The Criterion
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There's something about Mary

Readers share stories of sisters, life as a mom and their bond to Blessed Mother, page 3A.

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Franciscan Brother Michael Perry, minister provincial of the Franciscan Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, presides at a liturgy on Aug. 22 at St. Camillus Church in Silver Springs, Md., during which eight friars of the province professed solemn vows. (Photo courtesy: Franciscan Brother Octavio Duran, Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe)

Franciscan friar takes lessons learned on Indianapolis' near east side around the world

(Editor's note: Franciscan Brother Michael Perry, a native of Indianapolis, was ordained a priest in 1984. Looking back to the teachings and practices of St. Francis of Assisi, he and other Franciscan priests have chosen to identify themselves as "brother" like other non-ordained member of the religious order founded by St. Francis rather than "father." In respect of that decision, this terminology will be used in this article.)

By Sean Gallagher

Franciscan Brother Michael Perry's world in the early 1960s was the neighborhood on the near east side of Indianapolis around the former Holy Cross Parish.

See our annual Vocations Awareness Supplement, pages 1B-12B.

He came to know the neighborhood well working as a paper boy at 6 and managing a lawn care business with some friends by the time he was 10.

Along the way, Brother Michael learned important lessons there about neighbors taking responsibility to care for each other, about how the Church is all the people of God and that its worship and its care for those in need are closely related and strengthen each other.

A wide array of people instilled these lessons in him: his parents, his neighbors, the priests who served at Holy Cross, and the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods who staffed the parish's school.

Those lessons paved the way for Brother Michael to discern a call to religious life as a Franciscan. And he's taken those lessons with him in a wide variety of assignments and places.

He's been a missionary in the Democratic Republic of Congo in central Africa and served as a staff member in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief agency.

See FRIAR, *page 4B*

Archdiocese 'honored' to host 2029 National Eucharistic Congress

By Natalie Hoefer

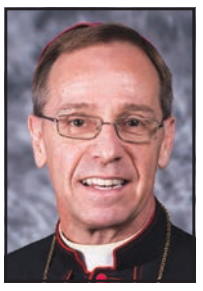
The people gathered for a dinner in Indianapolis on Oct. 20 erupted into cheers and applause when Crookston, Minn., Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens made the announcement: "I'm privileged to announce that in the summer of 2029, the 11th National Eucharistic Congress is going to be back here in Indianapolis."



Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens

The dinner at the Omni Severin Hotel followed a Mass at St. John the Evangelist Church in Indianapolis. Concelebrating were Bishop Cozzens and Bishop Timothy L. Doherty of the Diocese of Lafayette, Ind., with Archbishop Charles C. Thompson as principal celebrant.

"As we look toward the 11th National Eucharistic Congress in 2029, we do well to keep before us the continued outpouring of graces and blessings stemming from the National Eucharistic Revival that continues to bear fruit throughout the Church, local and universal," Archbishop Thompson said in his homily.



Archbishop Charles C. Thompson

Before announcing the location of the 2029 congress at the dinner, Bishop Cozzens, board chairman of the National Eucharistic Congress Inc., spoke of the impact of the 10th congress, held in Indianapolis on July 17-21, 2024.

"Everywhere I go now, people tell me stories about how the congress impacted them," he said. "I really want to say thank you to the people of Indianapolis and to your role in that."

See NEC, *page 2A*

Pope's doctors confirm his visit to Latin America two weeks after surgery

(OSV News)—Two weeks after Pope Leo XIV's surgery for lung cancer, his doctor confirmed he can fly to South America according to the previously released schedule, with Uruguay, Argentina and Peru planned as stops for his Nov. 6-17 trip, the longest trip of the pontificate so far.

"Based on his current clinical status, as well as the instrumental and laboratory tests performed, there are no contraindications that would prevent him from undertaking his upcoming apostolic journey to Latin America as planned," Dr. Luigi Carbone, the papal doctor said in a statement released by the Holy See Press Office on Oct. 26.

The pope "is following medical recommendations with great care and diligence, and with a deep determination to continue serving the Church," the statement read, confirming that

See POPE, *page 11A*



Pope Leo XIV gives a thumbs up as he arrives in his popemobile in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Oct. 21 to hold his first weekly general audience since cancer surgery on Oct. 13. The Holy See Press Office announced that day that Pope Leo needs no further treatment following his surgery for lung cancer. (OSV News photo/Simone Risoluti, Vatican Media)

In a time of challenges, a sister embraces her new role with hope

By John Shaughnessy



Benedictine Sister Jennifer Mechtild Horner shares a smile and a handshake with Pope Leo XIV at the Vatican. Sister Jennifer met Pope Leo while she was in Rome in September for a symposium involving members of an international association of Benedictines. (Submitted photo)

Lessons about the best way to live our lives come at different times for all of us.

For Benedictine Sister Jennifer Mechtild Horner, two parts of her life have especially influenced her, including one that nearly killed her.

The other one involves the guiding principle that has increasingly shaped her through her 37 years as a religious sister.

Her time as a Benedictine sister at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove has led her to embrace this knowledge about life and leadership: "I can't do it alone, God. I can only do it with you leading."

The impact of nearly losing her life in a split second provided another searing lesson.

"When I was a junior in college, I was in a horrible car accident and almost killed," Sister Jennifer says. "The car went off the road. My college roommate climbed up the hill to get help. I had a lot of serious, serious injuries. I was in the hospital for five weeks and in a wheelchair for the summer.

"When you're 20, 21, you think you have forever to live. In the recovery process, I realized you don't have forever. You have today. You need to choose what God is calling you to choose."

Those life lessons of relying on God and choosing to do his will have led to her latest opportunity to move even closer to him and serve the Benedictine community in another defining way.

'God was calling me to the next step'

In June, Sister Jennifer was elected to a six-year term as the president of the Monastic Congregation of St. Gertrude, a congregation made up of 14 autonomous monasteries across the United States and Canada, including Our Lady of Grace Monastery.

"The congregation itself is a place of mutual support," she explains. "There's also the oversight—to make sure things are being followed according to canon law, and that the communities are able to live a healthy, strong Benedictine life.

"Some of my duties are to do visitations of monasteries. Every five years, monasteries have a visitation where the president and a couple of sisters from other communities come to meet with all the sisters and look at finances, health care, formation—just to make sure the community is doing well. We make affirmations and some recommendations. If things aren't going well, sisters have a place where they can share that."

She views her election as president as "very humbling."

"I consider it a sacred privilege to serve the sisters in this way," she says. "I had been serving on the monastic congregation council already. And I had been serving as first counsel to the president. I really felt God was calling me to the next step."

She takes that step at a time of challenges and opportunities for monasteries of religious sisters across the United States and Canada.

Where communities of religious sisters thrived "50, 60 years ago," she says, the reality is that these communities are getting smaller and some are facing hard decisions about their future, including possible closings.

As monasteries consider their future, they always keep in mind their commitment to care for their sisters.

"Each sister has to be cared for to her death," Sister Jennifer notes. "Most communities can do that, and that's why we always want to make sure communities are making good decisions, so they have the resources to do that. If they wouldn't, then the congregation would be responsible for them.

"As communities get smaller, like I'm working with one community right now, they're wondering, 'What do we do?' I'm in conversation with them as they look to the future. It's their community, but I assist them when they have questions."

In her answers, Sister Jennifer partly draws from the life lessons of her father.

A father's influence

A Presbyterian minister, Rev. Francis Horner approached his life from a strong foundation of faith that was complemented by three other guiding principles: understand the reality, be open to change, and move forward with work and hope.

He moved his family from South Africa to the United States after he received deportation papers from the South African government because of his opposition to the country's discriminatory apartheid laws at the time.

He also accepted reality, adapted and moved forward with love when his daughter chose to become Catholic and a religious sister—choices she made in the years after her near-fatal traffic accident.

"It was hard on my parents not because they felt negatively about the Catholic Church, but you raise your children and you want them to be the way you want, and I think my dad always thought that maybe I'd be a pastor," Sister Jennifer says. "And then I announced I was going to be a sister a couple years later, so he and my mom had to go through that again. But they were fine. My dad would always tell people, 'We work for different companies, but we have the same boss.' He had a good humor about it."

She also admired and learned from the choices he made near the end of his life.

"He stayed in charge of his decisions, which was helpful," she says. "He gave up his driver's license. He was a pastor and a very good preacher, but as his memory started to slip, I remember he came home one day, and he said to my mom, 'That's the last sermon I'll give because I caught

See BENEDICTINE, *page 9B*

The '*fiat*' of priests, deacons, religious starts a new springtime in the Church

When Pope Leo XIV was elected pope, I told the kids at St. Joseph School in Shelbyville a little about him. When I told them that the pope attended St. Mary of the Assumption School just south of Chicago, a young child raised his hand and yelled out in excitement, "He went to Catholic school just like us, and in the state next door!"



Fr. Michael Keucher

That child hit the nail on the head! Long before he was a priest, canon lawyer, missionary and ultimately our supreme pontiff, the pope was simply a boy sitting in a classroom of his parish school learning his prayers. It was his parents and relatives, his priests and religious sisters, his mentors and friends who helped prepare him to say the most important word in the vocabulary of a faithful disciple: "*Fiat*!"

"*Fiat*" is Latin for "let it be done." It is also the Latin translation of how the Blessed Virgin Mary responded in faith after the Archangel Gabriel told her that she had been chosen to be the Mother of the Son of God. "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

So how did Blessed Fulton J. Sheen, beatified this past September, come to say his "*fiat*"? Before he wrote his library of books, before his weekly television and radio shows, before he became a priest and then a bishop, he was a kid in a classroom of St. Mary Cathedral School in Peoria, Ill. There, he learned to say the most important word he ever said: "*Fiat*!"

And let's not forget about St. Francis of Assisi in this 800th jubilee year of his death in 1226. His formal schooling took place at the parish school connected to the Church of San Giorgio in Assisi. It was there that he learned his Latin and his catechism. Although he got lost in worldly pursuits for a few years, the Lord continued working in his heart, calling him to surrender his ambitions and embrace a life he never could have imagined. His answer? "*Fiat*!"

As with all the saints in the Church and its great leaders among us, in Pope Leo XIV, Blessed Fulton Sheen and St. Francis of Assisi, we can learn what comes before one's "*fiat*" and the many fruits that come after it. Thanks to their fidelity to God's will and all that made that fidelity possible in the first place, so many fruits have come to the Church in America and around the world. Each one has brought about something of a new springtime in the Church. Praise God!

Thankfully, we need only look to the Church in central and southern Indiana for more local examples. In this Vocations Awareness Supplement, you will meet men and women in or from the archdiocese who are serving God in the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life. They celebrate the sacraments, accompany families, serve those in need, teach, pray and help in a myriad of other ways.

Much of that happens quietly, but every bit of it matters eternally. Their "*fiats*" are bearing fruit and bringing about a new springtime—even in our own backyard. We must pray for them and appreciate them.

