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Former Anglican priests begin formation to be ordained Catholic priests

by Jonah Dycus by Catholic News Service

HOUSTON -- Forty-two former Anglican priests from across the country have officially begun their training to become Catholic priests.

It was both a long-awaited milestone and the beginning of a new journey as they gathered in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston for the first formation weekend in late January at St. Mary Seminary and Our Lady of Walsingham Church in Houston.

The group included the wives of the Catholic clergy-in-training, so there was a total of 76 participants.

More than 100 former Anglican priests have applied to become Catholic priests for the U.S. Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter. To date, 42 have been accepted into the program.

The application process for each candidate included a criminal background check, psychological evaluation and recommendations from the Catholic bishop where he lives and from his Anglican ecclesiastical authority, if possible.

Based in Houston, the ordinariate is similar to a diocese, but national in scope. It is the first U.S. ordinariate established by the Vatican earlier this year to facilitate and shepherd communities of former Anglicans wishing to join the Catholic faith while retaining elements of their Anglican heritage and traditions.

Our Lady of Walsingham serves as the principal church. St. Mary Seminary is housing the nine-month program of formation.

On Feb. 12, a Mass of Institution also officially inaugurated the ordinariate. At the same time, Father Jeffrey N. Steenson received the title of "monsignor" and officially became its head.

Seminarians currently enrolled at St. Mary's served as hosts during the opening day of the first formation weekend in January.

"I think the seminarians at St. Mary understand how significant this is and they have been incredible," Msgr. Steenson told the Texas Catholic Herald, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. "They are so energized about this -- they know it is historical."

He credit the "extraordinary efforts and help" and "time and resources" of the archdiocese and Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo with bringing about "exactly what Pope Benedict hoped for -- the close relationship with the local diocese and the new ordinariate."

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Topics covered during the first formation weekend included "The Life and Work of the Catholic Priest," "Pope Benedict's Vision of the Anglican Ordinariate," and a keynote address and conversation with Marcus Grodi of the "Journey Home" program on the Eternal Word Television Network.

More formation training comes in the spring, covering subjects such as "The Petrine Ministry and Catholic Ecclesiology," "Catechesis and the Stewardship of the Catholic Tradition" and "The Catholic Approach to Scripture."

There also will be sessions on marriage; baptism/initiation; anointing of the sick; and the sacrament of reconciliation and instruction on the culture of the Catholic Church -- from priestly manners to the ecclesial movements. Formation will conclude with individual theological assessments.

Several of those in formation lead Anglican-use Catholic communities throughout the country.

"This is something we have all been waiting for since 2009, and now in 2012, we are not just hearing about it but living it," Randy Sly of Potomac Falls, Va., said of formation. "It was just astounding to look around the room and realize that all of us have been brought together by the Lord for this very special time."

Seminarian Charles Hough III of Granbury, Texas, echoed that sentiment.

"I'd been an Episcopal priest for over 30 years and many of us started together, ended in the Episcopal Church together and are now starting again together, moving into the fullness of the church," he said. "It is an incredible time for us. We have worked so hard and this is the culmination of a long journey, but it is the beginning of a new era for all of us to be in union with the see of Peter."

Sly and his wife, Sandy, have been Catholics since 2006. Sandy Sly recognized the "novelty" of meeting the other wives of seminarians but said their bond was certainly profound.

"It has been wonderful to meet other wives who are also on this journey, just to see that they are pouring their lives out for the Lord, like our husbands are," she said. "We want to be the best support for our husbands and for whatever we can do in ministry. We are just taking it one day at a time."

Mark Lewis, a former Anglican priest, was "overwhelmed" and visibly moved as he looked around a room filled with others who have shared the long trek with him. Lewis is administrator of St. Luke's Catholic Ordinariate Community in Bladensburg, Md. The community was received into the Catholic Church last October.

Lewis said a feeling of comfort and excitement came over him during vespers in the chapel at St. Mary Seminary.

"I was reflecting (on) when I was in seminary and how we would do the same type of liturgy," he said, "and I was thinking 'I am home. I am really home.'"

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