

# Vocations

Bulletin of the Savannah Diocese Vocation Office

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2010

Page 2

**Having A Brother as a  
Father**

Pages 3-4

**Meet our New  
Seminarists!**

Page 5

**Immersion Experience**



## Update from the Vocation Office

This is my first article as the new Vocation Director for the Diocese of Savannah and I am very excited about the challenge!

I appreciate the foundation laid by my predecessor Fr. Tim McKeown and the confidence of Bishop Boland in appointing me to this very important position. I request your prayerful support as I help our wonderful men discern God's call to the Priesthood.

I have recently returned from our End-of-Summer Gathering with all the seminarians near Helen, GA. It was a great opportunity for Fr. Mark VanAlstine, the new Associate Director, and myself to get to know the new and returning seminarians, as well as for them to get to know us. Each day was filled with activity - Mass, praying the Liturgy of the Hours, preparing delicious meals, tubing in the nearby river, fishing, exploring downtown Helen, shopping, wine-



tasting tours, movies, and great fellowship! It was truly a time of rest and relaxation before they begin the rigors of seminary life.

It was also an opportunity to bond with their brother seminarians and make new friendships with the men just entering our program.

This Fall we are blessed to have four new men joining our diocesan seminarian program: Scott Benningfield from Louisville, KY; Patrick Tunnell from Sharpsburg, GA; Tim Eyrich from Augusta, GA; and Tony Visintainer from Augusta, GA. (You can learn a little about them inside.)

Please keep all of our seminarians in your prayers as they discern God's call and continue, God willing, on the path to priesthood.

In God's Service,  
*Fr. Mike Ingram*  
Vocation Director

## Having a Brother as a Father

*A parishioner of St. Mary on the Hill in Augusta loves having a brother as a priest*

**D**r. Andrew Van Alstine comes from a family that has a penchant for science; all five siblings have advanced degrees in engineering and biology. It wasn't without some surprise, then, when Andrew's older brother Mark, flourishing in an established career, left his job to enter seminary.

"It was exciting news to me when Mark brought up the idea of leaving engineering and pursuing the call to priesthood," said Andrew. "You could look at it as a second career, but he didn't look at it that way." Instead, he saw it as following a call from God—of taking on a new identity, not just switching job descriptions.

"He got a lot of encouragement from us in his decision to be a priest. I was very happy for him and proud of him. It was exciting," remembers Andrew.

"Watching him grow up through a prior career and seeing him through seminary and priesthood, I've really seen him change a lot socially," said Andrew. "He has a maturity and happiness that comes from doing what God has made him to do. He's happy; he really looks content."

Fr. Mark Van Alstine was ordained in 2005 and has spent the last few years serving at St. Mary on the Hill in Augusta, the city where the rest of his family lives. Being in his hometown, one might imagine that Fr. Mark could spend a lot of time with brothers and sisters, but that's

not necessarily the case, Andrew learned. "As far as sharing him with others, it's sometimes difficult. Before he was ordained, we were used to calling him up and having him for dinner, and now we have to be penciled in like everybody else," he laughed.

This summer Fr. Mark received a new assignment at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah. He's also the new Assistant

Vocation Director, with his main job overseeing the formation of seminarians.

Ironically, points out Fr. Mark's siblings, even though their brother is moving a few hours away, they will probably still see him just as frequently. Priests, it turns out, are very busy people!

But Andrew is quick to admit this is a small price to pay to see his brother discover his true vocation and become a widely-known priest. "It's good, I enjoy hearing people in the community mention they know my brother," said Andrew.

From a practical perspective, having a priest in the family certainly has its perks. "Recently our entire family was on vacation up at the mountains," said Andrew. "It was neat to have the ability to have your brother celebrate Mass and have a couple of nieces and nephews at the altar helping him. He does a good job of keeping Mass a sacred event as well as giving it a personal touch."



