



Vocations

RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL TO PRIESTHOOD AND THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

Simple Call Leads to Profound Vocation

By Rachel Swenson Balducci

When Stephen Pontzer left a career in forestry to enter the seminary, his friends were supportive—but a little skeptical.

“Some of my friends thought it was just a phase that I would grow out of,” said Stephen, “but overall they were very positive.”

That was six years ago. On June 23, Stephen, along with fellow seminarians David Koetter, John Johnson and Aaron Killips, will be ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Savannah. The ceremony is at 10 a.m. at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah.

The ordination, said Stephen, brings to fruition a long season of discernment that all started with one priest asking him a very simple question.

For years, Stephen enjoyed a career as a forester, practicing “stewardship of our natural resources.”

“I loved forestry,” said Stephen, “but it always bothered me that I never felt truly content in my situation.”

Stephen said the content he longed for came from activities involving vocations, especially his time on *Vocatio Dei* retreats.

“Around that time, Fr. Mark Ross asked me, ‘have you ever thought about being a priest?’ Thus began my discernment to the priesthood.”

Now, after studying at St. Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, and spending several summers in service to the Church, Stephen is eagerly anticipating his upcoming ordination.

“I’m looking forward to being able to cele-

brate the Sacraments for the people,” said Stephen, “especially reconciliation.”

Fellow seminarian David Koetter is equally excited about his upcoming ordination, and sees the call as less about his own worthiness and more about God’s will in his life.

Continued on back cover...

ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD

SATURDAY, JUNE 23, 2007 AT 10:00 A.M.

CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, SAVANNAH.



✦ Rev. Mr. John Johnson ✦ Rev. Mr. Aaron Killips

✦ Rev. Mr. David Koetter ✦ Rev. Mr. Stephen Pontzer

Southern Catholicism Yields Vocations

Fr. Tim McKeown, Vocation Director, reflects on the success of gaining new priests for our diocese

Amidst the Live Oaks draped with Spanish Moss and rows of cotton fields the Catholic Church is going strong in Georgia. Although the Deep South is not synonymous with Catholicism, and the Diocese of Savannah is only about four per cent Catholic, it would be a mistake to think that the lack of numbers equates to a lack of vigor. There are growing numbers of very faithful Catholics throughout the South.

In fact, perhaps these smaller numbers make for a more vibrant faith. One is usually not a cultural Catholic in the South since Catholics generally must swim upstream. Being in the minority means being asked very often if you worship Mary, pray to statues or any number of misunderstood practices. Catholics must make a choice to know and live their Faith.

Recently the National Catholic Register did a study (January 14-20 issue) which looked at one indicator of fervent faith. They examined the ratio of the number of priests ordained to the number of Catholics in the diocese. The Diocese of Savannah was second in the nation of most priests ordained per Catholics in 2006. Among other southern dioceses in the top ten were Alexandria, LA, Knoxville, TN, Pensacola-Tallahassee, FL and Memphis, TN.

What factors play into these numbers? The author of the article, Tim Drake, noted that 78%

of the men being ordained “said they were initially invited by a priest to consider the priesthood.” In the Diocese of Savannah we have been blessed with good, strong holy priests who provide a good model for young men. When a priest lives his vocation well, a young man can say, “I could see myself being a priest.”

Certainly many of these newly ordained are of the John Paul II generation. His beautiful witness of priesthood spoke to many hearts. The fervent example of Bishop Boland plays a key role in Vocations. He strongly supports the seminarians and his accessibility and

joy is noted by the seminarians.

Fr. Tim Donahue, pastor of Most Holy Trinity in Augusta pointed to the importance of Eucharistic adoration. “It is a building block for vocations. I have discovered that more than a few vocations have come from men with a devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, who found their calling by spending time with Christ in adoration or prayer before the tabernacle.” The growing practice of Holy Hours and even perpetual adoration have been a factor in vocational growth. When men quiet their hearts to hear the “Fisher of Men” they may hear an invitation.

In the Register article Deacon Johnny Johnson noted that many of the men being ordained today are young. Speaking of his seminary of Mount St.