During this National Vocation Awareness Week, we are invited to remember that the same Lord Jesus who called our beloved pope, Blessed Fulton Sheen and St. Francis of Assisi is calling young people here in central and southern Indiana. Through our families first of all, but also through our schools, catechetical programs and youth groups, we have the joyous responsibility to help the next generation to pray about their own vocations.

When children learn to pray, encounter Jesus in the Eucharist and see adults joyfully living their vocations, they learn that God has something to say about their futures. They learn to ask, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

This week, pray for those who are discerning. Thank those who have answered. Encourage someone who might be called. And ask the Lord what "*fiat*" he desires from you. After all, one person's generous "*fiat*" can bear fruit for generations. May our archdiocese be filled with such "*fiats*!" And may the Lord bring a new springtime to his Church through them!

(Father Michael Keucher is director of vocations for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, dean of the Batesville Deanery and pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Shelbyville and St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Shelby County. Contact him at mkeucher@archindy.org*.)* †

The ‘habits’ of Saint Meinrad monks are seen in their daily prayer and work

By Fr. Simon Hermann, O.S.B.
Special to *The Criterion*



Benedictine Father Kolbe Wolniakowski coaches youths in proclaiming Scripture on June 27 during a One Bread One Cup youth liturgical leadership conference at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology in St. Meinrad. Formation of youths, lay adults, future deacons and future priests is a central part of the ministry of Saint Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad. (Photo courtesy of Saint Meinrad Archabbey)

Habits are the clothing that Benedictine monks wear at Saint Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad. But more important than the black tunic, scapular and belt they wear are the “habits”—the gifts and virtues—that the monks of Saint Meinrad embody in their common life together.

In learning about these “habits,” maybe you will see them reflected in a young man in your community and invite him to consider being a monk. Or maybe you are that young man. Maybe you’ll see the habits of the monks in yourself. If you do, then maybe you can have a discernment conversation with me, Father Simon. I serve as Saint Meinrad’s vocations director.

Our primary formation ministry is that of our seminary. Many monks are involved in teaching and forming men for the priesthood. This year, we have 117 men in formation for the priesthood, so it takes many monks to be professors, spiritual directors and formation mentors for the seminarians.

Some of our other formation ministries include our graduate theology program, our permanent deacon formation program, One Bread One Cup, which is our high school youth and summer college internship, our retreats at our Guest House and our external ministries like parish missions, parish Mass assistance, chaplaincies and retreats in dioceses or at religious communities.

Each monastery is different. Our primary focus at Saint Meinrad is that of formation ministry. It is beautiful to see the creativity of the Holy Spirit at work in the broad variety of ministries found in Benedictine communities across our country and around the world. Many have guest houses for guests to make retreats. Others have high schools and colleges. Some are involved with hands-on labor, arts and other crafts. But the foundation of any monastic community’s work is prayer.

At Saint Meinrad, we pray together five times a day, including at a Mass celebrated daily. We also have two times set aside each day for *lectio divina* (prayerfully engaging with Scripture or other spiritual texts). God nourishes and sustains us in our prayer, and he gives life to our work through our communal and private prayer.

All of this prayer and work is the framework of the Benedictine life going all the way back to St. Benedict himself 1,500 years ago. “*Ora et labora*,” the Latin words for “prayer and work,” is a motto for Benedictines around the world that summarizes their vocation and the common life they share together.

It is in this prayer and work that the habits of the Benedictine monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey are seen and come to life.

One way for a person to think about his or her vocation is to take to prayer with God and conversation with trusted friends and mentors the question of where you can best love God, best love your neighbor and best love yourself. What might it look like for a man to love and serve in those three ways at Saint Meinrad?

The first and last areas go hand-in-hand. To love God and self well at Saint Meinrad as a Benedictine monk looks like desiring to love God in communal prayer and personal prayer, and growing in a deeper love of oneself through receiving from God in prayer.

A man who realizes he is a sinner and is in need of God’s grace and mercy makes for a great monk, and a great person seeking to become a monk. It was once said by a monk at Saint Meinrad that a monk is a man who falls down every day and, by God’s grace, gets back up again. When we realize how far God loves us into wholeness and holiness and growth, we are patient, kind and caring toward others who are on their journey as Christians, too.

How do we love our neighbor at Saint Meinrad as Benedictine monks and those whom God might be nudging to consider loving through the Benedictine way of life? We primarily love and serve and minister through our care of each other in the monastic community. That love, care and the ongoing transformation of our life and prayer together helps us monks at Saint Meinrad do formation ministry well.

Our formation ministry includes work in our seminary and school of theology as professors, formators, spiritual directors and administrative leadership and support. Formation ministry also includes leading retreats at Saint Meinrad or off campus, forming youths and college students through One Bread, One Cup, preaching parish missions, working in trades, developing and sharing artistic skills and working in other areas that support these formation ministries.

God may place on a young man’s heart the desire to help form various facets of the Church like those we serve at and through Saint Meinrad. He may sense a nudge to be part of our formation ministry. After a successful application to the monastery and in the initial formation stages of monastic life, a young man may discover new and growing gifts that God stirs in him to put to service for the glory of God at Saint Meinrad.

We do important work at Saint Meinrad for the sake of the Church. The Benedictine monks here contribute to building up a sacred and essential part of the Church’s life. We firmly believe God is calling young men to contribute to this formation ministry and the life of prayer at Saint Meinrad that serves as its foundation.

Maybe you or someone you know is a Catholic, single young man between the ages of 20 and 40 who sounds like he would make a great monk after reading this article. You or he are a young man who desires to know and love God in a community of 70 monks, knows he is a sinner in need of God’ s grace and mercy and has some gifts—known and unknown—that he is stirred to put to service for the glory of God, especially related to formation ministry at Saint Meinrad.

The Lord continues to call young men to be part of our Benedictine monastic life at Saint Meinrad. Look us up and let us know how we can aid you in your discernment. Contact me, Saint Meinrad’s vocation director, by e-mailing vocations@saintmeinrad.edu. You can also learn more about Saint Meinrad Archabbey by visiting saintmeinrad.org. †



Benedictine monks of Saint Meinrad Archabbey in St. Meinrad process on Aug. 6 into the monastery’s Archabbey Church of Our Lady of Einseideln at the start of a Vespers liturgy during which Benedictine Novice Keegan Porter professed temporary vows. The monastic community prays in common in the church several times a day in the Liturgy of the Hours and at Mass. (Photo courtesy of Saint Meinrad Archabbey)

Vocations Awareness Supplement highlights the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life

This issue of *The Criterion* features our annual supplement that highlights vocations in the Church to the diaconate, priesthood and consecrated life.

It is ordinarily published during the U.S. bishops’ annual Vocations Awareness Week, which this year is on Nov. 3-9.

From the beginning, the Church has recognized that marriage is also a vocation, a pathway to holiness, to which God calls people. *The Criterion* publishes a marriage supplement annually in February.

In addition, the Archdiocese of Indianapolis has three offices which promote vocations. For information on the Office of Marriage and Family Life, go to archindy.org/marriageandfamily. For information on the diaconate, go to archindy.org/deacon. For information on the priesthood and consecrated life, go to heargodscall.com. †

Providence Sisters celebrate new postulant, profession of perpetual vows

By Jason Moon
Special to *The Criterion*

For Providence Sister Jessica Vitente and Jessica Sun, the summer of 2026 was memorable and monumental.

Sister Jessica, a native of Pomona, Cali., professed perpetual vows as a member of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods in St. Mary-of-the-Woods, while Jessica Sun, from northern Virginia, entered the congregation on Sept. 4 as a postulant.

Sister Jessica entered the Sisters of Providence on Sept. 10, 2018. She received the title of Sister on Aug. 3, 2019, and later professed first vows in 2021. On Aug. 8, she professed perpetual vows.

She admitted the eight-year journey has been eye-opening.

"I was attracted to the Sisters of Providence because I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself," she confessed. "I wanted a life of ministry and service to deepen my relationship with God.

"More importantly, I was curious about how these women of providence were living their lives through their charisms of love, mercy and justice."



Jessica Sun prepares on Sept. 4 to enter Providence Hall on the motherhouse grounds of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods in St. Mary-of-the-Woods as she is welcomed into the congregation as a postulant.

For Sun, the road leading to the Sisters of Providence began in 2023.

"As an activist turned activist-and-person-of-faith, the starting place for my discernment was an October 2023 Catholic sign-on letter to President Biden calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza," Sun said. "The Sisters of Providence were one of the women religious order signatories, and that began my providential journey with the dear vocation director Sister Joni Luna."

During her journey to perpetual vows, Sister Jessica said that, while she was already responding to where God was calling her, she felt compelled to search for more.

"When I met the Sisters of Providence, I had a deep desire for a new purpose," Sister Jessica said. "I believed I had a purpose, but the vision was murky."

Now eight years into her life as a woman religious, she said she is at peace.

"There is deep peace and deep joy in finally being a perpetually vowed Sister of Providence at this stage of my life," Sister Jessica said. "It is a great feeling to feel joyfully confident in living out the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, to trust and enjoy wherever my provident God calls me to respond to the needs of this time and to follow the path providence traced for me. I will follow it."

Sun's journey has only started with the Sisters of Providence, but she is looking forward to it.

"I am deeply drawn to the charism of love, mercy and justice, and I am in awe of how the Sisters of Providence have continued to be open to the Spirit and change with the times," Sun said. "I love that the sisters are unabashed in speaking out for God's just peace and nonviolence in answering Jesus' call to uplift and advocate for the infinite dignity of every human person, as well as the integrity of creation."



Providence Sister Dawn Tomaszewski places a ring on a finger of Providence Sister Jessica Vitente on Aug. 8 in the motherhouse chapel of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods in St. Mary-of-the-Woods. The ritual was part of Sister Jessica professing perpetual vows as a member of the congregation. At the time, Sister Dawn was superior general of the Sisters of Providence. (Photos courtesy of the Sisters of Providence)

Sun also said she has drawn much inspiration from the congregation's foundress, St. Mother Theodore Guérin.

"These sisters are committed to the justice that a true faith leads us to, and I can't wait to join in this ongoing dance with God with them," Sun said. "Mother Theodore has become a beautiful, warm leader and mentor I can pray with and be led by. What gentle and great love!"

Sister Jessica added that Aug. 8, 2026, will always be a date she remembers fondly.

"I am still relishing the happiest day of my life so far," she confessed. "This is the ongoing dialogue I have with my provident God since August: 'I will always love you and be with you forever. I am what I am and who I am. Give me nothing more than our love and grace. These alone are enough for me.' "

(Jason Moon is media relations manager of the Sisters of Providence. If you are interested in learning more about becoming a Sister of Providence, contact Sister Joni Luna at 361-500-9505 or at jluna@spsmw.org*.)* †

Sisters of Providence mark 20th anniversary of St. Mother Theodore's canonization

By Jason Moon
Special to *The Criterion*

Twenty years after St. Mother Theodore Guérin was declared a saint, visitors can still come face-to-face with tangible pieces of her extraordinary story.

