

Reflections



DIOCESE OF HAMILTON

A Newsletter from the Vocation Office

Winter 2005

What is a Seminary?

For many Catholics, a seminary remains a mysterious place, and there are often misconceptions about seminary life. This edition of *Reflections* will provide some insight into the process of formation and the places in which our seminarians live, study, pray and prepare for the priesthood.

As baptized Catholics, we are all called to strive for holiness – to become saints. This is a very personal calling in the heart of each one of us, but it can be supported and nurtured by our families, schools, church communities, and by society at large.

Nurturing environments also support the formation of priests, and it is within the seminary community that candidates for the Diocesan priesthood are supported and guided in the process of priestly formation.

The changes within our Church and the broader society within the last 50 years are reflected in today's seminaries. As Pope John Paul II has noted: "The new generation of those called to the ministerial priesthood display different characteristics in comparison to those of their immediate predecessors. In addition, they live in a world which in many respects is new and undergoing rapid and continual evolution" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*). The presence of lay students, increased role of women in the formation program, greater level of freedom, less isolation of seminarians, use of psychological assessments and greater emphasis on parish pastoral experience are some of the adaptations that have influenced seminary life today.

Seminarians themselves have changed too: There has been a tendency to older candidates, sometimes coming from other careers or educational experiences. Also, these seminarians often come from diverse cultural, family, and religious backgrounds.

All of these changes in church, society, and in seminarian candidates, present our seminaries with many new challenges. With this in mind we will take a look at those seminaries in which our own Diocesan seminarians are in formation, and examine seminary life today.

Fr. Mark Gatto
Vocation Director, Diocese of Hamilton

Seminaries need to walk students through the basics of living in community, of cultivating a prayer life...

Father Tom Lynch

Seminaries *changing with the times*

If yesterday's seminarian was typically the grown-up altar boy, the devoted Catholic man who was already deeply entrenched in the faith, today's seminarian could be almost any guy.

From former teachers and engineers, to converts to the faith, to people from broken homes, seminarians of the new millennium are a cross-section of the population, and seminaries are adjusting to the broader scope.

Seminaries can no longer take for granted that new arrivals have basic knowledge about Catholicism, nor that they have grown up with the practice of the faith.

"You can't make what we used to consider basic assumptions," says Father Tom Lynch, dean of Studies at St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto, which has about 90 seminarians, up from about 80 a decade ago.

Seminaries have made curriculum changes to ensure seminarians get the foundational knowledge they need, but renewed attention to formation – the living out of faith on a daily basis in the seminary community – is even more important, Fr. Lynch says.

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How to Apply to Seminary

- 1 Talk to your parish priest about your interest.
- 2 The priest will contact the Diocese of Hamilton's Vocation Director, Fr. Mark Gatto. You may also contact Fr. Gatto directly.
- 3 The Vocation Director meets with you to see if you demonstrate good potential.
- 4 If you appear suited for seminary, the Vocation Director links with the seminary to get you into the application process.
- 5 You complete a seminary application package, which requires the provision of personal, workplace and pastoral references; a medical exam; psychological assessment; written self-history, and academic transcripts.
- 6 Once this information is provided, an interview at the seminary may be scheduled.
- 7 If you are accepted into seminary, you will start the following September, at the beginning of the next school year.
- 8 The time frame of the application process varies but can range from one month to one year. The Vocation Director provides support and assistance throughout the application process.

Source: www.vocationinfo.ca

A Day in the Life of a Seminarian

You might think of a seminary as an ivory tower, a place of intellect, serenity and soul; a place untouched by the chaotic swirl of the world around it.

In reality, though, seminaries are very much affected by the world, and seminarians struggle like the rest of us to maintain serenity and balance in the midst of busy schedules.

For a seminarian to live a balanced lifestyle, allowing him to flourish spiritually, emotionally and physically, he must carve out time for healthy disciplines. He must consciously make time to eat well, sleep well, exercise and pray.

At least, that's the experience of Tim Hingston, a deacon and fifth-year student at St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario. At interview time, he is about to go for a two-hour walk, which he tries to do three or four times a week.

"If I don't take time to walk now, I will be a mean, grumpy, grouchy man by the end of the day," he says.

Tim, 42, seems far from the type to be mean and grumpy, but the point is clear. There are always assignments to do, presentations to practice, people to help. It is easy to become depleted, without a conscious effort to build in time for oneself.

A typical day is difficult for Tim to describe, as each day is different. However, all of his days are an intense, challenging mix of academics, prayer, fellowship, and apostolic work. (The latter includes such responsibilities as homily preparation, reaching out to other seminarians in his role as deacon, and facilitating prayer and support meetings with Diocese of Hamilton seminarians, as he does each Thursday afternoon.)

