

# The New York Times Magazine

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SECTION 6

Dan  
Quayle's  
Road  
To Respect  
By Melinda  
Henneberger



No one lives at further remove from consumerist, sexualized, technocratic America than its Catholic priests. And nobody feels the disjunction more acutely than young seminarians. **By Jennifer Egan**

# Why a Priest

The number of men studying for the priesthood has plummeted, and the resulting shortage is a major problem for the Catholic Church. But for those enrolled at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, it isn't the church that has to change -- it's the world. **By JENNIFER EGAN** Photographs By Karen Huehn/Matrix

‘**W**atch people's faces when we come in the door," Tom Holloway says. Holloway is a 29-year-old fourth-year Catholic seminarian at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary, and on this stunningly cold winter night, he and six other seminarians have driven to a diner not far from Emmitsburg, Md., where the seminary is situated, to have dessert. Holloway and two others in their fourth and last year, Brian Bashista and Damien Cook, are wearing clerical attire, or "clerics," as they call them: black slacks, black shirts, Roman collars. They have already been ordained as deacons; they've made "solemn promises" of celibacy and obedience, and can perform baptisms and preside at marriages, as well as preach. They will be ordained as priests later this spring.



**Prayer Break** Michael Dobbins (left) and Brian Bashista in an afternoon ritual

As they enter the diner, a collective awareness seizes the room, much the way it might in the presence of someone famous. People either look up, or resolutely avoid looking up. After the seminarians settle in at a round table, Holloway, a slight, fair-haired man from Peoria, Ill., expands upon the reactions I've just seen -- a phenomenon seminarians refer to as "the head-turn effect."

"People do one of three things," Holloway says. "Suddenly they get really nice, and they want you to think they're really good people. Somebody my age, they're calling me Sir. The second one is, people get very stony, like they're mad at you. They just glare. The third one is my favorite: you walk in and they do a double take and they look really scared, like, *Why is he dressed like that? He knows my secrets!*"

The sight of a Roman collar, the seminarians go on to explain, can have the power to flush profanity from conversations, douse lovers' fights and halt the scolding of children. Airplane rides are notorious for inspiring long queries from seatmates, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, even when the seminarian isn't wearing clerics; the sight of a breviary is often enough to set things off. (Priests regularly hear confessions on airplanes, I'm told, finding two back seats for that purpose whenever possible.)

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Jennifer Egan writes frequently for the magazine. Her last article was about homosexuals in the military.

**On the Cover** Brian Bashista, Jerome Magat and Michael Dobbins, seminarians on the road increasingly less traveled. Photographs by Karen Kuehn/Matrix, for The New York Times.

Jerome Magat, a brainy, energetic 26-year-old of Filipino descent, is a second-year seminarian, so he wears clerics off-campus only when attending a formal, ecclesiastical event or when visiting hospitals, homeless shelters, prisons and schools, which is part of the seminary program. "It's that supernatural element," Magat says of the reactions his clerics provoke. "There's a mystery about the priesthood."

Some of that mystery inheres in the very nature of the Catholic priesthood. A priest is called to be an *alter Christus*, to stand in the Person of Christ and perform the sacraments, through which grace is conferred by God. Nowadays, though, the distance between the Catholic priesthood and the surrounding culture has given it a near occult mystique. As America hurtles forward unblinkingly into the consumer-driven, technological and environmental unknown, the Catholic priesthood remains becalmed in a zone of otherworldly preoccupations relatively unbuffeted by present-day vicissitudes. Today, as, say, 500 years ago, a man -- and only a man -- who senses he has a vocation, or a call from God to the priesthood, hands over his life irrevocably to the church, promising celibacy and obedience. Now, as centuries ago, he answers to the bishop of his diocese, celebrates the Mass, performs the sacraments and, if he has been appointed a pastor, oversees and maintains the solvency of his parish. (A religious-order priest like a Franciscan or Jesuit makes an additional promise of poverty, and commits his life to his religious community and its particular mission.) In exchange for these sacrifices, a diocesan priest typically receives from his diocese a room, board, a place to retire when he is too old or sick to serve any longer and around \$10,000 a year.

It is perhaps not surprising that in contemporary America, with its focus on individualism and personal achievement, not to speak of wealth, the number of men seeking out this sort of existence has plummeted. In 1998, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, there were 47,582 active priests in America -- about 10,000 fewer than in 1975. The average age of a diocesan priest is now 58, and nearly a quarter of all priests are older than 70, the average age of retirement. Perhaps no institution in America faces a more severe personnel crisis than the Catholic Church.

And it is likely to get worse. The total number of graduate seminarians in America last year was the lowest on record: 2,622, a drop of almost 70 percent from the 8,159 in 1967-8. This decline comes at a time when the number of Catholics in America, where they represent by far the largest religious denomination, has ballooned from 48.7 million in 1975 to 61.6 million today, largely as a result of Latin American and Asian immigration and population growth.