Her remains rest in a handmade walnut casket made by an employee of the Sisters of Providence of Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods with wood from the campus of the congregation's motherhouse grounds, inside a shrine dedicated to the congregation's foundress.

Nearby, a portion of her finger bones—a first-class relic—is publicly displayed for veneration alongside the official decree from the Vatican declaring her a saint.

The Sisters of Providence celebrated the 20th anniversary of Mother Theodore's canonization on Oct. 11 with a pilgrimage, special Mass and picnic.

During the liturgy, additional first-class relics were given to representatives of each diocese in Indiana. Msgr. Frederick Easton, a retired archdiocesan priest, represented the Church in central and southern Indiana. At the time of Mother Theodore's canonization, he was the archdiocese's vicar judicial and was involved in the canonical investigation of the miracle that led to her being declared a saint.

"The 20th anniversary allowed us to remember St. Mother Theodore as a woman whose faith, courage and trust in providence continues to inspire," Sisters of Providence General Superior Sister Jeanne Hagelskamp said. "Her relics and personal belongings provide a tangible connection to her life and invite visitors to encounter her story in a deeply personal way."

For Catholics, relics provide a physical connection to saints and serve as reminders of their lives of faith and their continued place within the communion on saints. The Church distinguishes three classes of relics. First-class relics are portions of a saint's body, such as a bone, hair or blood. Second-class relics are objects personally owned, worn or used by a saint. Third-class relics are objects that have been touched to a first- or second-class relic.

The Shrine of Saint Mother Theodore Guerin offers visitors an opportunity to explore not only her relics, but also the personal belongings and places that tell the story of a woman who left France in 1840 for the Indiana frontier to establish a religious community that continues its mission to this day.

As the Sisters of Providence continue to celebrate this momentous anniversary, these relics offer visitors an especially meaningful connection to a woman whose life was marked by courage, prayer and an unwavering trust in providence.

Inside the shrine, visitors can see her writing desk, chaplet, prayer book, shoes and other items she brought with her from France when she journeyed with her five sister companions to western Indiana.

The exhibits chronicle her remarkable journey to the Indiana wilderness, where she established the Sisters of Providence and founded schools that helped shape Catholic education despite facing an unfamiliar landscape, limited resources and significant hardships.

St. Mother Theodore Guérin was declared a saint by Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican on Oct. 15, 2006, formally recognizing her holiness and establishing her veneration throughout the universal Church.

Her relics and preserved artifacts at Saint Mary-of-the-Woods offer visitors an opportunity to reflect not only on how she lived, but also on the enduring impact of her faith.

St. Mother Theodore Guérin's journey through the sainthood process culminated in her canonization, making her the eighth saint in America and the first in the state of Indiana.

Twenty years later, her relics remain a physical reminder of the woman behind the title "saint"—a woman who left France for an unfamiliar land, faced extraordinary challenges and built a lasting legacy grounded in faith, education and providence.



Representatives from the five dioceses in Indiana receive first class relics of St. Mother Theodore Guérin during an Oct. 11 Mass in the Church of the Immaculate Conception on the motherhouse campus of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods. Retired Msgr. Frederick Easton, right, represented the archdiocese at the liturgy. (Photo courtesy of the Sisters of Providence)

"The anniversary celebration of the canonization of Mother Theodore was a profound experience for me and for so many others," Sister Jeanne said. "To walk the paths where Mother Theodore trod with so many pilgrims was a graced moment. And the energy in the church of the celebration of the Eucharist was palpable.

"Then to see so many people making connections with one another at lunch was heartwarming. And one of the most touching moments of the day was to be in Mother Theodore's shrine and to watch pilgrims, young and old, come through and just be with Mother Theodore before they left campus. Providence was with us from beginning to end!"

(To learn more about St. Mother Theodore Guérin and the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, go to spsmw.org*.)* †

FRIAR

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All of this led Brother Michael to be chosen in 2013 by his fellow Franciscans to serve as their religious order's worldwide leader as its minister general. As such, he was the 120th successor of St. Francis of Assisi himself, serving in this office until 2021.

This summer, Brother Michael was elected as the minister provincial of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Province of the Franciscans that is made up of most of the members of the order in the U.S. It was formed in 2023 when several provinces came together to form one new province of about 700 friars. He also serves as the director of the Laudato Si' Center for Integral Ecology at Siena University in Loudonville, N.Y.

In an interview with *The Criterion*, Brother Michael reflected on how the lessons he learned as a youth in Indianapolis have remained with him and shaped him as his world has grown far beyond the near east side neighborhood.

"I'm no longer the paper boy or the one who cut grass in the neighborhood," he said. "But I'm still that person because that sense of community, that sense of responsibility, that sense of the dignity and the holiness of life that was communicated through the community of Holy Cross and other communities in Indianapolis remains."



Franciscan Brother Michael Perry greets Pope Francis at the Vatican during an April 2024 pilgrimage to Italy of members of the board of trustees of Siena University in Loudonville, N.Y. Brother Michael, who grew up on the near east side of Indianapolis, currently serves as minister provincial of the Franciscan Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, made up of some 700 friars in the U.S. He is also the director of the Laudato Si' Center for Integral Ecology at Siena University. (Photo courtesy of Siena University)

'Something that shaped my whole vision'

Although he's now ministered throughout the world and held positions of high responsibility in his religious community, Brother Michael remembers well the people in his neighborhood and parish who shaped him to be the person he has become.

One such person is retired Father John Geis, whose first pastoral assignment after his 1964 ordination was as associate pastor of Holy Cross Parish, serving there until 1970.

Brother Michael described Father Geis as "a wonderful pastoral person."

Then there was Father James Byrne, Holy Cross' pastor from 1970-83, whom Brother Michael described as "a natural pastoral person" who "was able to bring people together to work for the benefit of the community."

"He really presented to me an image of what the Second Vatican Council talked about, the Church as the people of God," Brother Michael added. "And that has never left me. That's something that shaped my whole vision."

Then there were his parents and his neighbors who helped form him. He recalls his parents and other adults in the neighborhood taking action to help their neighbors who were in need.

"The priests at Holy Cross were sensitive to that and would even sometimes just say that there's a family in need and can some families help," Brother Michael recalled. "And they'd get an immediate response."

After graduating from the former Holy Cross Central School in 1968, Brother Michael ultimately became part of the first graduating class of the-then new Roncalli High School in Indianapolis. He's also the first of its many graduates to be ordained to the priesthood.

Brother Michael was first drawn to the Franciscans by meeting a friar serving in Indianapolis who, in an ecumenical effort, worked with a Methodist congregation to serve the poor on trips to West Virgina.

Brother Michael joined what was then the Sacred Heart Province of the Franciscans, based in St. Louis. He first professed vows in 1978. When he later enrolled at Chicago Theological Union for priestly formation, two Augustinian friars showed him and other new students around the city in a bus ride.

One of those Augustinians was Brother Robert Prevost, the future Pope Leo XIV. The other Augustinian was also named Robert, which confused Brother Michael.

"I remember getting off the bus at the first stop and I turned to he who now is Pope Leo and I said, 'Are you Robert or Bob?' " Brother Michael recalled. "And he said, 'Just call me Bob.' "

Although his ties to Pope Leo are not that close, another pope played a much larger role in his life.

All Franciscans are 'successors of St. Francis'

After his ordination in 1984, Brother Michael did graduate studies in theology in England and later did missionary work in Africa and work for the U.S. bishops in Washington.

The friars of the Sacred Heart Province recognized his leadership potential in all these ministries and elected him as their minister provincial in 2008.

But it was a position that Brother Michael held for only 11 months. In 2009, Franciscans from around the world elected him to serve a six-year term as second in worldwide leadership of the order as its vicar general.

When he was told by a group of friars before the election that he was likely to be chosen for the office, Brother Michael asked them to choose someone else.

"But as good, obedient Franciscans are, you tell them not to do it, and they will do it," said Brother Michael with a laugh.

Four years into that term, history was made when Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Buenos Aires became the first Jesuit to be elected supreme pontiff and selected a papal name never adopted by a previous pope: Francis.

Less than a month after Pope Francis was elected on March 13, 2013, the pontiff appointed the Franciscans' minister general to serve as secretary for the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

That congregation (now a dicastery) needed a new secretary because its previous one, then-Archbishop Joseph W. Tobin, had been appointed in 2012 as archbishop of Indianapolis.

With the Franciscans no longer having a minister general, a special election was called to choose a friar to complete the last two years of the term of now-Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo. Brother Michael was elected.

It was a weighty moment for the man who had grown up on the near east side of Indianapolis, noting that becoming a successor of St. Francis "places a tremendous responsibility on one's shoulders."

"But I reminded them to not forget that each of them were also the successors of St. Francis, of the same spirituality, of the same invitation to do what is yours to do," Brother Michael said.

He tried to give his fellow Franciscans an example of their common spirituality by adding a word to the title of his new office: "servant." Brother Michael was to be the "minister general and servant" of the Franciscans.

"This is something that St. Francis highly valued," said Brother Michael, adding that it was "a central theme of Francis' writing and in his leadership of the Franciscan order, which he did until he resigned in 1220.

"He wanted us never to allow any rules or titles that we held to elevate us anything above washing the feet of others."

To 'reclaim our values' or 'to be reclaimed by them'

It was a moment of feet-washing that began reminding Brother Michael, his fellow Franciscans around the world and all Catholics of the service that all disciples of Christ are called to give those in need and those who suffer.

The new pontiff, following in the footsteps of his namesake, St. Francis, washed the feet of inmates in a Roman prison on Holy Thursday, March 28, 2013, just two weeks after his election.

In doing this so soon after his election, Pope Francis, for Brother Michael, was "demonstrating a quality for me, not only of Jesus and of the Church, but of the core values of the Franciscan identity, that our life is intimately connected with our brothers and sisters who are in various conditions of suffering."

"He really challenged us and reminded us of our simplicity and our need to always stay close to God's people, especially those who are marginalized, those who are poor," Brother Michael said.

He added that Pope Francis' ongoing witness was "an opportunity to reclaim our values—or maybe to be reclaimed by them—and to reorient our lives."

Later in 2013, Pope Francis issued his landmark apostolic exhortation on the proclamation of the Gospel, "*Evangelii Gaudium*" ("The Joy of the Gospel").

This document, Brother Michael said, reflected a particular Franciscan understanding of the nature of the Church.

"His vision was the same vision I grew up with as a young adult," he said, "as the Church as the people of God, the communion of the world with the Church and the Church's relationship to the world and all people, even those outside the Church."

Brother Michael continued to see deeply Franciscan qualities in other teaching documents of Pope Francis, such as his 2020 encyclical letter, "*Fratelli Tutti*: On Fraternity and Social Friendship."

For him, this document was a call to all Franciscans, and all Catholics, "to expand our spiritual and affective imagination to embrace all people, to recognize we're on a common journey together back toward God, together with all of creation."