*"He has a maturity and happiness that comes from doing what God has made him to do. He's happy."*

# Meet our New

**Scott Benningfield ~ Age: 39 ~ Hometown: Louisville, KY**

**Home parishes:** St. Martin of Tours (Louisville, KY); Sacred Heart (Savannah)

**A scripture you find inspiring:** John 17:20-26 - *"I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word."*

**Favorite saint:** Saint Stephen

**Hobbies / interests:** Guitar and travel

**What lead you to consider the priesthood?**

I intensified my Catholic faith when I was in need, and the tools of the Church (daily Mass, confession, Rosary, adoration, scripture) really helped me. I see the world hurting, struggling and dividing and I want to help alleviate this. The hurts, struggles, and divisions will always exist but they will be lessened with stronger bridges to Christ and each other. For me, the humility, honesty and serenity from the sacraments, which can help an ailing world, is the fuel for this drive to see about priesthood.

**Thoughts on becoming a seminarian:**

I'm excited to begin studies, especially at St. Vincent Seminary which is a beautiful and special place. I'm looking forward to beginning this next step.



**Patrick Tunnell ~ Age: 20 ~ Hometown: Newman, GA**

**Home parish:** St. Matthew (Statesboro)

**A scripture you find inspiring:** Matthew 28:20 - *"I am with you always, until the end of the age."*

**Favorite saint:** Saint Jude Thaddeus

**Hobbies / interests:** I really enjoy sports, since being in college I have played alot of racquetball and pingpong. I also enjoy spiritual reading, movies and I have several TV shows I follow.

**What lead you to consider the priesthood?**

In high school I was starting to learn a lot about my faith by reading several books written by the saints. The priests were portrayed in these writings as heroes who were so close to Christ and so vital to His Church. I just felt like Christ was calling me to this closeness with Him by serving His Church. When I started college at Georgia Southern, Father Tim Mckeown (the vocation director of the Savannah Diocese at the time) was the local parish priest. After talking to him several times about the priesthood and seminary it seemed like all the signs were pointing for me to discern priesthood more seriously in seminary.

**Thoughts on becoming a seminarian:**

Its unbelievable that I am a seminarian! I have dreamed of becoming a priest since my freshman year of high school, and to think that I am now on my way to possibly becoming one amazes me!



# Seminarians!

**Tim Eyrich ~ Age: 20 ~ Hometown: Augusta, GA**

**Home parish:** Most Holy Trinity (Augusta)

**A scripture you find inspiring:** 1 Timothy 6: 11-16 - *“Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession...”*

**Favorite saint:** Saint John Vianney

**Hobbies / interests:** Soccer, traveling, camping, reading, being with my family

**What lead you to consider the priesthood?**

I first remember considering the priesthood around age 8 when Fr. Ted Hochstatter came to visit our community. When he left I began “saying Mass” for my family, and my parents gave me a Mass kit for my birthday that year. Years later I went to Vocatio Dei with Fr. Brannen, and afterward began spiritual direction specifically discerning a vocation to diocesan priesthood. Through high school it was something that was on my mind, but it really hit hard as I graduated and realized that I was truly on the verge of the “real world”. I am excited to be taking the next step as a seminarian at this point in my life.

**Thoughts on becoming a seminarian:**

I am very excited and joyful upon being accepted as a seminarian for the diocese. It has been something I have wanted to do since I first considered the priesthood at age 8, and I have looked forward to this day ever since.



**Tony Visintainer ~ Age: 20 ~ Hometown: Augusta, GA**

**Home parish:** Most Holy Trinity (Augusta)

**A scripture you find inspiring:** John 20:26-28 - *“Do not be unbelieving, but believe.”*

**Favorite saints:** Saint John of the Cross

**Hobbies / interests:** Playing cello, reading literature

**What lead you to consider the priesthood?**

When I was about six years old, Father Tim McKeown was saying mass at St. Joseph’s in Augusta. At one point, he invited all boys and young men who felt they might be called to the priesthood to come forward and receive a blessing. I felt God calling me, so I went forward. Since then, the call to the priesthood hasn’t necessarily always been foremost my mind (in fact, for a while I wanted to have nothing to do with it), but God, with his love, mercy, and grace, has brought me to a point where I am prepared to enter Seminary.

**Thoughts on becoming a seminarian:**

It’s going to be a long process, and one that, with God’s help, I will undertake joyfully, but seriously and prayerfully as well. I have been so encouraged by the tremendous show of support and enthusiasm, and all the prayers offered, from people here in my home diocese. I look forward to whatever the next few years hold, knowing that your prayers will be with me.