On top of these pursuits, Tim squeezes in exercise, academic committee meetings, and chores such as laundry. Twice a week, he treats himself to some evening TV.

On this particular day, the former property manager and realtor



St. Peter's Seminary

has only one class and no assignments due the next day. But he awoke at 6:30 a.m., as usual, and spent time in prayer in his room before joining in prayers at the seminary's Thomas Aquinas Chapel at 7:45.

He had breakfast at the basement refectory (the seminarians first stand together to say grace) and then met, as is the seminarians' daily custom, with members of his group in one of the lounge areas. (The seminarians are divided into five groups, each with their own formation advisor and section of "the house.") He caught the morning news with them on television and talked with them about their lives.

From 9 a.m. to 11 a.m., Tim attended a class on ethical issues in pastoral ministry, where he participated in a discussion on the management and screening of volunteers in parish life.

After class, he worked on a homily he is set to deliver in a parish, had lunch at the refectory, did correspondence and cleaned his desk.

Then he takes time for the *Reflections* interview, following which he intends to enjoy his walk (a basement gym is available for seminarians who prefer to work out that way).

At 4 p.m., he will informally facilitate a support and prayer meeting of Diocese of Hamilton seminarians in one of the lounges, and at 4:45 p.m. he will attend Mass.

Supper with other seminarians will be at 5:30, followed by the prayer for priests and hymn to Mary at the chapel.

Evening commitments for seminarians range from classes to working on papers to doing laundry, as Tim plans to do tonight in the seminary's coin-operated laundry. He also plans to polish his homily, work on a paper on the Canon Law of marriage, and watch E.R. at 10 p.m.

The busyness and intensity of seminary life may be challenging, Tim says, but they are good preparation for parish ministry. "Once you've learned how to balance everything, you'll have the skills to go out there and continue with it."

Seminaries need to walk students through the basics of living in community, of cultivating a prayer life, and so on, he says. After all, faith is not mainly a matter of intellect; "it's an affair of the heart."

Reflecting on the past 10 years, Fr. Lynch recalls an "incredible diversity" of students. Apart from the arrival of many converts and "reverts" (people who have returned to the faith after leaving it), the student body includes many more ethnic groups than in the past.

Many seminarians have had previous careers and education – for example, in banking, teaching, and engineering. "The 'one size fits all' assumptions just don't work," Fr. Lynch says.

The average age of St. Augustine's seminarians is 31, which has dropped a little of late due to an influx of 22-year-olds (also, the seminary has advised some dioceses to send older men to seminaries that specialize in an older population).

Like Fr. Lynch, Father Bill McGrattan, rector of St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario, also notes the increasing diversity of the student population and the need for seminaries to adjust. For example, St. Peter's underwent an extensive curriculum change about six years ago, in part to ensure that students get fundamental theology courses early in their seminary careers.

St. Peter's has 50-55 seminarians in undergraduate and theology programs, up from about 40 a decade ago. Here, the average age is 30-31, similar to that at St. Augustine's.


As at St. Augustine's, many seminarians come to St. Peter's with prior university degrees. However, because of the breakdown of families and society, they may not have had the upbringing, nor the life experiences, that would have fostered their self-confidence and self-awareness, Fr. McGrattan says. An older student – one who has spent time in university before coming to seminary – is not necessarily easier to mentor than a younger one, he's found.

Widespread participation in World Youth Day, community service programs in Catholic high schools, and the influence of Pope John Paul II are among reasons Fr. Lynch and Fr. McGrattan cite for the renewed interest of men in joining the priesthood, following the "big crash" of three to four decades ago.

Seminaries, bishops, vocation directors, parish priests and the laity share the responsibility to create "a culture of vocations," Fr. McGrattan says.

Fr. Lynch says lay people tend to think seminarians must be disheartened by all they are up against, from societal and family breakdown to heavy work schedules to lack of support for local parish priests. However, he has found today's seminarians in general to be very realistic. They are asking the question, "What type of priest am I called to be?"

"They really are pretty clear-eyed about the difficulties (of being a priest), yet they want to do it," he says.



Fr. Bill McGrattan, rector of St. Peter's Seminary

Learning More About Seminaries

If you're thinking about attending seminary to become a priest but aren't sure it's the right choice for you, consider yourself invited to a Come and See weekend.

St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario, and St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto, Ontario, both host Come and See weekends to introduce potential candidates to seminary life. Visitors can also talk with seminarians and faculty members.