This, Brother Michael said, is a message "which the world needs to hear today in all of the divisions, all the pursuit of weapons and war, with each country being told it has to stand on its own and demonstrate its capacity to dominate others."

'On the edge of a whole new adventure'

Because he served for eight years as minister general and servant of all Franciscans around the world, choosing Brother Michael to lead one province might seem like a no brainer.

But while he was humbled by his fellow friars' choice of him to lead the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, there was another friar whom he was praying would be selected instead of him.

"I think some people think that maybe because you've been to Rome and had some other job you might have some special wisdom, which simply isn't true," he said.

Nonetheless, Brother Michael is excited to lead his fellow friars across the U.S. in a time when other religious communities are considering that their time in the Church is coming to an end.

"Franciscans don't have that luxury because our charism doesn't come from us," he said. "Our charism belongs to the Church, and it belongs to the world.

"We're re-imagining [it] in light of what the Church and young people need right now. That's the direction we're being called to right now in terms of a witness."

Brother Michael noted that eight young friars recently professed solemn vows in his province, two others were ordained as priests and seven men entered the province as postulants.

"I feel excited because we're on the edge of a whole new adventure, a whole new epoch that's emerging," he said. "We don't have any control over it, and we certainly don't have a crystal ball knowing what direction it's going to lead us. But we are at an incredible moment in history, an incredible opportunity."

That's a big vision for a boy who grew up delivering newspapers and mowing lawns on Indianapolis' near east side. But the foundations of faith and care for all people that were laid there in his heart and soul have prepared Brother Michael for this moment.

"I just think God is preparing us for something amazing yet to come," he said. "We've just got to be faithful, and we've got to be willing to change and move forward."

(To learn more about a vocation as a Franciscan in the Province of Our Lady of Guadalupe, visit friars.us*.)* †

‘A desire for more’: Former New Albany parishioner professes first vows as a Dominican Sister of St. Cecilia

By Julie Young
Special to *The Criterion*

When Dominican Sister Mary Francis Noll first heard the Lord call her to be a religious sister, she was flattered but she wasn’t ready to make a commitment.

At the time, the Villa Hills, Ky., native was a senior at Western Kentucky University where she was pursuing a degree in psychological science. With graduation looming and the need to find that first post-college job, she spent a few quiet moments in prayer in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Becoming a bride of Christ wasn’t exactly on her radar.

“Thankfully, the Lord was patient with me,” she said.

After completing her undergraduate program, Sister Mary Francis was offered and accepted a position as a teacher’s aide at Immaculata Classical Academy in Louisville, Ky. Her parents, Bob and Jane Noll, had been educators. So, she was comfortable in a school setting and thought it would be a great environment to begin her career. She moved to southern Indiana where she rented a house with her good friend Emma Cox who connected her with Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany, as well as the area’s vibrant young adult scene.

Although she hadn’t forgotten that moment in adoration, Sister Mary Francis settled into single Catholic life. She sang in a choir at Our Lady of Perpetual Help under the direction of Katelyn Stumler, joined a weekly Bible study, worshiped at daily Mass and hung out with her new friends. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was missing.

“I was really happy, but I wasn’t completely happy or not as happy as I should have been in those circumstances,” Sister Mary Francis said. “There was a desire for more that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.”

It wasn’t long before the Lord approached again in her prayer. This time, she told him that she would pray about it. She’d researched various religious communities online after the first time she heard the Lord calling her during adoration and felt drawn to the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn. But she was torn.

After all, she was established in her parish community, and she had a great support system of friends. Would they understand if the Lord was calling her to something more?

“I didn’t tell anyone about my calling for a good amount of time because it was so personal to me,” Sister Mary Francis said. “But deep down, I knew that whatever the Lord was calling me to, I would have the support of that loving community.”

After arranging an informal visit to the religious community in 2022, Sister Mary Francis returned for a more formal “come and see” retreat the following year. She told her roommate that she found so much joy in the congregation that she didn’t want to leave.

“After this, she began discerning more seriously, and all the pieces fell into place,” Cox said. “It was like she was becoming more herself as she became more open to her vocation.”

Stumler wasn’t surprised at all when Sister Mary Francis shared that she was discerning a religious vocation.

“One of our parish choir members shared with me, after the fact, that there was always something different and special about her in regard to her love for the Catholic faith,” she said. “I think connecting with the members of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish gave her a supportive, faith-filled community where she could cultivate her calling.”

Just as everything seemed to be falling into place, a full-time job offer and a friend’s upcoming wedding caused Sister Mary Francis to reconsider the timing of the Lord’s plan for her life. Although she was confident that she was called to be a religious sister, she assumed that she would have to wait a year or two before entering the Nashville Dominicans, as they are commonly known. On the surface, life continued on as normal, but inside, Sister Mary Francis was restless and she was no longer content to wait.

“As soon as I admitted that to myself there was instant peace,” she said.

After a lengthy application process, Sister Mary Francis was accepted into the congregation in June 2023 and entered religious life two months later. After a year as a postulant in which she was introduced to life as a Dominican and continued to discern her vocation, she was admitted into the community’s two-year novitiate where she received her white veil as well as her religious name. During that time, she gained a deeper understanding of the vows she would profess as well as the customs of the community.



Dominican Sister Mary Francis Noll, left, smiles after professing her first vows on Aug. 10 at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville, Tenn., as a member of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia, whose motherhouse is in Nashville. Dominican Mother Anna Grace Neenan, prioress general of the community, right, sits beside Sister Mary Francis, who was previously a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany. (Photo courtesy of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia)

On Aug. 10, Sister Mary Francis took the next step when she professed vows of poverty, chastity and obedience during the Rite of First Religious Profession at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville. Six other members of the community professed vows with her. Sister Mary Francis’ parents and younger sister were present for the occasion, as well as several members of her former faith community in New Albany.

“I was overjoyed to be at the Mass where Sister Mary Francis took her first vows,” Stumler said. “Her face was radiant and we couldn’t help but feel that she had the look of someone who was truly fulfilling God’s will for her life.”

Today, Sister Mary Francis is working toward her Master of Arts in teaching at Aquinas College in Nashville. She has also been given the opportunity to be part of her community’s choral ensemble and continues to play praise and worship music on her guitar.

Although she doesn’t get to see her southern Indiana friends as much as she used to, she remains grateful to the faith community who supported her as she answered the Lord’s call.

“I made wonderful friends there and I continue to carry them in my heart,” she said.

(To learn more about the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn., visit nashvilledominicans.org*.)* †



Dominican Sister Mary Francis Noll, right, poses on Aug. 10 with Katelyn Stumler, director of liturgical music ministry at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany, at the motherhouse of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn. Sister Mary Francis, who made her first profession of vows that day, had previously been a member of a choir led by Stumler at Our Lady of Perpetual Help. (Submitted photo)

ArchIndy Vox podcast explores Vatican II vision for religious life

ARCHINDY VOX PODCAST

***Criterion* staff report**

Ever wonder what religious sisters and brothers promise when they profess vows? Or how their communities have changed since the Second Vatican Council?

The latest episode of ArchIndy Vox’s series on the council takes up “*Perfectae Caritatis*,” the Latin title of Vatican II’s “Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life,” issued in 1965.

Host Ken Ogorek, executive director of the archdiocesan Secretariat for Evangelizing Catechesis, talks with Benedictine Sister Sheila Fitzpatrick of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove and Holy Cross Brother Matt Rehagen, who teaches religion and math at Cathedral High School in Indianapolis.

They unpack the document’s call to return to the sources—Scripture, the spirit of each community’s founder and the tradition of the Church—and adapt that heritage to the times.

They also explore why the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are less a list of “no’s” than a wholehearted “yes” to God; how discernment unfolds in community, illustrated by stories of the strict, regimented life religious sisters knew before the council; what makes a founder’s charism unique, from the Benedictine rhythm of prayer and work to Holy Cross’ vision of education as a work of the resurrection; and why both guests see a joyful future for consecrated life.

The discussion is a good entry point for anyone curious about what Vatican II said and wondering whether God might be calling them to religious life.

Listen on any major podcast platform or watch on the Archdiocese of Indianapolis’ YouTube channel by searching @IndianaCatholic or by scanning the QR code at right with your smartphone camera. †

Father Joseph Feltz loves his faith—and IndyCar racing

By Matt Keating
Special to *The Criterion*

Considering his love of IndyCar racing, Father Joseph Feltz didn't hesitate when he was offered his latest assignment as an archdiocesan priest.

Archbishop Charles C. Thompson appointed him to serve as the pastor of St. Christopher Parish in Indianapolis, which is less than a mile from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

"I was told it was a very easy decision," said Father Feltz, who began serving at St. Christopher in July of 2025. "When I was asked to be pastor, I said yes right away. I didn't hesitate."

Besides his leadership of the parish, Father Feltz is also a chaplain for IndyCar Ministry, an ecumenical organization. He celebrates Mass for the IndyCar drivers, crews and fans during the race season.

"I've been with the ministry for a while," Father Feltz said, noting that his ministry has taken him to races in Toronto, Milwaukee, St. Petersburg, Fla., and other venues in the past. "I'm just at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with the IndyCar Ministry now. I love the month of May around here. It's very exciting."

So is seeing the turnout for the Masses that are celebrated on the morning of the Indianapolis 500, Masses he has concelebrated alongside Archbishop Charles C. Thompson and his predecessor, now-Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, archbishop of Newark, N.J.

"We had 420 people come to the Masses in the race car garages when it only seats 100 people," says Father Feltz, who attended the Indy 500 as a boy with his dad in the 1970s and has been at every Indy 500 since 1986. "It was a wonderful thing to see so many people attending Mass before the race."

Father Feltz said his interest in auto racing is partly rooted in his experience of being trained in and working as an engineer prior to his discerning a call to the priesthood.

The engineering that's involved in creating the designs of the engines used in IndyCar racing amazes him. Still, he appreciates his closeness to IndyCar even more, viewing it as a community in which he gets to give pastoral care as a priest.

"I feel like my interest in the community and my faith have both increased," said Father Feltz. "I've been encouraged by the re-emergence of faith in people, particularly among young people."

He believes a lot of young people are disenchanted by today's culture and so are seeking more spiritual meaning in their lives.

"I think technology, artificial intelligence and the way it can dehumanize people has led to more young people looking for something more meaningful and spiritual," Father Feltz said. "They are looking for something that can allow them to recapture their humanity. Some people pulled away from their faith, but they are returning. It's exciting to see that the Holy Spirit is so active."

Father Feltz experienced that same longing for something deeper in his young life—a search that led to him becoming a priest.

'This has been a great fit for me'

Growing up in Indianapolis, he attended St. Barnabas School and graduated from Roncalli High School in 1981.

