



## Catholic seminaries are a part of our area's comeback story

I was a year away from ordination when the news of the abuse scandal rocked the Catholic Church back in 2002. It was a tough time to be a seminarian, as it seemed as if almost every day The Plain Dealer would run a front-page story about another priest who had been accused of sexual misconduct. The gravity of the situation brought on great sadness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, apathy and even despair. And I can't even imagine the pain of those who suffered the abuse.



I remember conversations with a few of my seminary classmates, as we wondered what we were getting ourselves into. On May 17, 2003, Bishop Anthony Pilla ordained 10 of us to the priesthood — the largest ordination class in Cleveland since 1988. St. John Cathedral was packed that morning, and I'll never forget how the initial noble applause of the faithful slowly erupted into cheers, hoots and hollers during the recessional hymn. The exuberant reaction of the people of God wasn't simply for the 10 new priests. It was also a pivotal moment of

recognition that, as a diocese, we finally had something to celebrate after more than a year's worth of dark and depressing news regarding the abuse scandal.

The very next year, only three priests were ordained for the Diocese of Cleveland, and the enrollment at Borromeo Seminary, our college formation program, dropped to fewer than 20 diocesan seminarians for the first time. And who could blame recent high school graduates (or their parents) for a lack of interest in the priesthood at that time? Many commentators predicted a round of seminary closings across the country and some thought Borromeo Seminary and St. Mary Seminary here in Cleveland would shut their doors forever, transferring their seminarians to Detroit, Columbus or Chicago. But that never happened.

Remember, Cleveland is a comeback town. Our Cavaliers broke the 52-year drought.

Our two Catholic seminaries are also part of Cleveland's great story. Now you may say, "I'm not Catholic," or, "I hate the Catholic Church," or, "I don't even believe in God, so what do I care about schools for future priests?" I hear you. But if you're a Clevelander, then you enjoy hearing good news about your city and telling others about it. So here's some good news: This year we accepted 12 high school graduates from the Class of 2016 to Borromeo Seminary. They are an intellectually, musically, athletically and socially gifted bunch of disciples. Two were valedictorian at their respective schools. (They are all carefully screened and trained to protect God's children.) Between both Borromeo and St. Mary seminaries, there are now almost 70 men studying for the priesthood in the Diocese of Cleveland, and we expect Bishop Richard Lennon to ordain eight of them to the priesthood in May, making this year's the largest ordination class Cleveland has seen since 2003.



Like the city of Cleveland itself, the Cleveland diocesan seminaries have made a comeback, and people are starting to notice. Did you know that the national average age of an incoming seminarian is 27? In Cleveland, it's 20. Nationally, the average age of a newly ordained priest is 34. It's 29 in Cleveland.



Another noteworthy fact is that the seminarians studying for the priesthood in Cleveland tend to be homegrown — from the parishes in our eight-county diocese. Many seminaries around the nation have opted to incorporate seminarians from other countries due to the lack of vocations in their home dioceses, but Cleveland continues to have a rich "farm system" of parishes that nurtures and supports its own.



Are we still going to face tough transitions in the near future, as a goodly number of our diocesan priests reach retirement age?

Yep. But, there is plenty of reason to hope that we'll have enough well-trained priests to serve the people of God here in Northeast Ohio, which is just one more blessing for Cleveland.

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This article appeared in the Wednesday, September 7<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. The author, Rev. Damian Ference is an assistant professor of philosophy and director of human formation at Borromeo Seminary in Wickliffe.