Among a nationwide shortage of priests, vocations are thriving in the South. Twenty-two men have been ordained for our diocese since 2000.

Mariusz Fuks to be Ordained Deacon

Despite distance from home and loss of close friend, seminarian looks forward to serving

Third-year seminarian Mariusz Fuks will be ordained a deacon June 2, 2007 at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah. The celebration begins at 10:00 a.m.

Mariusz, a student at Mt. St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, is from a devout and supportive family who live in a small village in Poland. Mariusz came to the Diocese of Savannah in 2002, knowing only that "the Diocese is big and that the Diocese needs more priests and seminarians."

When Mariusz came to the United States, it was with his close friend and fellow seminarian Dariusz Zurek. Last winter, Dariusz was killed in a tragic car accident, which has been difficult for his best friend.

"The only hope I have," said Mariusz, "is that now he is in a better place with God, the place we all hope for, heaven, and that one day we all are going to be there united with Christ."

Despite the tragedy, Mariusz said his experience in our diocese has been wonderful so far.

"There is a lot of things I would like to add," he said, "like my gratitude and thankfulness for the people of the Diocese of Savannah, for their kindness, generosity, real 'southern hospitality' and much, much more."

Mariusz' mother and sister will come from Poland for the ordination and his brother will come down from Chicago. Please pray for safe travel for his family, and for Mariusz as he prepares for his diaconate ordination and continues on his journey toward the priesthood.



Southern Catholicism *(continued)*

Mary's he said, "We have 150 to 160 guys here. All of them, with the exception of one or two, are about my age. There's a fresh, vital spirit among the young guys. They are ready to go out, be good priests, remain faithful to their state in life, and do their best to serve and defend the Church."

There is certainly a vitality in the priesthood in the Diocese of Savannah. With this June's priestly ordination we will have had 22 new priests ordained in this new Millennium! It would be simplistic to try to explain this surge based on two or three factors. Suffice it to say that the Holy Spirit is active today issuing the call for young men to consider the call to be "fishers of men." Many young men are dropping their nets, leaving their boats and heeding the call to preach the Gospel in the Deep South.

Looking for a
white-collar job?



savannahpriest.com

FAQs, discernment tips, seminarian info, and much more

Candidates Study English in Statesboro

Brooks Coates, Vocation Office Assistant, reports on progress of seminarian candidates from abroad

This past September, the Vocations Office began a new endeavor. With the help of Fr. Adam Kasela, the diocese invited two men from Poland to live with us at St. Matthew Church in Statesboro and to attend classes at Georgia Southern University studying English as a second language.

Dawid (David) Kwiatkowski and Krysztof (Chris) Szczepanik, seminarians from Warsaw, accepted our invitation. Although it would mean leaving friends and family—and their culture and language—they answered the call serve God and His people.

St. Matthew's is perfectly suited for such an endeavor. In addition to the rectory, there is an apartment on the church property; the two buildings offered plenty of space for Fr. Tim, our two Polish students, and me.

This living situation afforded us another benefit: community. Together we worked, studied, prayed, exercised, and shared our lives. Chris and David learned more about the language and culture in our Diocese and the States and we became acquainted with them personally to see if they were suited to be priests in our diocese.

Our project did so well that this past January, with the help of Fr. Fredy Angel, Fr. Larry Lucree, and Fr. Alfonso Gutierrez, we invited two men from Colombia to do the same.

Rodrigo Rojas and Pedro Montes, both seminarians from Bogotá, Colombia, arrived at the end of that month. Along with David and Chris,



Candidates from other countries are studying English in Statesboro. From left to right: Pedro Montes Lizarazo, Krysztof Szczepanik, David Kwiatowski, and Rodrigo Rojas Florian

who were in their second semester, Pedro and Rodrigo began to study English, and were also able to live with us at St. Matthew's.

These four men have answered the call to serve God's people in foreign lands. This missionary spirit is still needed in today's interconnected world of computers and cell phones. There are places in the world, even in the United States, where people do not know about Jesus. God sends his messengers as instruments through which His grace will flow.