## Immersion Experience

*Father Pontzer learns more than just a language in Bolivia*

Last summer, native Georgian Fr. Stephen Pontzer left our diocese for sunny South America. The plan was to hone his Spanish skills at a language school, but his real education came from being a parish priest in a foreign country.

When Fr. Stephen arrived in Bolivia last July, he was scheduled to begin studies at the Maryknoll Institute of Languages. Two weeks after he arrived, however, a nearby parish of 65,000 parishioners was desperate for a priest. Two of its priests were leaving and there could be no Mass without help from Fr. Stephen.

“The parish has a main church in Santa Cruz,” Father explained. “About eight other parishes around that area are also part of that parish.” While most of those smaller churches have religious sisters during the week, there was still a need for a priest to celebrate Mass. “The pastor said, ‘if you don’t help out we’ll have to cancel Masses this weekend,’” recalls Fr. Stephen. So he stepped up to fill the gap.

There were also baptisms during Mass, sometimes as many as eight at a time. Fr. Stephen began saying Mass every day and soon his life as a priest was overtaking his life as a student. “Between preparing for Mass and writing and translating homilies, I didn’t get much time to study.” For a while he tried to do both, but most of the class time was spent preparing for his priestly duties. Eventually, though, he was able to redirect most of his attention to studying Spanish in a school setting.

During his time in South America, Fr. Ste-

phen lived with a native family, and the full immersion helped his practical skills. “It was a very good experience,” he said. “Working in the parish was good - busy, but good. And the school is excellent.”



Fr. Stephen has felt a call to focus on his Spanish-speaking skills for years. “Ever since I was a seminarian I’ve had lots of signs from God that I need to learn Spanish.” The most poignant sign was a visit to a girl in the hospital who didn’t speak English. “She hadn’t had any Spanish-speaking visitors, and when I tried to speak

to her in English she started to cry,” recalled Fr. Stephen. “Her name was Marguerite. I think of her as my patron.”

Fr. Stephen added that he has always recognized the struggle of our priests to meet the needs of the Spanish-speaking population. “I knew how difficult it was for the guys in missions in our diocese,” he said. “The number of Masses they say - I wanted to help them out.”

After his experience in Bolivia, Fr. Stephen is eager to put his new skills to good use. He is now the Parochial Vicar at St. Theresa in Albany where he and the pastor are developing a ministry for hispanics. He looks forward to continuing to master the Spanish language. “I have no problem saying Mass or reading anything, but one-on-one conversation is still tricky,” he said. “They say it takes nine years to be fluent.”

Fr. Pontzer has one request for the people of our diocese. “Pray for the missions in South Georgia,” he said, “and the priests.”

# IS HE CALLING YOU?

The only way to know  
is to listen.

Come listen to God's voice in  
prayer, silence, conversation,  
friendship, and reflection.

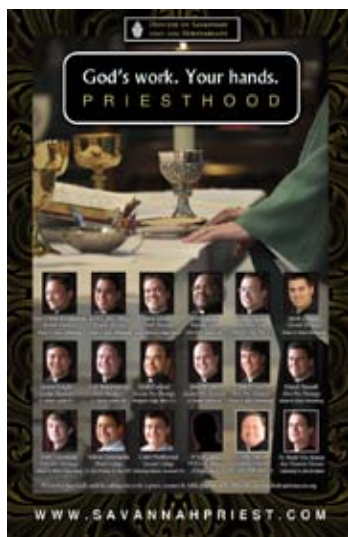


## DISCERNMENT RETREAT FOR MEN CONSIDERING A PRIESTLY VOCATION

December 17-18, 2010  
Holy Spirit Catholic Church  
4074 Chambers Road, Macon, GA 31206

Begins with Dinner at 6:00 P.M. on Friday  
Concludes with Mass at 6:00 P.M. on Saturday  
*Sign up at [www.SavannahPriest.com](http://www.SavannahPriest.com)*

*Monstrance image Andy Coan (andycoan.com)*



## Pray for our Seminarians

Seminary formation is both very rewarding and very challenging. It is about much more than just intellectual growth – seminarians are challenged to develop a profound prayer life, an integrated moral life and a dynamic personal life so that they are enabled to become the best priests they possibly can. And they undergo this rigorous training so that they can spend their lives serving you – the people of God!

Please remember to pray for our seminarians as they begin their new year of formation.



Savannah Diocese  
Vocation Office



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