea of becoming military chaplains. In the last two years, this number has risen to 30. (Two have since left.)

The 2011 cohort is studying in 18 different seminaries around the country. The majority are commissioned officers with combat zone experience. The two highest-ranking seminarians are Army Capt. Daniel Czajak and Marine Capt. William Appel, a helicopter pilot. Six other seminarians have gone through the military services archdiocese's vocations office and have entered dioceses and religious orders but will not become chaplains.

Three years ago, the Archdiocese for the Military Services appointed its first-ever national vocations director, Fr. John McLaughlin. He speaks admiringly of these men.

"After being on the front lines and understanding self-sacrifice and a life of service and discipline, these men thought about their lives after serving their country and chose to give their lives serving the people of God," he said.

"Seminarians must have their diocesan bishop's or religious superior's permission to serve with the [the military services archdiocese] and not all give it," he said.

Enough do to keep him constantly on the road visiting future priests, bringing them together and supporting their journey toward ordination. The military archdiocese cosponsors the seminarians planning to serve as chaplains.

McLaughlin recently held a retreat for women considering joining a religious order, even though there is no place in the military chaplaincy for women religious.

A statement on the military archdiocese's "Protectors of the Faith" Web site reads, "Christ needs priests who are mature, virile, and capable of cultivating an authentic paternity."

No newly ordained priest goes directly into the military, but is required to spend three years in a parish first. McLaughlin said, "That way, the military doesn't have to train them" as priests. Chaplains do have to meet the military criteria of physical fitness and an understanding of the way the military works. The newly ordained priest heading for the chaplaincy becomes a commissioned military officer.

"Most of the seminarians have military service, ROTC, or have come from military families," McLaughlin said, adding, "I can only make contact with those young men if they have permission from their bishops. I don't recruit them."

Reading their thumbnail biographies on the Protectors of the Faith Web site, one common factor among the seminarians is their great regard for the late Pope John Paul II. How this devotion plays out in a viewpoint in their chaplaincy, remains to be seen; however, all chaplains must be willing to minister to those of every faith tradition, as well as Catholics, wherever they serve.

Seminarian Christopher Christensen, a former Navy surface warfare officer aboard the U.S.S. Blue Ridge, is studying for the Arlington, Va., diocese.

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"I knew several chaplains while I was in, and they did influence my decision to apply for the seminary," he said. "I had already been thinking about the priesthood, but the chaplains did influence me towards the Chaplain Corps." Christensen said he had no problem getting permission from his bishop to become a chaplain. His ability to speak Japanese will serve him well if he is sent to the Pacific Rim after ordination.

"I had attended a vocations retreat sponsored by the Archdiocese for the Military Services in Seoul, Korea, in December 2006. While there, it hit me that the military needs priests," Christensen said. "All three services are hurting for priests, and it is the people of God who suffer for it."

As part of their preparation, the seminarians have summer training with active chaplains in order to "witness the life of a chaplain," McLaughlin added.

Joseph Block is a West Point graduate who served in Iraq. A native of Wisconsin, Block will be ordained for the La Crosse diocese before he becomes an active Army chaplain.

Before being deployed to Iraq, he was stationed in Hawaii, where a strong conversion experience led him to "embrace my Catholic faith."

"As I began to dive into the faith, I began to feel the call to priesthood," Block said. He found a spiritual advisor, Fr. (Col.) Vincent Inghilterra, who mentored Block during his discernment.

It was then that he had a common military experience. "After deciding I wanted to become a chaplain," he explained, "the Army paperwork took quite a while."

[Judy Gross writes from Tallahassee, Fla.]