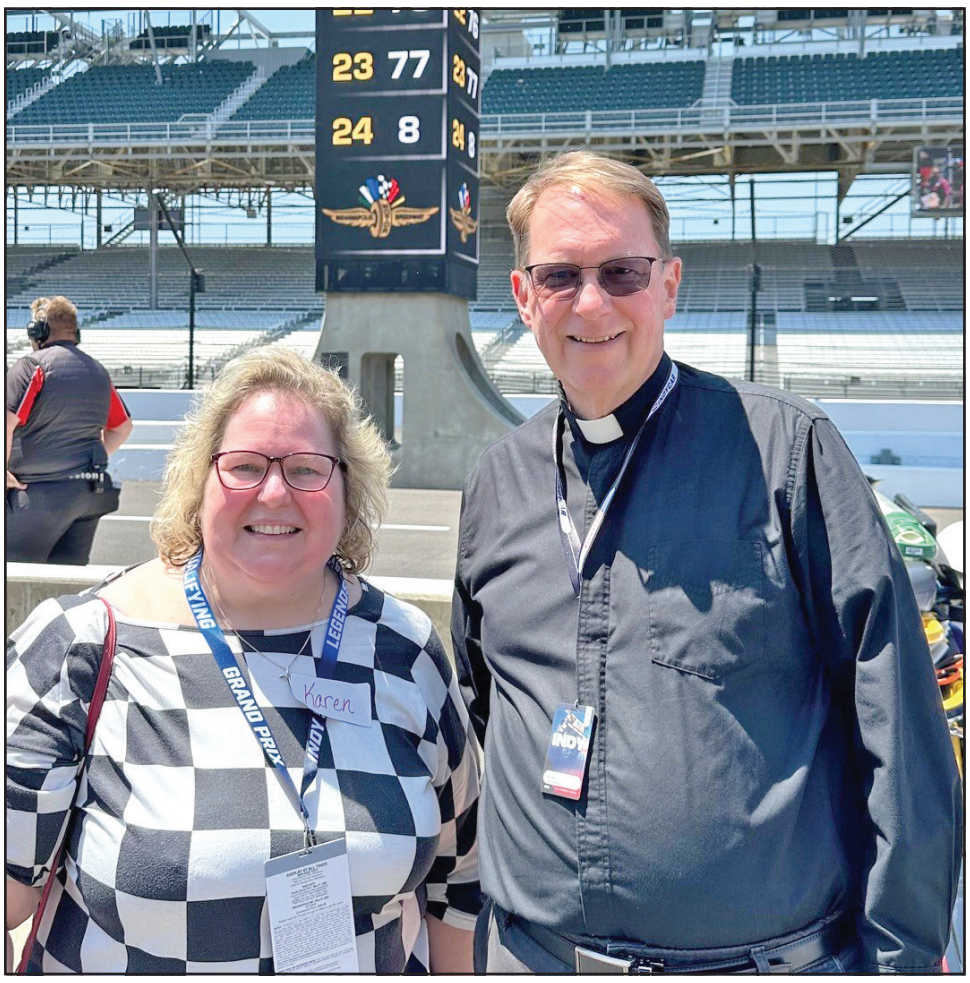
His education continued at the General Motors Institute (now Kettering University) where he earned a degree in electrical engineering.

"I worked at Allison Gas Turbine and later Allen-Bradley as an electrical engineer, and I enjoyed my work at both places," said Father Feltz.

Still, when he attended a retreat at St. Barnabas Parish, he felt drawn to strengthen his faith.

"I decided I was going to start praying the rosary at lunchtime in the parking lot of my office complex," Father Feltz recalled. "I kept the beads in my pocket. At first, I laughed over the idea of pursuing the priesthood, but the more I thought of it, the more I began to think it was a great idea. I had faith I could do it."

That belief grew after talking with a few priests, including now-Archbishop of Seattle Paul D. Etienne, who was vocations director for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis at the time of Father Feltz's discernment of the priesthood.



Father Joseph Feltz, pastor of St. Christopher Parish in Indianapolis, poses on May 12 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with Karen King, principal of his parish's school. In addition to serving as pastor of St. Christopher, Father Feltz is also a chaplain for IndyCar Ministry. (Submitted photo)

"I eventually left engineering," said Father Feltz. "I attended Saint Meinrad Seminary in the fall of 1997 and was ordained on June 1, 2002."

Father Feltz's first assignment was in Richmond, where he served for two years as associate pastor for the parishes of Holy Family, St. Andrew and St. Mary—now combined as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish.

"That kept me busy," said Father Feltz. "I worked with Father Todd Riebe and really learned a lot from him. We have remained friends since then."

Subsequent assignments have taken him across central and southern Indiana. He served as pastor of St. Lawrence Parish in Lawrenceburg, as dean of the Batesville Deanery and as administrator of St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Parish in Aurora. He later served as pastor of St. Malachy Parish in Brownsburg.

"When St. Malachy moved from the city of Brownsburg to the cornfields, we had 72 acres to build the new school and rectory," said Father Feltz. "That was very nice."

Father Feltz has also served as priest moderator and sacramental minister at St. Mary-of-the-Woods Parish in St. Mary-of-the-Woods and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Terre Haute. He has also been pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany and dean of the New Albany Deanery. And he served as vice-chancellor and vicar of clergy for the archdiocese.

"That was wonderful," he said. "I was vicar for the clergy for four and a half years. I served with Cardinal Tobin and Archbishop Thompson."

At every turn, Father Feltz has kept his focus on leading people closer to God. Now, he gets to combine that desire for his parishioners with his ministry for the IndyCar community while leading St. Christopher Parish.

He sums up that combination by saying, "This has been a great fit for me."

(Matt Keating is a freelance writer and a graduate of Bishop Chatard High School in Indianapolis. For more information on a vocation to the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, visit HearGodsCall.com.) †



Father Joseph Feltz, pastor of St. Christopher Parish in Indianapolis, celebrates a Mass on Sept. 27, 2025, on the grounds of the faith community. Assisting at the Mass is altar server Jacob Shook, right. (Submitted photo)

Serra Club invites students to enter annual vocations essay contest

The Serra Club of Indianapolis is sponsoring its annual vocations essay contest during the months of November and December. It is open to any Catholic student in grades 7-12 in the archdiocese who are in Catholic schools, public schools or who are homeschooled.

Students entering essays for the contest are asked to reflect on St. Francis of Assisi and Blessed Fulton J. Sheen.

This year, the Church marks the 800th anniversary of the death of St. Francis, and the beatification of Archbishop Sheen occurred on Sept. 24. Both tirelessly shared the Gospel in ways that were new for their times and showed a deep love for the poor.

In 300–500 words, reflect on these questions: What can their example teach you about having a missionary spirit? How has a priest, deacon or a member of a religious community inspired you to share Christ's message in a new way and to serve those in need?

How might God be calling you beyond your comfort zone to spread the Gospel in creative ways, care for those most in need and follow the vocation he has prepared for you?

For more details and an essay submission form, contact your school religion teacher or parish catechist or youth minister. Information can also be requested by contacting the archdiocesan vocations office at vocations@archindy.org.

Submitted essays must be postmarked no later than Dec. 18. †

Former Bloomington youth minister finds fulfillment as missionary sister

By Natalie Hoefer

Upon graduating from college in 2011, Ashley Barnett was torn between two parish youth ministry director job offers. One was in her hometown of St. Louis and the other was at St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Bloomington.

Ultimately, she chose the latter, taking her mother's advice to "stretch and go someplace new."

She didn't know at the time that the move would lead to a lifetime of "stretching and going someplace new" as Sister Maria Gemma of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT).

"I felt called to the missionary religious life," says Sister Gemma, who will profess her final vows next summer. "I didn't think my desires could be as fulfilled as they are."

The sense of joy and peace she feels now is far different than the doubts and concerns she experienced on her discernment journey.

In time, Sister Gemma came to realize that Jesus "invites us to trust and take each step with him," she says—even when that step seems to make no sense on the surface.

'A catalyst in my relationship with Christ'

Raised in the Catholic faith, Sister Gemma studied theology and catechesis with a focus on youth ministry at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Steubenville, Ohio.

"My life was really impacted by youth ministry," she says. "When I was invited to a youth group in high school, it became a catalyst in my relationship with Christ. … I felt called to serve in the same way I was served, helping teens to know that Jesus loves them."

Sister Gemma laughs when she shares a "one-sided deal" she made with the Lord during her senior year in college.

"I said, 'OK, Jesus. I want to work fulltime as a youth minister within eight hours or less of home [in St. Louis], and I will say yes, but I would really like to know by the time I graduate,' " she recalls.

She applied for a position at a St. Louis parish that had an existing youth ministry program and was offered the job.

She also applied for the position at St. Charles Borromeo and received a job offer the week before she graduated—proving that "Jesus came through just as I'd asked!"

On the surface, the job with the existing youth ministry program in her hometown was the obvious choice. After all, she'd never heard of Bloomington, she would have to create the youth ministry program at St. Charles Borromeo, she hadn't met the priest and didn't know if he would support her role, and the pay was less.

Nevertheless, "I was so attracted to that job," says Sister Gemma, who began her new job in August 2011.

Fortunately, the new pastor Father Thomas Kovatch, who arrived at the parish shortly after her, "loved our teens and showed up in their lives," she says.

And he was impressed by Sister Gemma.

"She's just a joy-filled, happy person who completely focuses on what she can do for others," says Father Kovatch. "Everything she does, she does with excitement, joy and energy. The youths just loved her, and so did the parishioners. … I think it's because she brings the light of Christ alive."

Eventually, Father Kovatch became "like a spiritual father" to her, says Sister Gemma. "He was one of first people I talked to about being called to religious life."

Grateful, affirmed, confident in Christ's call

Between 2014 and 2018, Sister Gemma joined Father Kovatch, parish youths and families on seven mission trips to Uganda.

"That changed my life," she says.

Sister Gemma had thought about religious life at different points in her life but had been considering the vocation more seriously in the year prior to her first mission trip in 2014.

During a Mass on that visit, she remembers thinking, "I love you so much, Jesus. I'll do whatever you want, go wherever you want."

Kneeling in prayer after receiving Communion, "I heard Jesus say, 'I want you to be mine forever.' And I knew that meant religious life," says Sister Gemma.

Despite doubts of having "courage to respond with my whole life," she researched different types of orders and discerned a call to the missionary religious life.

She contacted a college friend who had become a SOLT missionary priest to discuss the order and its missionary lifestyle. Attracted by what she heard, Sister Gemma reached out to the head of novices for the SOLT sisters.

The two communicated for almost two years "about the community, my own discernment, what my prayer life was like, what my next step should be," says Sister Gemma.

But two issues held her back: health and money.

Sister Gemma, like her parents and siblings, was born with the genetic condition known as dwarfism. The physiological effects have caused her severe back pain, resulting in multiple surgeries.

"I was really suffering at that time," she says. "I wondered if my health was strong enough to enter religious life, and the [SOLT] community was discerning that, too."

She also had a student loan debt of nearly $75,000 to pay off before entering the order if she was accepted—something she greatly desired after meeting the sisters during a "come and see" visit.