The weekends are typically held twice per year, and you don't need to have decided to apply to seminary to attend. For information or to register for the next Come and See weekend, please call Father Mark Gatto, Vocation Director, at 905-528-7988.

Seminarians from the Diocese of Hamilton study at St. Peter's and St. Augustine's as well as at St. Philip's Seminary in Toronto and at Blessed St. John XXIII Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts.

Here are answers to some frequently asked questions about seminary:

- **How long will I be in seminary?** The formation process varies in length depending on the education you already have. If you already have a degree, it may take five years. If you don't, it could take seven or eight.
- **Do I have to be an honours student to be accepted?** Not necessarily. Candidates come from various work and academic backgrounds. However, you must be able to carry out university level studies.
- **Will I be allowed to see my family while attending seminary?** Yes, you will be encouraged to maintain healthy relationships with both family and friends.

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Who covers the cost of attending seminary?

The two main costs of attending seminary are tuition, plus room and board.

Tuition is paid for by the seminarian for the undergraduate degree and the first two years of the theology degree.

The Diocese pays for tuition in the remaining years of study.

The Diocese pays room and board for all seminarians from within the Diocese. Bursaries and other forms of financial assistance are available.

Source: www.vocationinfo.ca

Seminaries Online

- **St. Peter's Seminary** • located within the University of Western Ontario complex: www.stpetersseminary.ca
- **St. Augustine's Seminary** • among founding members of the Toronto School of Theology at the University of Toronto: www.staugustines.on.ca
- **Blessed St. John XXIII Seminary** • including the Blessed John XXIII National Seminary Library: www.blessedjohnxxiii.edu
- **St. Philip's Seminary** • an apostolate of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, affiliated with the Pontifical University of the Lateran: www3.sympatico.ca/mhilbert/spn_st_philip_s_seminary.html

Pastoral Year Gives Seminarians “Sneak Peek” into the Future



Seminarian Jerzy Tomon

Rich and flavourful, like the filling of a good sandwich, the pastoral year falls right in the center of the seminary experience.

The two preceding years of theological study are foundational.

The two subsequent years of theological study are the culmination.

But the middle year – the internship year, in which the seminarian gets firsthand experience in parish ministry – that's where he finds out what being a priest is all about.

Just as people don't fully know what it's like to be parents until they are parents, men can't fully know what it's like to be priests until they are priests, says Father Peter Hundt, pastor of Holy Cross Parish in Georgetown.

Yet the internship year goes a long way in the right direction. It helps priests-in-the-making to answer the question, "Is this what God really wants me to do?" It also helps parishes to discern if the seminarian is meant for parish ministry.

Seminarian Jerzy (pronounced Yer-je) Tomon started his pastoral year in May at Holy Cross, a 2,600-family parish and the only English Catholic parish in Georgetown.

Originally from Poland, Jerzy felt that God was calling him to work with people of other cultures. The chance came to study in Canada, and now he anticipates becoming a parish priest here, where there is, in fact, a cultural mix. "I enjoy it a lot; it is a sign that this is a place for me," he says.

Jerzy, 28, is a student at St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario.

"He's a very responsible person and is doing very good work with us here," Fr. Hundt says.

In addition to working with the youth group at Holy Cross, Jerzy is in charge of outreach to the Mountainview Villa senior citizens' home. He takes communion to Catholic residents at Mountainview and when new Catholic residents arrive, he welcomes them and finds out what kind of pastoral care they will need.

He is also involved in other facets of parish ministry, from saying prayers of blessing for parishioners' homes, to assisting at Mass.

Unlike Poland, where Catholicism is dominant, Canada has a diverse mix of religious backgrounds. In at least 30 to 40 per cent of cases, when baptisms are conducted at Holy Cross, one of the parents is not Catholic. Jerzy must adjust to cultural differences such as this while also working to improve his English and develop his pastoral care skills.

"He's certainly very competent and knows himself well and where he feels God has called him," says Fr. Hundt. "He's very enthusiastic about ministry and about life in general."

Jerzy has played piano for services at a hospital and nursing home when the regular piano player was not available, saving Fr. Hundt from having to lead the singing a capella. Jerzy is also able to converse with Polish parishioners in their own language.

Upon return to the classroom after the pastoral year, seminarians generally have a whole new perspective on their studies, Fr. Hundt says.

A class on marriage may bring to mind a marriage dynamic the seminarian encountered in parish ministry. A class on homiletics may have him wondering how to bring a particular message home to parishioners in a homily.

"Hopefully this will help the studies come alive for him," Fr. Hundt says.

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