

From The Morning Call  
October 22, 2006

## A double-edged sword

**While priest sex scandals may deter some, others say they've entered the seminary with resolve to restore faith in the cloth.**

By Wendy Solomon Of The Morning Call

Orlando Aso had a comfortable life. A lucrative job as an auditor/analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, an apartment in Hoboken, N.J., and plenty of friends.

Joe Ganser, armed with a degree in biochemistry from Muhlenberg College, had planned on attending medical school.

Eddie Fleming was finishing his studies at an Ohio medical school and on course to becoming a physician.

But then each of them made the same life-altering decision.

This fall, they entered Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Montgomery County.

The three are among seven men from the Allentown Catholic Diocese who entered the seminary this year, the largest group since 2001. Eight enrolled that year.

Overall, the Allentown Diocese has 20 men preparing for the priesthood at Saint Charles Seminary. It's hardly a bumper crop. The numbers are emblematic of the national decline of high school, college and graduate-level seminarians, which has plummeted 85 percent since 1967, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

As the church watches the number of priests and seminarians decline, some blame the damaging effects of the sexual abuse scandals that have come to light since 2002 and continue to make news. They say it has tarnished the reputation of the priesthood and discourages young men from considering it as a career. Others, however, say the scandals may have motivated others, believing the church needs them, to join the priesthood.

The number of men who enter seminary was dropping for decades before the scandals surfaced. Some attribute the slide to a more secular, materialistic society and the church's insistence on celibacy and an all-male priesthood.

Scholars are looking at the question of whether the priest sex abuse scandals have dissuaded Catholics' decisions to work for the church.

"Just look at the numbers," said Katarina Schuth, who has an endowed chair in the Social Scientific Study of Religion at St. Thomas University in Minnesota. In the five years since sex abuse scandals broke, nearly 600 fewer seminarians enrolled.

"That's a big drop," Schuth said, and larger than any other period since 1967.

And yet, against this backdrop, men like Aso, Ganser and Fleming continue to enroll in seminary — not in large numbers, but in small trickles.

Timothy P. Muldoon, director of the Church in the 21st Century Center, a think tank created at Boston College because of the sex abuse scandals, says the problems may have had the opposite effect on some men who feel the church needs them more than ever.

"If someone is contemplating the priesthood they are obviously drawing from a much deeper well than whatever they've seen in the news. It's not going to be swayed by the bad behavior of the priests or bishops they see in the news. There's got to be a lot of optimism," Muldoon said.

The calling

How does a man, fresh out of high school, college or after years working in another profession arrive at the decision to be a priest?

It would seem to be the kind of decision one doesn't make lightly. Are the considerations the same as if one were choosing a career as a high school history teacher, a software engineer or a psychologist? Do you ask about salary, benefits and a 401(k) plan? What about the hours and the commute?

Or is the decision to become a priest strictly a choice about intangibles, a deep desire to help people or to fulfill a sense of religious mission? Some might argue it's not even a choice, but a divine calling.

Aso, 33, of Bethlehem, calls himself a "cradle Catholic," meaning Catholic since birth. He attended Mass once a week, but was not particularly religious. That was before his epiphany.

"I think the most profound event that started my thinking about the priesthood was the death of my mother four years ago. When she died, it created a big void in my life," Aso said.

"Although my life was going very well in terms of job security, a good salary and many friends. Deep down there was something missing. When my mother died, I realized that all those material things were not that important and that my relationship with God was not where it should be," he said.

The prayers of the rosary came to him almost instantly when his mother died, he said. It was a sign, he believes, from the Blessed Mother leading him to her.

"I began to want to know more about my faith," Aso said. He started going to daily Mass and watching EWTN, the 24-hour Catholic cable TV channel. He continued praying the rosary.

"Slowly, but surely, I started not needing to go out with friends as much, watching movies, going out on Thursday nights. I began to become comfortable with prayer, even in solitude," he said.

He went on pilgrimages to religious sites in Europe, particularly ones where Mary was said to have appeared.

Aso was not dissuaded by the sex abuse scandals. Rather, he described his decision as a divine calling.

"I think it was all part of giving me the sort of spiritual guidance to finally realize, 'I think I'm being called to the priesthood.' "

Scholars such as Schuth and Dean Hoge, a sociologist at Catholic University of America, say seminarians over the last 10 to 15 years who grew up under Pope John Paul II are also more conservative than previous generations who grew up under Vatican II.

Aso may be typical of the new seminarian who David Yamane, a sociologist at Wake Forest University who studies post-war American Catholics, says are contemplating the priesthood: "People who really believe very strongly in the traditions of the church."

Like Aso, students are also entering seminary at a later age than previous generations. Another student from the diocese, a former accountant, is 35. The average age of newly ordained priests has risen to 37, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Fleming is 29 and Ganser is 22. Aso's other first-year classmates from the diocese are 18 and 19.

Men entering the priesthood are not only older, they are more educated, according to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. In 2005, 32 percent of newly ordained priests had completed a graduate or professional degree beyond the baccalaureate, compared to 13 percent in 1998.

The second-career priests, or delayed priests as they are sometimes called, are also increasing. Yamane, the sociologist, said these late bloomers' decisions are probably based on unfulfilling experiences in the regular working world "without having found any real profound sense of the moral purpose of doing these things."

Fleming, of Hellertown, was in medical school and Ganser, 22, of Kutztown was about to enter medical school. Both wrestled with how they wanted to live the rest of their lives.