"I really liked them," Sister Gemma recalls. "I was attracted to how the sisters pray, how they love Our Lady and serve people. I felt convicted to join religious life in this community."

After she was accepted by the order in November 2017, the news was shared with the St. Charles Borromeo community—including her need to pay off her debt before entering the order.

"It was certainly less than a month before my whole debt was paid off by people from the parish," says Sister Gemma. "It was such a gift, and I felt so grateful and affirmed, but also confident that Jesus was calling me. I knew I was leaving with the blessing and love of all the people I served and loved in my time at the parish."

She entered the SOLT community on Aug. 22, 2018, and began living the mobile life of a missionary.

Jesus' 'little gem'

Sister Gemma spent one year as an aspirant and one year as a postulant at the sisters' convent in Seattle, Wash., while doing mission work with the order in North Dakota during the summers. She moved to Rosstown near Corpus Christi, Texas, for her two-year novitiate in 2020 and professed first vows on July 16, 2022.

Prior to the profession of first vows, novices submit to the order's superior, known as the General Sister Servant, up to three possible religious names.

"St. Gemma is a saint I've had a devotion to for a long time—she's the patron of people with back issues," says Sister Gemma of the saint who suffered from spinal meningitis. "Her name means 'little gem,' and that's what I want to be for Jesus—his little gem, someone he keeps forever.

"I was so excited when I was named Sister Gemma" during the vow ceremony, she says.

She draws inspiration from her namesake's "love of Jesus in the midst of suffering" as she continues to deal with back pain. Sister Gemma had two more back surgeries, spending all of 2024 and the spring of 2025 recovering.

"She suffers a lot from her pain, but she masks how she feels so most people don't know," says Father Kovatch. "But she still has a high level of joy and happiness despite the physical problems she lives with and endures. … I think it's a witness to others, that if this young religious sister can love God despite her suffering, why can't I?"

Sister Gemma admits her genetic condition means she "can't always do things as others, or I need more help," she says. "But it's not like Jesus sees my weakness. No, it's 'I love you and everything about you. I want even more for you. I want your greatest happiness and fulfillment.' And sometimes that comes through the cross."

'Love is always our mission'

Outside of her time off for health issues, Sister Gemma served at an elementary school in Rosstown after her first vows. In July, she moved to Phoenix to serve as a parish youth minister.

"It's so much fun to be doing youth ministry again—I love serving teens," she says.

SOLT Sister Mary Emmanuel Schmidt calls her "a force to be reckoned with." The Sister Servant for the American Region has known Sister Gemma since 2018. "She's very dynamic, personable, extra friendly and outgoing. I think people just automatically feel very at ease with her, and it energizes her to be with people—the more people the better!"

Members of the SOLT order serve together in teams of priests, sisters and laity, a community that "is a good fit for the way God wired her," Sister Mary Emmanuel adds. "She has a great love for the Lord and her vocation."

Sister Gemma, who will profess her final vows next July, agrees.

"Love is always our mission—I love the Lord, he loves his people, and I love his people," she says.

Her advice for women discerning religious life includes having a spiritual director and worshiping at daily Mass.

"And spend time in adoration," she adds. "Being with Jesus in person is very important, and [adoration] is the one place where the noise quiets and there's no other voice but his and yours."

And trust that "when you take the next step, Jesus will be right there. He lives our life with us and in us—you never do it alone."

With such trust, Sister Gemma has come to "realize that Jesus' desires for me are so much greater than what I had for myself and what I imagined. He has strengthened my heart to be able to receive more of him.

"Wherever he wants to go is where I want to be." †



Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Sister Maria Gemma smiles with Father Thomas Kovatch, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Bloomington, on July 16, 2022, after she professed her first vows as a member of the religious community. She served as youth minister at St. Charles Borromeo from 2011—the same year Father Kovatch became pastor of the parish—through 2018, during which time the priest became "like a spiritual father" to her. (Submitted photo)



Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity (SOLT) Sister Maria Gemma speaks at a fundraiser dinner at Our Lady of Corpus Christi Retreat Center in Corpus Christi, Texas, on May 27. Behind her is a statue of the Blessed Mother with the order's emblem: three interlocking circles each with an image representing the three persons of the Holy Trinity. (Submitted photo)

Seminarians credit experience in Catholic schools in their discernment

By Sean Gallagher

God can lead a person to his or her vocation through many channels of grace: parents, friends, a pastor, a spiritual director, prayer and the sacraments.

In addition to these influences, several current archdiocesan seminarians also identify the experiences they had in Catholic schools in the archdiocese as a means by which God led them to consider a possible call to the priesthood in their lives.

Within those school communities were many pathways of God's grace for the seminarians: fellow students, chaplains, teachers and an overall culture in the school in which discerning a vocation to religious life or ordained ministry is affirmed and encouraged.

Four of these seminarians spoke recently with *The Criterion* about how their experiences in Catholic schools helped them get to where they are today.



Seminarian Dean Cheever stands outside of Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School in Indianapolis on Oct. 13. A Scecina graduate, Cheever is in his second year of priestly formation at Bishop Simon Bruté College Seminary and Marian University, both in Indianapolis. (Photo by Sean Gallagher)

Influential priests

The presence of priests in schools, either serving as chaplains in high schools or simply as a pastor regularly present in his parish's school, has laid the groundwork for the discernment of three seminarians.

Seminarians Josh Russell and Nathan Huynh are both in their fourth year of priestly formation at Bishop Simon Bruté College Seminary and Marian University, both in Indianapolis.



Nathan Huynh

They were previously students at Providence High School in Clarksville and gave credit to priests who served as chaplains at the school as helping them to grow in their faith and opening their hearts to a possible priestly vocation.

Father Adam Ahern was a chaplain at Providence in Russell's freshman year there. Making the sacrament of penance available daily during students' lunch periods in the cafeteria made confession an ordinary part of the life of faith for Russell.

"It ended up becoming a part of conversation, 'Hey, I'm going to go to confession. I'll be right back,' " Russell said. "It was very normal. I always appreciated that. Even among my non-Catholic friends, it was fine to talk about because he made it normal."



Josh Russell

Father Daniel Atkins, a retired archdiocesan priest who died on Sept. 25, was a source of encouragement for both Russell and Huynh.

"He was very understanding, very patient with me when I was really struggling with a lot of things," recalled Russell, a member of Holy family Parish in New Albany. "He chose to spend time seeing me just as a son of God and that was it. That was his whole job. That was his whole life. And he really lived that out in a way that was helpful for me."

After Huynh told Father Atkins that he had an interest in the priesthood, the priest gave him "advice and spiritual readings on the discernment process and what it's like being in the seminary," recalled Huynh, a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in New Albany.

"I would also see him every Thursday when I would go to daily Mass, so I was able to grow closer to him that way, too," Huynh added. "Seeing how joyful he was doing his ministry work inspired me because it truly showed that he was doing it for the love of Jesus."

Russell spent two years as a volunteer for a Catholic ministry after graduating from Providence before he became a seminarian. He looks back on the priests who served as chaplains at his high school as being critical to his future discernment.

"If not for those two men, I wouldn't be in seminary right now," Russell said. "I've got immense gratitude for Providence as an institution for providing a space to have such great [priests] and grateful for their example."

Father Robert Gilday, now retired, was the only pastor that seminarian Dean Cheever knew through his high school years as a member of St. Therese of the Infant Jesus (Little Flower) Parish in Indianapolis.

"He was a constant presence in the school," said Cheever, who is in his second year of formation at Bishop Bruté and Marian. "He was a great pastor and strong in the faith. He was a very good inspiration to me."

Influential teachers

Cheever also noted that two of his theology teachers at Father Thomas Scecina Memorial High School in Indianapolis helped him become open to the priesthood.

Both were young adults and had previously been seminarians for dioceses outside of Indiana.

"It was very humanizing just to be able to see younger men that I think I could relate to more who had a positive experience in seminary but didn't ultimately become priests," Cheever recalled of the teachers, who are no longer on Scecina's faculty. "They were very passionate about the faith. That was a very good example to me."

Seminarian Lucas LaRosa recalls the encouragement to consider the priesthood he received at Roncalli High School in Indianapolis more than a decade ago from now-retired Deacon Thomas Horn, who was a religion teacher for him there.

"I still look back on that 13 years later," said LaRosa, who is a seminarian at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology at St. Meinrad. "It did have an impact on me. It was an honor."

Another religion teacher for LaRosa in his time at Roncalli was Patrick Verhiley, now director of the Catholic Franciscan Leadership Program at Marian University.

LaRosa described him as "an awesome teacher" who had "a really clear and strong devotion to the Lord."

The conviction of faith that LaRosa saw in Verhiley led him to take his spiritual advice seriously.

"It was like, if Mr. Verhiley says so, then I'll do it," LaRosa recalled.

Russell spoke about how Diana Welch, a biology teacher at Providence, helped deepen his faith.

"She wanted us to know biology, yes," Russell said. "But she also wanted us to know facts about the empirical world that would really draw us to understand and better appreciate Jesus Christ and the miracles that we attest to in the Church."

The connection between biology and the faith was especially highlighted for Russell in Welch's class when they studied a book during Lent that examined Christ's experience in his passion and death from scientific and medical perspectives.

He described it as "a scientific process" that helped him "connect who I believed God to be" with "what I believe God went through."

Influential students and school experiences

Cheever pointed to the friendship at Scecina that he shared with his brother Joe and with Ian McKiernan, both now in their first year of formation at Bishop Bruté and Marian.

"The three of us would talk about our experiences and the way that we've grown deeper in the faith," Cheever said. "That was just a very good group to have."

Huynh said the opportunity he had as a senior at Providence to help lead a retreat for juniors was influential for him.

"Being able to share my faith was good 'practice' for being a priest, since by my junior year I was dead set on joining the priesthood," he said.

Years after he took part in it, LaRosa still looks back on his senior retreat at Roncalli as playing a pivotal moment in his life of faith.



Lucas LaRosa

"It was a really moving experience where I felt a lot of love both within my own relationship with God, with my family, with my friends, my classmates whom I may or may not have known that well," LaRosa said. "When I went forward into college and into the workforce, the things I learned from that senior retreat were what I wanted to hold onto.

"It was having your own relationship with God but also seeing that through your friends and family's eyes, too, and feeling that love of the Father through them as well."

In addition to his senior retreat, LaRosa also had the opportunity of a lifetime during his senior year when he was one of four Roncalli students selected to go to the Vatican for the canonization of St. John XXIII, whose name before his election as pope was Cardinal Angelo Roncalli.

Because he was declared a saint in the same liturgy in 2014 as St. John Paul II, the crowds in Rome were enormous. LaRosa, his fellow students and then-Roncalli principal Chuck Weisenbach waited in line all night to get a place in St. Peter's Square for the canonization Mass.

"Everyone was packed in like sardines, pushing forward, trying to get as close to the front as possible," LaRosa recalled. "We knew we were in it for the long haul. This was a global thing. I got to live one of the biggest moments in the school's history.

