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Newly ordained priests across country hail from variety of backgrounds

by Catholic News Service

Washington — After he ordained six new priests for the archdiocese of Washington on Saturday, Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl encouraged them to take up the call of the new evangelization and help transform the world.

"This is the age of the new evangelization," the cardinal said during an ordination Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, describing the call for Catholics to renew their faith, grow more confident in its truth, and share the good news of Christ with others. "This is the opportunity of our age. This is the call of our moment."

At the Mass, Wuerl ordained Fathers Francisco Aguirre, Rafael Barbieri, Mark Cusick, Shaun Foggo, Scott Holmer and Samuel Plummer.

The cardinal noted that many in today's culture feel no need for God. "Living the faith and sharing the excitement of our experience of the Lord brings us into conflict and even contrast with the mentality and culture of our day," he said, encouraging the new priests to bring Christ's truth to their people, and not yield to the temptation of seeking popular approval through political correctness.

"These are the challenges you will face as the heralds of the new evangelization and agents of the Holy Spirit, working to transform this world so it really is a manifestation of God's kingdom," Wuerl said.

At end of the two and one-half hour Mass, the new priests stood together before the altar and offered their first blessings to the thousands of people there, and then applause cascaded through the shrine as they processed down the center aisle. The cardinal thanked the new priests' family members, friends, and the priests who mentored them, and noted that, "No one comes to ordination alone."

In the archdiocese of New Orleans, five men were ordained June 1 at St. Louis Cathedral. The newly ordained were prompted to "be on fire for the Lord."

As newly ordained Fathers Colin Braud, Travis Clark, Gary Copping, Daniel Green and Jonathan Hemelt joined New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond around the altar for the eucharistic prayer, the cathedral's smoke alarm, triggered by the thick cloud of incense, blared.

Undaunted, the archbishop continued with the preface, and the sound stopped after about 30 seconds and a few hastily opened doors. But before the final blessing, Aymond told the standing-room-only congregation that the smoke alarm was a teachable moment.

"I think this was the first time we've ever had a fire drill during an ordination," he said, eliciting laughter from the congregation. "Some of you may think it was because of the incense, but I think it's because the newly ordained are just on fire for the Lord. In fact, I think we should have a fire drill at every ordination."

Calling it "a joyful and glorious day in the life of the church," Aymond said the five new priests each had become aware of his priestly vocation in a different way, but each had discerned over the previous year of service as a deacon that God was calling him in a profound way.

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"From the depths of their hearts, they have heard God's call, 'Come, follow me,'" the archbishop said, noting that the vocational call, in many ways, is "a mystery." He added that it took the love and support of family and friends to nurture that call.

The rite of ordination configures the newly ordained to "Christ the priest," Aymond said. "You will become Christ the priest," he said. "You will act and you will speak in the name of Christ. You will preside over the Eucharist, and through prayer the bread and wine will become Christ, and you will say: 'This is my body; this is my blood.'"

The new priests said they were awestruck by their ordination.

"It's really just an amazing experience," Hemelt said. "I'm so thankful for all of the people who have been there and supported us over these years. It's just really indescribable. I'm so happy to have been called by the Lord and so humbled by that call, and I look forward to getting to work, as the archbishop said.

"I want to save souls. That's it. If I can do that, a couple of times, I'll be happy," he told the *Clarion Herald*, archdiocesan newspaper of New Orleans.

Approximately 500 men were ordained Catholic priests this year in the United States. They were all ages and from all backgrounds. Many were born in the United States; others were from Columbia, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Poland, Germany, Cuba, Haiti, El Salvador and Mexico.

In the diocese of Raleigh, N.C., Bishop Michael Burbidge ordained Fathers Nicholas Cottrill, Thomas

Duggan and Ryan Elder June 1 at St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Cary.

"What a blessed day for the church and our diocese," Burbidge said at the beginning of his homily, "as these three men, your sons, brothers, family members and friends, are about to be ordained priests."

In the archdiocese of Seattle, 58-year-old Fr. Mark Kiszelewski was ordained June 8 by Archbishop J. Peter Sartain at St. James Cathedral. The new priest, who has two grown sons from a marriage that was annulled in 2001, said he felt "a continued desire ... to serve God and to serve his church as much as I could."

His sons, Alex and Andrew, now 24 and 21, respectively, are supportive and excited about their dad being a priest.

And Kiszelewski believes his personal history, while unusual for a priest, will be a great asset in his priesthood, helping him relate to the experiences and struggles of his parishioners.

"I've been there," he told *The Progress*, archdiocesan newspaper of Seattle. "I know what it's like to be struggling with a teenager who's rebellious ... I've experienced a lot of the good and a lot of the tough things, but you get through it. ..."

"All those experiences give me at least a way of letting people know that I understand what's going on, and that's a good thing," he added.

Elsewhere, seven men were ordained by Denver Archbishop Samuel Aquila May 18 at the Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception; Chicago Cardinal Francis George also May 18 ordained 10 men hailing from Mexico, Poland, Uganda, Indiana and the Chicago area; and seven priests were ordained at St. Theresa Church in Trumbull, Conn., May 25 for the diocese of Bridgeport by retired Archbishop Daniel Cronin of Hartford, Conn.

One of the newly ordained priests for the Bridgeport diocese is Fr. Joseph Gill, who grew up in Frederick, Md. When people ask him why he wanted to be a priest, he said the short answer is that he "fell madly in love with God."

"As a teen, I had a profound and personal encounter with Jesus Christ, who changed my life and gave me a joy and a peace that surpasses all understanding. I want to give my life to him and to make him known and loved, so that he may set souls ablaze with a passion for holiness. In a word, I am striving to become a saint and help others become saints as well," he said.

In the diocese of Green Bay, Wis., Bishop David Ricken ordained two men to the priesthood June 1 at St. Francis Xavier Cathedral in Green Bay. In the same liturgy, he also ordained two men to the transitional diaconate. This was the first time in recent years that both ordinations occurred at the same Mass, which was described by the diocese as an opportunity to highlight the calling to the celibate life the four men chose.

The Josephites ordained seven priests from Nigeria June 1 at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Washington. The priests will be assigned to one of 40 Josephite parishes nationwide.

The Jesuit order ordained 16 priests in June in ceremonies in New York, New Orleans, Los Angeles and Chicago. Before entering the Society of Jesus, the ordinands worked in nonprofit community service, higher education, state government, documentary film production and biomedical research, and several taught in high schools and colleges.

Jesuit Father Thomas Smolich, outgoing president of the Jesuit Conference of the United States, said the new Jesuit priests experienced a call to the priesthood "as varied as their hometowns and former occupations, but they have one thing in common: a desire to dedicate themselves to the Jesuit mission of serving the church where the need is greatest."

[Contributing to this story were Mark Zimmermann in Washington, Peter Finney Jr. in New Orleans and Kevin Birnbaum in Seattle.]

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