Missionaries from around the world remind us of God's love and of our "universal" Catholic Church. Let us pray for all missionaries in the world, especially those working in the Diocese of Savannah, and specifically for Chris, David, Pedro, and Rodrigo as they discern God's will for their lives.

Grace-Filled First Year of Priesthood

Fr. Justin Ferguson reflects on his first year of priesthood at St. Mary on the Hill in Augusta

Reflecting upon this first year of my priestly life, I would have to say that it has been everything I expected and a whole lot more. I always expected the priesthood to be a life of God working through the priest, who celebrates the sacraments, counsels the people, gives spiritual direction, participates in various parish activities, etc., but what I never anticipated was the powerful experience of God working through the priest.

From the moment of my ordination I have been amazed by the many experiences of God's grace working in, through and around me. This awesome experience of the grace that penetrates the life of the priest after he receives the sacrament of Holy Orders is what I have found to be beyond any of my expectations. From the joyous moments of baptisms and weddings to those heart-wrenching times in losing a loved one, I as a priest have taken part in those most intimate moments of people's lives.

One of the most profound experiences that I have had is hearing confessions. During my seminary days, I always dreaded hearing confessions. The confession practicum that we did during my priestly formation was only helpful for me in the sense of making sure that I knew the rite of confession, but knowing that souls would be soon coming to me in order to receive

God's forgiveness and guidance in this sacrament was a bit daunting for me.

However, all these anxieties were quickly forgotten when I was hearing my first confession because I realized in a very unique way



Fr. Justin Ferguson, who was ordained last summer, greets young parishioners after Mass, no doubt planting seeds for future vocations!

God's grace working in, through and around me.

It is precisely in this experience that I have come to know of that ontological change that took effect in me by the sacrament of Holy Orders which I received last June - there truly is a sacramental, mysterious change during the priestly ordination which equips one for a new way of life.

Due to such experiences, I am continually affirmed in my decision to become a priest, and am called on to that continual conversion of heart so as to lead others closer to our Lord.

Will You Help Identify Future Priests?

Fr. Mike Ingram, Assistant Vocation Director, needs your help

I have a very special place in my heart for our Vocations Office. It was a tremendous help to me in my discernment process and a very nurturing support to me throughout the seminary formation years



leading up to my ordination in 2002. It is hard for me to believe that on June 29th, the Solemnity of St. Peter and St. Paul, I will be celebrating my fifth anniversary as a priest. I will be celebrating the happiest, most rewarding, and most personally fulfilling five years of my life! Thanks be to God!

Now as the Associate Vocation Director I have a wonderful opportunity to give something back, but I need your help.

Fr. Tim, our Vocation Director, has asked me to focus on the new men who are just beginning their discernment process and are looking for some preliminary information concerning the priesthood and the Diocese of Savannah. These men are sitting in your church each Sunday, attending daily Mass beside you, praying the Rosary with you or joining you in Adoration.

As baptized Catholics we are the Body of Christ on this earth. That includes His eyes and

ears. I need your help in identifying these men! If you see someone you think might potentially make a good, holy priest, mention it to him. Have the courage to get his name, telephone number, and e-mail address for me (contact info at bottom of page). I will gladly follow up on your lead and will keep in contact with him through e-mails and telephone calls.

Who knows—your tip might be the first step in who your future Pastor may be!

Simple Call *(continued from front)*

“I am very humbled by the fact that Jesus has called me to the priesthood,” said David, who attended seminary at Mount St. Mary’s in Emmitsburg. “While I am not worthy, I am excited about serving God’s people.”

David said he is most excited about celebrating Mass, and “praying my Mass for God’s flock.” He added that he is grateful for the tremendous support of his family, and for the example of holy priests.

“My family has always backed me without pushing me,” he said. “I have also had the great privilege of meeting and working with Fr. Brett Brannen. He has been a huge influence in my vocation. He is a great priest and I hope to be half as holy as he is.”

CONTACT US

Fr. Tim McKeown
Vocation Director
(912) 681-6726
vocations@diosav.org

Fr. Mike Ingram
Assistant Vocation Director
478-788-6386
Frmikeingram@holyspiritmacon.org