"Looking back, that definitely had a cool impact on me in my life."

By the numbers, promoting a culture of vocations

The high schools of the seminarians featured above are not the only ones in central and southern Indiana that have graduates who are current archdiocesan seminarians.

At present, the archdiocese has seminarians from six high schools operated by the archdiocese or its parishes and from three independent Catholic high schools.

Roncalli currently has 22 graduates who are priests, three women in religious life and three more women who are currently novices.

Seven Providence graduates are either currently priests or who died as priests, including Father Atkins. Six women who graduated from Providence are currently religious sisters. Additionally, Benedictine Abbot Brendan Seipel of St. Bernard Abbey in Cullman, Ala., is also a Providence graduate.

Likewise, seven Scecina graduates went on to be ordained priests, with one now deceased. And seven graduates of the school went on to become women religious, with one now deceased.

As a member of the Roncalli graduation class of 1979, a teacher from 1984-90 and after serving as an assistant principal, principal and in his last year as school president, Weisenbach has a good perspective on how Roncalli has nurtured a culture of vocations over the years in which students are encouraged to embrace whatever vocation to which God is calling them.

"The overall message that we're constantly trying to share with our students is, 'What is God calling us to be?' " Weisenbach said. "He's given each of us a set of gifts and talents that's unique. What's he asking us to do with these gifts and talents? Let's be open to that."

If students express an openness to vocations to religious life or ordained ministry, Weisenbach said the whole school community will "hold them in high esteem, which I think has been encouraging."

(For more information about a vocation to the priesthood in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, visit HearGodsCall.com*.)* †



Benedictine Sister Jennifer Mechtild Horner considers the chapel as her favorite place in the new Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove. She recently began serving as president of the Monastic Congregation of St. Gertrude, a congregation made up of 14 autonomous monasteries across the United States and Canada, including Our Lady of Grace Monastery. (Photo by John Shaughnessy)

BENEDICTINE

continued from page 1B

myself slipping. I don't want to be remembered for the time I got lost in a sermon.'

"For me that was such a beautiful thing because he was able to name reality. In our world and in all of our lives, to name reality isn't to say we failed, it's just to say this is where we are."

She embraces that approach as the president of the monastic congregation.

A new reality touched with hope

"I'm a person who is full of hope, but I'm also realistic," Sister Jennifer says. "I definitely see hope in situations, but I really believe in naming what is, so we can create something new. If we don't name what is, then we're living in a way that's not going to help us move forward.

"There are some communities in our congregation that really realize what some people call, 'coming to completion.' I like to call it, 'coming to fulfillment.' The community has lived what God has called them to do.

"But there are other communities—and I think we're one of them here at Our Lady of Grace—that are still open to taking vocations."

That combination of understanding the reality, being open to change and moving forward with work and hope has been on magnificent display at Our Lady of Grace Monastery since the sisters moved into their new, smaller, more inviting, stunningly-more-light-filled home in the spring of this year—a $24 million facility that replaced the one that served the sisters for more than 60 years.

"I'm proud of our community for making the decision to downsize our monastery so it really fits us," Sister Jennifer says. "Even more than downsizing, I call it 'right-sizing.' When you have a big community and you're getting smaller, you're in a place that's not really livable, and it gets more and more expensive. Every community has to face this."

She also sees another benefit to the new facility.

"We've had some people visiting us. Because we've made a decision to 'right-size' our buildings, I think if a younger person is looking at us, they see that we are making decisions about ourselves and not just living in a place pretending that everything is fine."

'I know that God is always with me'

There's one place in the new monastery that immediately became a favorite of Sister Jennifer and many of the other 39 sisters who call it home.

"I love our new monastery chapel," she says about the setting where huge windows allow light to pour in, offering a scenic view of the trees, plants and flowers that mark the monastery's grounds. "The chapel is the heart of the monastery, and we are blessed to gather there often. I am a person that loves the outdoors. Being able to connect with nature in our chapel draws me closer to God."

She counts the new monastery, the breathtaking chapel and her latest calling as the president of the monastic congregation as continuing the many blessings she has received as a religious sister in the Benedictine community.

"The greatest gift is being able to seek God with others who have the same goal," she says. "Daily, we turn to God together asking for God's grace. We cooperate with one another as we discern God's call and help one another grow in God's love. I will always be thankful that God has called me to this way of life."

Her gratitude extends to the way her religious life has enhanced her connection to Christ.

"The blessings I have received from my relationship with Christ are too many to be named," Sister Jennifer says. "I would say that trusting in our all-loving God has given me the courage to face both the joys and struggles that come my way. I know that God is always with me, calling me to become more of who God calls me to be."

The call she has received is one that she believes we have all been called to follow in our lives.

"My relationship with Christ has called me to reach out to others and to be aware of the many needs in the world," she says. "It reminds me that there are so many in our world longing for love and a place to belong. I am called to reach out wherever and whenever I can, sharing Christ's love with others."

(For more information about a vocation as a Benedictine Sister of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, go to benedictine.com*.)* †

Sister Jennifer shares her favorite parts of her vocation

By John Shaughnessy

Benedictine Sister Jennifer Mechtild Horner has been a member of her order since 1995, a time during which she has lived most of those years at Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove.

When she was asked to share her favorite gifts about being a part of the Benedictine community at the monastery, Sister Jennifer said, "I have many things I love." Then she focused on four aspects that are especially meaningful to her.

Sharing a life of prayer.

"As Benedictines, we are called to a deep life of prayer," she said. "Gathering each day for prayer as a community helps me to go deeper in my relationship with Christ. Having the support of the sisters around me helps me to be faithful."

Finding God in the silence.

"Our Benedictine way of life calls us to enter the silence. It is in this place that we come face to face with ourselves and God. It is in the silence that I hear God speaking to me and have the grace given to respond to God's voice."

Living in community.

"I love our community life together," Sister Jennifer said. "Living with my sisters calls me to be the best version of myself. The sisters both support and challenge me. It is in living together that I learn more about myself and how I need to grow."

Finding joy and growth across the generations.

"I enjoy intergenerational living," Sister Jennifer said. "Our youngest sister is in her early 40's, and our oldest member is 103. There is so much wisdom in our monastery, and we all learn from one another." †

Seminarians look to Blessed Fulton J. Sheen as a role model in faith, ministry

By Sean Gallagher

Seminarian Josh Russell had his doubts before going to the beatification Mass of Blessed Fulton J. Sheen on Sept. 24 at The Dome at America's Center in St. Louis.



Josh Russell

It was going to be a long day for him and the other 38 seminarians from several dioceses in formation at Bishop Simon Bruté College Seminary in Indianapolis. They left for St. Louis early on Sept. 24 and were to return late that night.

But once Russell entered the stadium for the liturgy, he was glad he came.

"It was a rallying experience," said Russell, a member of Holy Family Parish in New Albany. "While we processed in, I took a glance around at the 50,000 people all gathered to celebrate the life of a great man within the Church and couldn't help getting happily overwhelmed."

Seminarian Randy Schneider, who is in his third year of formation at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology at St. Meinrad, was impressed by seeing Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle read the decree of beatification on behalf of Pope Leo XIV.

"It was an awe-inspiring moment to see the Church at work, officially raising one of her own to the rank of 'blessed,' " said Schneider, a member of All Saints Parish in Dearborn County. "It felt at the same time ancient and new—venerable and exciting."



Randy Schneider

Seminarian Casey Deal, a member of St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Bloomington who is also in formation at Saint Meinrad, was glad to see so many Catholics from across the country at the beatification Mass.

"Walking to the stadium that day, you saw nuns, priests, seminarians and lay Catholics everywhere," Deal said. "It was neat to see."

Seminarian Sam McFee, a member of All Saints Parish in Dearborn County in his first year of formation at Bishop Bruté, was excited by the vitality and growth in the Church in the U.S. on display at the beatification Mass.



Casey Deal

"The growth of the Catholic Church locally and nationwide specifically has been very encouraging and exciting for me to witness and be a part of," he said. "More Catholics demands a response, and an appropriate response would be more priests."

Russell sees Blessed Fulton as a role model for all Catholics. He looks to him in particular as someone to emulate in his priestly formation.

"I admire Sheen's passion not just for the Catholic faith, but for the way of life which the faith leads us toward: of radical conversion of life, love of God and of neighbor," Russell said. "It's an extension of this desire to love God, seeking the conversion of sinners, ourselves included. I came into seminary with this mentality."



Sam McFee

Blessed Fulton is the first American-born bishop to be declared blessed. In 2017, Blessed Stanley Rother became the first American-born priest to be beatified.

Schneider sees them both as "incredible role models" as he looks forward to being ordained a transitional deacon in the fall of 2027.

"These two holy members of the Church in the U.S. are certainly encouraging to me, as they prove that God continues raising up saints in our own time and in our own country," Schneider said. "I am honored to be a member of the Church and of the country that formed and produced these blesseds, and I am confident that the Holy Spirit will guide all of us to faithfully carry out the mission they so faithfully took part in." †

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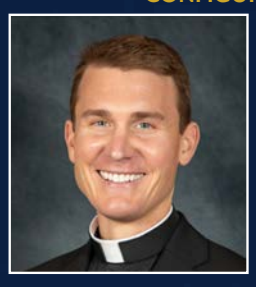
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VOCATIONAL SYNTHESIS STAGE



Lance Tony Antony Samy '27
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Simon the Apostle, Indianapolis
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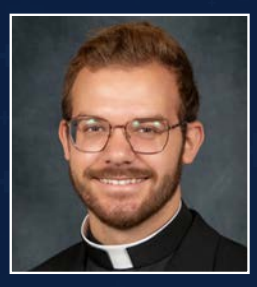
CONFIGURATION STAGE



Casey Deal '28
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Charles Borromeo, Bloomington



Kristofer Garlitch '28
Pastoral Internship
St. Mary, North Vernon



Randy Schneider '28
Saint Meinrad Seminary
All Saints, Dearborn County



Seth Hickey '29
Saint Meinrad Seminary
Mary Queen of Peace, Danville



Hayden Merkel '29
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Mary, Aurora



Lucas LaRosa '30
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Barnabas, Indianapolis



Todd Seiler '30
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Mary, Aurora



Ted Tobias '30
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Luke the Evangelist, Indianapolis

DISCIPLESHIP STAGE



John Fritch '31
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Martin of Tours, Martinsville



Antonio Harbert '31
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Joseph, Shelbyville



Abraham Hudepohl '31
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Nicholas, Sunman



Nathan Huynh '31
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
Our Lady of Perpetual Help, New Albany



Joshua Russell '31
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
Holy Family, New Albany



Jack Fraley '32
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Gabriel, Connersville



Dominic Pavey '32
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
Holy Rosary, Indianapolis



Dean Cheever '33
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Therese of the Infant Jesus (Little Flower), Indianapolis



Max Ecoff '33
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
Holy Rosary, Indianapolis

