

# Father Nelson Rubio first Venezuelan ordained to diocese

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |





Father Nelson Rubio (right) stands with Sue and Dennis Wood, close friends and parishioners of St. John Church in Hot Springs, and his godparents, Jose Gregorio Olaves Irobo and Jacqueline Josefina Carrasquero Gutierrez, who flew in from Chile for his Dec. 16 ordination at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Rubio and the congregation laugh during a lighthearted-moment of Bishop Taylor's homily. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Rubio stands before Bishop Taylor to be questioned regarding his willingness to fulfill the duties of a priest during the Promise of the Elect. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Nelson Rubio makes a promise to Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of “respect and obedience” to him and his successors during his Dec. 16 priestly ordination. Father Juan Guido (left) served as master of ceremonies, Deacon Patrick Friend (right) was deacon of the Word and seminarian Jaime Nieto assisted the bishop. (Bob Ocken photo)



Receiving the strength of the Holy Spirit, Father Rubio stands in silence as Bishop Taylor lays his hands on his head. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Rubio wipes tears from his eyes and smiles at Bishop Taylor after hugs from all priests present. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Nelson Rubio tears up while reading the Eucharistic prayer during his ordination Dec. 16. Msgr. Scott Friend (left) and Father Mark Wood (right) were important spiritual leaders for Father Rubio. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Rubio gives communion to Sue Wood of St. John Church in Hot Springs. Dennis and Sue Wood, parents of Father Mark Wood, sat with Father Rubio during the Dec. 16 ordination. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Rubio gave his first blessing to Bishop Taylor, then to the congregation and to close friends and family during his ordination at the Cathedral of St. Andrew Dec. 16. (Bob Ocken photo)



Father Rubio beams a smile as he walks out of the Cathedral of St. Andrew at the conclusion of his ordination Mass Dec. 16. (Bob Ocken photo)

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When Father Nelson Rubio stood at the altar to offer up the Eucharistic prayer, tears filled his eyes. He paused, setting down his glasses, gently rubbing his eyes as Bishop Anthony B. Taylor laid a hand on his shoulder. In that moment, Father Rubio had finally fulfilled God's call of service.

"“Oh my gosh, I am a priest. I'm doing the prayer.' I cannot describe with words," only a feeling of overwhelming joy in that moment, he said.

Father Nelson Jesús Rubio Villalobos, 37, was ordained to the priesthood Dec. 16 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock in a Mass filled with happiness and tears. Father Rubio is the first Venezuelan ordained to the Diocese of Little Rock.

It was a day that was years in the making, beyond the average formation for a priest. Bishop Anthony B. Taylor pointed out how Father Rubio chose readings that seemed to chronicle his own journey to the priesthood — fears, obedience and learning from Jesus to walk with people in their faith. The first was Jeremiah 1, 1.4-10, with God comforting the prophet despite his fears, "I know not how to speak; I am too young." The second from Hebrews 5, 1-10, explaining that "You are a priest forever." In the Gospel of John, Jesus opens up the power of his love to the Samaritan woman at the well, saying, "whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst."

"As a priest, Nelson will accompany many people in their own personal journeys of faith. Reaching out to those on the periphery, to ethnic minorities, like the Samaritans of Jesus' day," Bishop Taylor said, later adding, "Nelson, before the Lord formed you in the womb he knew you. And yet, without knowing it, before you were born, he already had a specific role in his divine plan for you, to be a priest in the Diocese of Little Rock. You came to know his plan for your life."

In his native Venezuela, Father Rubio felt God's call to serve as early as his first Communion. He entered the seminary, earning three degrees, but stopped short of his diaconate ordination. In 2008, he began to discern his calling outside of the seminary, eventually meeting Father Javier Bustos, then-vice rector at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology in Hales Corner, Wis. He then connected with Msgr. Scott Friend, Diocese of Little Rock director of vocations.

Father Rubio officially became a diocesan seminarian in 2014 and has studied at Sacred Heart in Wisconsin. About 50 people from Wisconsin traveled to Arkansas to celebrate with Father Rubio, including fourth-year seminarian Ariel Orozco, a parishioner at St. Adalbert Church in Milwaukee.

"Nelson was like a brother to me. We have a special bond as opposed to just friends; we're walking the same journey," Orozco said, adding when Father Rubio became emotional during the Eucharistic prayer, "He touched our hearts."

Even though Father Rubio's mother, Carmen Villalobos, and three sisters could not come to the United States from Venezuela because of political unrest in the country and the inability to get a visa, the diocese live-streamed the ordination for them to watch. His godparents, Jose Gregorio Olaves Irobo and Jacqueline Josefina Carrasquero Gutierrez, originally from Venezuela, flew in from Santiago, Chile.

"(He's) always striving to be a good Christian. He always grew up wanting to be a disciple of

the Lord," Irobo said, with his wife adding that Father Rubio's mother was "for sure crying," watching her son be ordained.

"I have been like his mother ever since he was born," Gutierrez said, adding that as a priest, Father Rubio will be, "A very loyal one. He definitely feels a strong calling for the Lord."

After lying prostrate during the litany of saints, Father Rubio was helped back to his feet. In 2014, he became ill with Guillain-Barré Syndrome, triggered by a flu shot. It has caused extreme muscle weakness and damage to his peripheral nervous system, requiring medication and physical therapy twice a week.

Msgr. Friend hugged Father Rubio, along with the other priests present. His embrace was coupled with tears.

"Just to see all he's been through ... that was just so scary," said Msgr. Friend, reflecting on when Father Rubio was hospitalized for a month and misdiagnosed with everything from multiple sclerosis to leukemia.

"How you carry a chronic disease and find meaning in your suffering," is something they share, as Msgr. Friend suffers from multiple sclerosis. "I feel a real solidarity with him through sickness."

"It's like a birth into something new," when a priest is ordained, he added. "Getting him to this point fills my heart with joy. We have to be his family because his family is not here. ... It's emotional."

Father Mark Wood of Little Rock, who was his first spiritual director and helped vest Father Rubio during the Mass, was instrumental in his recovery.

"He helped me walk again and stay motivated for the future," Father Rubio wrote in a list of thank-yous read by the bishop at the conclusion of Mass.

Father Wood's parents, Dennis and Sue Wood, parishioners at St. John Church in Hot Springs, formed a close bond with Father Rubio and sat next to him during the ordination. They also brought up the Eucharistic gifts.

"It's just an honor and privilege to go on this journey with him," Sue Wood said. "I would want his mother to be here, but I told him his mother was in my heart."

Bob and Mary Anne Honzik, parishioners at Sacred Heart Church in Hot Springs Village where Father Rubio served and was ordained to the diaconate, said they've watched him grow so much after first arriving at their home from Venezuela.

"I think he's going to have a sense of humor and he's very aware," of the needs of the people, Bob said, with his wife adding, "Just very loving."

It was impossible for Father Rubio to pick just one powerful moment during his ordination, pointing to "the consecration when the bishop prayed for me, anointed my hands, all the priests laid their hands on me."

"You feel the Holy Spirit. All the hair on my body stood up," he smiled.



"I'm grateful for God to be compassionate to the people, merciful to the people," Father Rubio said of his priestly mission.

On Jan. 19, he will begin serving as associate pastor of Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in North Little Rock (Marche) and St. Mary Church in North Little Rock.

Though his priesthood has just started, all those who know him said that he's going to be special to every parish he serves.

"What is there not to love about him? He loves everyone and everyone loves him," Sue Wood said.