

Spirit is moving: Look at vocations in past two decades

written by Katie Zakrzewski |



Father Jeff Hebert presents the seminarians at the Catholic Youth Convention April 6 at the DoubleTree Hotel in Little Rock. Father Hebert brings the seminarians to youth events, so

young people have a chance to ask them questions and discern a vocation. (Collin Gallimore)

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In 2025, Bishop Anthony B. Taylor will ordain his 50th diocesan priest. But things have changed a lot in vocations and the priesthood since 2008 when Bishop Taylor became bishop. Three diocesan priests shared the data with Arkansas Catholic, as well as their perspectives on how things have changed.

Making vocations visible

Father Jeff Hebert, director of the Vocations Office and prefect at the House of Formation, was one of the priests ordained by Bishop Taylor. Since his ordination in 2018, he has worked closely with seminarians, preparing them for the priesthood.

Father Hebert said before 2008, there was growing concern in the diocese about the low number of ordinations to the priesthood.

“It was pretty doom and gloom,” Father Hebert said. “They were looking at really consolidating parishes and were trying to plan because things looked pretty grim.”

But something incredible happened, Father Hebert explained, as Msgr. Scott Friend took over vocations from 2005 to 2021.

“The spirit has really been moving quite a bit.”

Soon, in the 2000s, 11 priests were ordained. Then 35 in the 2010s. So far, there have been 12 priests ordained in the 2020s.

“As the vocation director now, people ask me, ‘What are y’all doing?’” Father Hebert said. “And sometimes I have to tell them, it’s not really anything we’re doing — God is the one who calls these young men. It’s the Holy Spirit that’s moving in their hearts. It’s not like I give a clever speech, and then all of a sudden, someone wants to be a priest.

“It’s way more about creating a culture of vocations, which is to say that men are being called by the Lord. When the Lord is moving in their lives, we’ve created a culture that is actually very receptive to those young men. ... The thing that’s changed the most is that our diocese and our people, they just love vocations. ... it’s a little less scary when you’re a young man, and you’re feeling the call ... to make that public and tell someone about it.”

One of the most pivotal ways Father Hebert has been working to create a culture of vocations is by attending youth events and bringing seminarians with him.

“They’re there, and the young people can talk to them,” Father Hebert said. “They see they’re young people who kind of look like they could be in high school.”

Father Hebert also encourages seminarians to go to parishes and visit Catholic schools as well.

“It’s just the idea that it’s visible and that it’s the young people ... telling them they might want to consider this for their lives,” Father Hebert said. “It’s someone who’s actually already taken a step in that direction and they’re joyful and they’re happy. ...

“The thing that really opens up the young people’s hearts, in my opinion, is when (seminarians) share their own story ... when they start describing what that experience was, the experience in prayer of how they feel called and how they want to serve — they want to give themselves in this way. And they’re honest about both the fears involved with that, but also the excitement and joy that comes along with it.”

As young seminarians mingle with other young Catholics their age and share their stories, other young men begin to realize that God may be calling them, too.

The number of seminarians peaked at 46 in 2014 but has hovered between 20-30 for the last eight years. This fall, the diocese will have 24 seminarians.

With Father Mauricio Carrasco joining the House of Formation staff, Father Hebert will now have the time to plan more retreats and travel around the state to boost the presence of seminarians and recruitment. He plans to visit youth groups, parishes and Catholic schools as well to “put the image of the priest out there and see whose hearts respond.”

“To me, it doesn’t seem like things have slowed down,” Father Hebert said. “...Maybe that’s just because I’m in the midst of it. ... Even if you have a lot of seminarians, the thing that really gives you a sense of the health of vocations is how many guys are making it all the way to ordination.”

Fortunately, Father Hebert said, when the diocese is as supportive of vocations as the Diocese of Little Rock is, seminarians are more likely to become ordained because Catholics give them encouragement and support.

Bearing fruit

Father Joseph de Orbegozo, rector of the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Little Rock and faculty member at the House of Formation, like Father Hebert, was ordained in 2018. He has noticed a growing interest among younger men in a vocation and a shifting culture that allows for such discernment.

“What I find fascinating is that more and more young people are asking questions more deeply and at an earlier stage ... thanks to God, the working of the Holy Spirit and the interaction of lay people and priests in their life,” Father de Orbegozo said. “They are responding earlier. I think in some ways that may have to do with the fact that I think people, especially who are in that youngest generation, are asking questions about meaning and purpose earlier in their lives in a world where they feel like their purpose is their meaning.”

Father de Orbegozo praised seminarian signing days at Catholic High School and in parishes for having a tangible impact.