"Throughout that time, since before medical school, I had a feeling that while medicine is an important vocation in itself, it's not the be-all-end-all," Fleming said.

Medicine and science fascinated him, but he felt they couldn't address the larger question: "Why?" Fleming, always a devout Catholic, turned to his faith for direction.

Ganser had been headed toward medical school ever since high school. A biochemistry major at Muhlenberg College, he began to question his direction when he was preparing for the medical school entrance exam and filling out applications his junior year.

"I just wasn't finding the satisfaction, the fulfillment I needed," he said.

"As you progress through your college career, things change and you begin thinking as you get close to graduation, is this what I really want to be doing? Do I really want to be stuck in this field I've chosen for the rest of my life?" Ganser said.

He sought an answer through prayer. "I started praying very heavily, very deeply. Without anybody ever bringing it up, this option [the priesthood] on its own came up. And it stuck. No matter if you try to forget it and say that's not for me, it keeps staying there. It's persistent. 'Check this out. Talk to somebody.' Eventually I went to my parish priest at Muhlenberg ... and I said, 'I think I'm called to be a priest.' "

Catholics call the time spent soul-searching on whether to enter the seminary "discernment," and it continues during the years at seminary. It's a journey to try to figure out what they believe is God's plan for them.

Fleming has no regrets about choosing the seminary instead of being a first-year medical resident as his former classmates are.

"I really felt to pursue medicine now would be a disservice to myself and patients because I would sort of only have half my mind on it," he said.

There is no guarantee Fleming or any of the others will eventually become priests — up to 80 percent drop out of seminary.

"One classmate said if I leave and come back to medicine that I'd be a better physician for it," Fleming said.

#### Promoting priesthood

Dean Hoge, of Catholic University of America, has said the priest molestation cases that surfaced in 2002 "probably ... depressed priestly morale ... but nobody knows how much."

In a poll of 1,854 Roman Catholic priests conducted in 2002 by The Morning Call and Los Angeles Times, seven in 10 priests said the sex abuse scandals are the church's biggest crisis in 100 years, but not their greatest challenge. The greatest hurdles, they said, were a secular society, the priest shortage and burnout.

Seven of 10 priests expressed great contentment with their vocation, and the vast majority, 72 percent, would definitely enter the priesthood again. Another 18 percent said they would probably enter the priesthood if they had a second chance.

Almost nine out of 10 priests said they would advise young men to enter the priesthood.

Even as priest molestation cases continue to surface, Fleming, Ganser and Aso are undeterred. The priesthood remains a special calling, they said.

"Certainly, the sexual abuse hurt the church and its people. A lot of healing is needed," Fleming said. Therefore it is important for priests more than ever to show they are "models of a good life," he said.

"Obviously it was a difficult time for the church, and still is ... for the sin of a few people," Ganser said. "We're going to rebuild things and hopefully we can lead it into a new generation."

Dioceses and seminaries are doing more than waiting for potential students to drop in or hear the call.

Sometimes they plant the seed through advertising campaigns and showing up at college fairs. The U.S. Conference of Bishops recently produced a DVD called "Fishers of

Men" to promote the priesthood. In one segment, several men talk about how they came to the priesthood, including a man who had careers in baseball and acting.

Saint Charles Seminary, which has been educating priests since 1832, will be using a new recruitment tool, a promotional DVD called, "A Proud Past and a Bright Future," a technique customarily used by secular colleges.

"We are continually looking at ways we can be of service in promoting the vocation, how we can get our message and mission out to the wider public, especially to parishes and schools," said Monsignor Joseph Prior, rector of Saint Charles.

The Allentown Diocese stepped up its efforts a few years ago with glossy recruitment posters that said, "Some jobs let you see the world. We've got one that lets you make it better." It revamped its Web site and made it easier for people to get information on the priesthood in a section called BeAPriest.com. For the past two years, the Diocese has shown a short promotional video to potential students on Discernment Night. In the video, several seminarians, priests and their parents talk about their decisions.

Rev. Francis A. Nave, director of the Office of Vocations, is the point-person in the Allentown Diocese who helps young men figure out if they're being called to the priesthood. In Catholicism, a vocation traditionally refers to a calling from God to either work in the church or live a secular life of marriage and fatherhood.

"I like to avoid the term 'recruiting' because we believe that God calls every person to a particular life, whether that's marriage, religious life or the priesthood," Nave said.

"It's important to note that through the whole history of the church [the priesthood] has never been abundant," he added.

Nave recently attended a national conference of diocese and vocation directors where they discussed how to encourage more young men to the priesthood. The consensus was that interest in the priesthood should begin in the family.

#### New beginnings

Nave said the diocese has a responsibility to encourage its pastors to look for and cultivate potential candidates among the boys and young men who attend their parishes.

It's also important to have a realistic understanding of the job of priest — the rewards, as well as the hours, salary, skills and education required, Nave said.

"If it's pay they're looking for, they're barking up the wrong tree," Nave said. "If young men feel called in that direction, they've got to know the truth."

And with that information, a man may be able to answer whether he truly belongs in the priesthood.

The trees on Saint Charles' grounds show their fall colors. It could be any other college campus on the East Coast. Football, dorms, theater productions. Aso, Ganser and Fleming walk across campus with their knapsacks slung across their backs, except unlike other colleges, it is all male and they are wearing the seminary's required black suits, white shirts and black ties.

In a few days, when it is Cassock Day, they will don the black collar of clergymen in training.

At some point during their six-year journey of study and reflection, each of these men will have to answer perhaps the most important question of their lives.

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