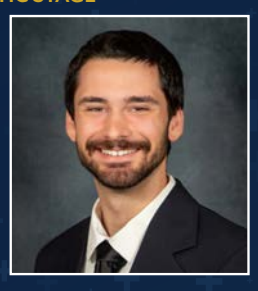
PROPAEDEUTIC STAGE



Paul Weckenbrock '33
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
All Saints, Dearborn County



Liam McDonald '33
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Paul, Bloomington



Jack Schoening '33
Saint Meinrad Seminary
Holy Name of Jesus, Beech Grove



Josh Waddell '33
Saint Meinrad Seminary
St. Augustine, Jeffersonville



Sebastian Alvarez '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Michael the Archangel, Indianapolis



Joe Cheever '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Therese of the Infant Jesus (Little Flower), Indianapolis



Luke Geraci '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
All Saints, Dearborn County



Jordan Leiter '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Christopher, Indianapolis



Samuel McFee '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
All Saints, Dearborn County



Ian McKiernan '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
Our Lady of Lourdes, Indianapolis



Joshua Salinas '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Anthony, Indianapolis



Abraham Schwartz '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
All Saints, Dearborn County



Joseph Shewmaker '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
Holy Rosary, Indianapolis



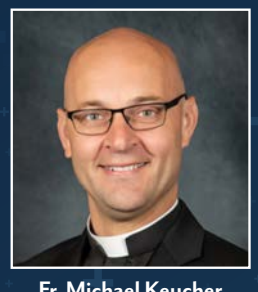
Francis Strotman '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Nicholas, Sunman



Henry Strotman '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
St. Nicholas, Sunman



Caleb Weckenbrock '34
Bishop Simon Bruté Seminary
All Saints, Dearborn County



Fr. Michael Keucher
Director of Vocations
mkeucher@archindy.org



Fr. Eric Augenstein
Director of Seminarians
eaugenstein@archindy.org

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Sisters of Providence
Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods



Sr. Stephanie Marie Rivas, SP
Sisters of Providence
Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods

NOVICE



Sr. Ann Duong, SP
Sisters of Providence
Saint-Mary-of-the-Woods



Sr. Maité Rodriguez-Mora, SP
Sisters of Providence
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NOVICE



Sr. Miriam Rose Sheehan
Sisters of St. Francis of
Perpetual Adoration
Holy Rosary, Indianapolis

POSTULANT



Regina Gerstbauer
Sisters of St. Francis of
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St. Louis, Batesville

JUNIOR



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Missionaries of Charity
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Dominican Sisters of Mary,
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Sisters of St. Francis of
the Martyr St. George
St. Joseph University Parish, Terre Haute

TEMPORARY PROFESSED



Sr. Maria Gemma Barnett, SOLT
Society of Our Lady of the
Most Holy Trinity
St. Charles Borromeo, Bloomington

NOVICE



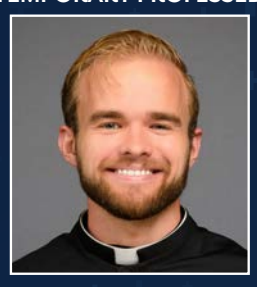
Sr. Mary Francis Noll, OP
Nashville Dominican Sisters
of St. Cecilia
Our Lady of Perpetual Help, New Albany

NOVICE



Sr. Kristin Foresman
Mercedarian Sisters of the
Blessed Sacrament
St. Mark, Indianapolis

TEMPORARY PROFESSED



Br. Benjamin Sasin, CSC
Congregation of the Holy Cross,
United States Province of Priests
and Brothers
St. John the Evangelist, Indianapolis

PHILOSOPHY STUDIES



Roberto Mazariegos
Vincentian Priests and Brothers
Eastern Province, USA
St. Mary, Indianapolis

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Dominican Province of
St. Albert the Great
St. Bartholomew, Columbus

NOVICE



Br. Vincent Sherman
Dominican Province of
St. Albert the Great
St. Mary, North Vernon

NOVICE



Br. Levi Wojtalik
Dominican Province of
St. Joseph
Holy Rosary, Indianapolis

DEACON



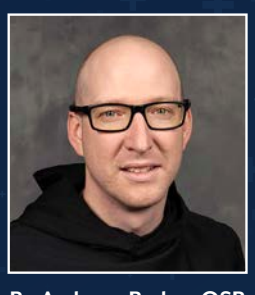
Rev. Mr. Taylor Fulkerson, SJ
Society of Jesus - Midwest Jesuits
St. Mary, Lanesville

PHILOSOPHY STUDIES



Ben Jansen, SJ
Society of Jesus - Midwest Jesuits
Sts. Francis and Clare, Greenwood

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Br. Ambrose Brahm, OSB
Saint Meinrad Archabbey
St. Meinrad, IN



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Br. Colm Porter, OSB
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Br. Evagrius Allison, OSB
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St. Meinrad, IN

NOVICE



David Hensler, OSB
Saint Meinrad Archabbey
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Deacon Woodard feels 'very fulfilled' bringing diaconal identity to his life

By Natalie Hoefer

When Deacon Russell Woodard describes the role of a deacon, "servant" is the first word that comes to mind.

" 'Deacon' comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, which means 'servant,' " he explains. "If you read the sixth chapter of Acts, the first deacons were created to assist widows who were being neglected.

"We [deacons] are charged with caring for those on the margins of society, to take the place of Christ the servant."

Deacons are also charged with sharing the word of God and assisting with and celebrating certain sacraments.

Ordained to the permanent diaconate in 2012, Deacon Woodard strives to bring these three facets of a deacon's identity to all aspects of his life, from his personal relationships to the charitable work he's involved with, to his full-time job as a parish life coordinator (PLC) since 2010.

'I see myself as a servant'

Deacon Woodard was about halfway through his deacon formation when he was asked to serve fulltime as PLC for St. Anne Parish in New Castle and the former St. Rose of Lima Parish in Knightstown in 2010.

Prior to his 2012 ordination, he asked another deacon who served as a PLC how to differentiate between that position and the role of deacon.

"He said, 'It's easy.' Then he said, 'Well, no, it's complicated,' " Deacon Woodard shares with a laugh.

With four years in both roles in New Castle and Knightstown, six years at Holy Trinity Parish in Edinburgh and the last four years at St. Agnes Parish in Nashville, Deacon Woodard has learned how to bring his identity as a deacon to his fulltime PLC position.

Take the diaconal charge to share the Gospel, for instance. In light of that call, and because "we are all called through our baptism to evangelize," he says, as PLC he recently brought a training program through the Evangelizing Catholics organization to teach St. Agnes parishioners "to evangelize people they come in contact with every day just through regular conversation."

Deacon Woodard also says that, as a deacon and as a PLC, "I see myself as a servant."

So, when he hears of a need in the broader community, he considers "how we as a parish can help better serve our neighbors and help those people on the margins."

For example, he committed the parish to serve meals once a month at Mother's Cupboard Community Kitchen in Nashville, joining that effort.

"He's always there when it's St. Agnes' night to serve, and I know he volunteers there more than that," says parishioner Sarah Dill. "He's usually up front where those who come in can get canned food and bread. He's always warm and welcoming with them, being as hospitable as possible."

He also encourages parishioners to volunteer with the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Brown County and to take Communion to the parish's homebound—ministries he himself assists.

"I try to serve and be an example to the people in the parish," says Deacon Woodard. "We need to get out and help these people on the margins."

It was that particular diaconal call that influenced his decision to apply for the archdiocese's deacon formation program in 2007.

'He brings a presence of love'

"I've always liked serving people," Deacon Woodard says. "As a teen, I picked up furniture for [the] St. Vincent de Paul [Society]. I was 16 when I started taking Communion to the homebound."

During deacon formation, candidates are encouraged to try different types of ministry. For a time, Deacon Woodard volunteered with and coordinated the biannual 40 Days for Life campaigns in Bloomington.

He also became involved in corrections ministry at the Plainfield Correctional Facility and later at the New Castle Correctional Facility. He started serving on the Brown County Jail ministry team "shortly after he arrived in Nashville," says the facility's chaplain, Thom Miller.



Deacon Russell Woodard blesses a woman's throat on Feb. 4, 2024, the feast of St. Blase, at St. Agnes Church in Nashville where he serves as both deacon and parish life coordinator. (Submitted photo)



Deacon Russell Woodard, left, assists Dominican Father Simon Felix Michalski during a Christmas Eve Mass at St. Agnes Church in Nashville on Dec. 24, 2024. (Submitted photo)

"He is there at least once a week. He comes in almost every week when I do [cell] block visits. He's someone I count on as a leader of the visits when I can't be there."

The diaconal "servant" aspect of his identity shines through Deacon Woodard, he adds.

"He has a heart for the guys we work with, and you can see his compassion," says Miller. "It's a ministry of presence—we go in to listen. A lot of these people carry a lot of heavy burdens ... . He's good at offering resources, transportation, clothes. But more than anything, he brings a presence of love and listening to people who need to be heard."

Miller, who works full time as an intermediate school math teacher, appreciates Deacon Woodard's "rich knowledge and understanding of Scripture. When people ask questions about the Bible or theology, I just kind of look at him."

Before making rounds in the blocks, the ministry team stops in the jail office "to pray in gratitude for the ability to minister to these people," says Miller. Deacon Woodard is "the one who usually prays in the office and in the blocks. I love to hear him pray."

Prayer is also a way he brings his identity as a deacon to his relationship with others.

'I've been very fulfilled'

Outside of serving parishioners, those on the margins or his family and friends, "One of things I really do is I pray," says Deacon Woodard.

"Anytime they have a need, I tell them I'm praying for them. I tell people to give me prayer requests.

"I spend a lot of time in prayer. That's part of the life of a PLC and a deacon, but it's also something I do for my friends and family. That's very important for me."

As PLC, Deacon Woodard brought that prayer aspect of his identity to St. Agnes by initiating a parish holy hour for vocations every Wednesday evening, and he instituted adoration between the morning and evening Masses on the first Friday of each month. As a deacon, he is able to offer Benediction after adoration.

"Adoration is important to me," says Deacon Woodard. "That was something I wanted to institute, and people have responded."

He reflects on his own time in prayer almost 20 years ago as he discerned his call to the diaconate.

"When the third person [from his parish at the time] said, 'You ought to think about being a deacon,' I was like, 'OK, God, you've got my attention,' " Deacon Woodard recalls. "It's something I realized God had been preparing me for for a long time."

He recalls Father Joseph Moriarity, a priest of the archdiocese, telling him, "If you can find peace in whatever you're doing or in a decision you make, you can be assured you're doing God's will."

"That's what I've found in this vocation," says Deacon Woodard. "I've been very fulfilled."

(For more information on the archdiocese's permanent diaconate program, go to archindy.org/deacon-formation *or contact Deacon John Jacobi, archdiocesan associate director of deacon formation, at 812-946-0873 or* jjacobi@archindy.org.*)* †