“This is something that Father Jeff (Hebert) has raised a flag on. ... When you’ve got so many seniors at Catholic High having a signing day for so many young people, it makes it easier for

other young people to consider themselves pursuing a vocation. It becomes more tangible when the folks who are seminarians look like you, act like you and went to your school.”

Father de Orbegozo said the “Come and See” vocation discernment retreats across the state are also bearing fruit, as more young people see the increased importance and visibility surrounding vocations. Father de Orbegozo said as seminarians get younger and younger, he is trying to find new ways to make content relevant to them.

“I can relate to (the seminarians) in many ways, but I can’t relate to them as peers,” Father de Orbegozo said. “When I started teaching, there were still a lot of guys who were guys I’ve been in seminary with. There’s a sense of connection to them. Whereas now, the guys that I’m teaching are truly a generation different from me. And so I am noticing the ways in which they interact differently. The values that they have are different.”

But Father de Orbegozo said this is a good thing, as it creates an opportunity to build good rapport in the continuity of priests, seminarians and vocations.

Look at the numbers

Father John Connell, vicar general, moderator of the curia and pastor of St. Joseph Church in Conway, keeps up with seven decades of data on priests in the Diocese of Little Rock. He provided Arkansas Catholic with a glimpse at the changes in vocations and diocesan priests over time.

Since the 1960s, the Diocese of Little Rock has seen 91 priests ordained. Of those, seven were ordained in the 1960s, six were ordained in the 1970s, 13 were ordained in the 1980s, seven were ordained in the 1990s, 11 were ordained in the 2000s, 35 were ordained in the 2010s, and 12 have been ordained so far in the 2020s.

With the ordination boom since 2008, the average age of diocesan priests has dropped. Right now, most priests are in their 30s, 40s and 60s.

Of all the priests in the diocese, two are in their 90s, seven are in their 80s, 11 are in their 70s, 17 are in their 60s, nine are in their 50s, 18 are in their 40s, 23 are in their 30s and four are in their 20s.

The average age of all diocesan priests is 54, while the average age of the 71 active diocesan priests is 50. Of these priests, 45 were born from 1975 to 1997.

Father Connell said having priestly role models has helped inspire young men in high school and college to pursue vocations.

“There are young men that are coming into the priesthood ... right out of high school and somewhere in college,” Father Connell said. “You have people like Father Patrick Friend over at Catholic High, and this huge amount of young guys inspires other young guys to think about the priesthood.

“So it hasn’t really changed where we’re drawing them from, but ... when a young person thinks about the priesthood, and he sees a lot of young priests, for example, Bishop Taylor

having a signing day (at Catholic High School in Little Rock), you think, 'Maybe it's not so bad after all,' Father Connell said with a laugh.

He said the Diocese of Little Rock has created a sense of brotherhood among priests.

"We are a fraternity of priests. We all are here in the Diocese of Little Rock, serving the Church here in our diocese, and we're all priests, so we're all part of fraternity," Father Connell said. "We do a good job in encouraging the young guys to do things together, spend time together, which they do, and they've got their groups going on. They're taking care of one another."

Father Connell said it can also be hard when seminarians are ordained to say goodbye to close friends they've made and move to the other side of the state for an assignment.

"If it's all about fraternity, that can be detrimental ... so I always say, yeah, it's good to be a fraternity, but you also have to nurture that vocation of what you're really there to do, and that is serve the people. And I think we do a good job with that as well, so that the priests don't get burned out or depressed when they're far away from everybody else."

One of the primary concerns of vocations is ensuring there are always enough young priests who can continue to sustain diocesan operations as priests age and begin to retire. Fortunately, vocation numbers are healthy.

Father Connell acknowledged the number of seminarians has dropped over the past eight years.

"That's just the normal ebb and flow of data and statistics," Father Connell said. "... The fruit of the work of our vocation directors, both Msgr. Friend and Father Hebert, is that we are having at least one (priest) ordained every year and sometimes two, sometimes three, on an outlier year you have five or six or you have eight.

"For the most part, this year is a small year. Next year's a small year. Then for 2026, right now we're scheduled to have five. If they all get ordained, that's another big year, but then it's followed by one. ... I can't tell you why it happens that way but just be grateful when it does."

Father Connell has noticed a difference in priest ages and generations. While he is used to working with priests who are millennials, he is now seeing more priests who are Generation Z. Now, he said, as did Father de Orbegozo, the challenge is crafting the message in a way that is relevant to priests from a new generation, given that their experiences are different.

Regardless of generational differences, one thing remains the same — praying and listening to hear God's call.

"Sometimes vocations are just maybe a passing thought or a possibility, and a little bit of time, a little bit of reflection will discern it as just that — or maybe, it's something more," Father Connell said. "Listen intently to the Lord. Listen carefully to him."