The drop in vocations has been under way since the 1970's, when seminaries emptied precipitously, in part because of a disillusionment with celibacy. Meanwhile, families of Italian, Irish and Central European descent -- the old Catholic ghetto that, earlier in this century, was a major source of American priests -- have shrunk in size and risen to the middle class, broadening opportunities for their sons. More recently, the pedophilia scandals of the late 80's and early 90's have been a public relations catastrophe for the church. But those within the church say that the increasingly secular nature of American life has taken the biggest toll on vocations.

"This is the world of advanced science and physics -- what are priests doing in this world?" asks the Rev. Lorenzo Albacete, a theology professor at St. Joseph's Seminary in Yonkers. "Those that come into the seminary today are taking a radical stand. They are countercultural."

"Countercultural" is not a word one would readily pin to the amiable, clean-cut young men who are enjoying a rare night out at the diner for ice cream and cheesecake. And yet in America today, a man whose personal heroes are martyr-saints, who invokes God often in conversation, who worries intensely about the poor and believes that contraception and masturbation are always morally wrong is, to put it mildly, outside the mainstream. He stands apart. "Sometimes it's hard to talk about Jesus Christ," says Damien Cook, 25, a friendly, Falstaffian-looking deacon from Omaha. "I remember in high school, you feel odd bringing Him up. You're told by the culture that Christianity oppresses people."

Like all counterculturalists, seminarians and priests can provoke suspicion, even hostility, from a society whose values they seem, by their very presence, to challenge. Seminarians say they're frequently approached by strangers who disagree with the church's position on women's ordination or, more often, celibacy. "They go: 'Father, you can't get married, right? Well, I don't agree with that,'" Brian Bashista, who is 34 and from Arlington, Va., recounts. "You try to explain, but some of them don't want to hear it. Maybe I took offense the first couple of times, but it happens so much that I say, Lord, you must be doing something. Maybe this is an opportunity to try to help teach."



**Men in Black** Bashista on campus; with Dobbins in a mall; at Communion.

Seminarians often confront the suggestion that a high proportion of them are homosexual. Magat, who worked as a health-care consultant before entering the seminary, learned that some colleagues were wondering if he was gay after he divulged his intention to be a priest. "At first I felt emasculated," he says. "I had a naive view of what people thought about priests; in my home environment and my family, priests are upheld as pillars of the community."

In fact, there is a concern among some within the church that the proportion of gay men entering the priesthood has risen sharply. Magat and Bashista claim that they are not aware of gay men at Mount Saint Mary's, but say that it shouldn't matter if some seminarians have "homosexual inclinations," since anyone seeking to become a Catholic priest, straight or gay, is striving to live a celibate life.

The conversation drifts to another, darker presumption about the sexuality of priests. Magat recalls an encounter he had recently in a supermarket. "I was standing in line in my clerics," he says. "The woman in front of me was checking out her groceries, and her young son in the shopping cart, probably 2 or 3, he was kind of looking at me, interested. I waved and said, 'Hi, how's it going?' and she pulled him out of the cart and away from me. I was just mortified."

Despite the high profile of the scandals involving the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests, there is no evidence that the incidence of sexual misconduct is greater among priests than among clergy of other denominations or the population at large. But this is of little comfort to Catholic clergy or parishioners -- nor is it likely to alter the widely held perception that men who choose to live celibate lives have psychological problems they wish to conceal.

This perception is not lost on the seminarians. Magat was dating a woman before he entered the seminary, but he avoided telling her that he was considering a vocation until the last possible moment. "I was afraid," he says. "If I decided not to go to the seminary and I'd told her in advance, then I'm out of the vocation and I'm out of her. Because I knew she would have dropped me like a hat."

For a long time, Bashista says, he was critical of the fact that priests cannot marry, and celibacy was a big impediment for many years as he struggled with the idea of becoming a priest. "I really felt that I was called to be a father and a husband," he says. "I thought that was why I was placed on earth. There was a girl I dated in college -- we'd even had talks about getting married."

Bashista's initial aversion to celibacy is widespread among men of his generation, according to Dean Hoge, a professor of sociology at Catholic University. In a 1985 study of college men, Hoge concluded that making celibacy optional, as it is for Eastern Orthodox and Protestant clergy (celibacy has been required of Catholic priests only since the Second Lateran Council in 1139), would increase the number of candidates fourfold. So far, though, the church hierarchy has shown no interest in such a reform, and with the exception of Bishop Raymond A. Lucker of New Ulm, Minn., who called in a pastoral letter last fall for a dialogue on celibacy, very few American bishops have spoken publicly on the issue.

A former architect who practiced for seven years before entering the seminary, Bashista would have been an anomaly 30 years ago, when nearly three-quarters of entering seminarians were under 25. But today he is the norm; 86 percent of seminarians are older than 25 when they enter, and 16 percent are older than 40, meaning that -- with four years of theology in front of them, often preceded by a year or more of "pretheology" and sometimes interrupted by a mandatory year of ministry or reflection -- some will be 50 or older by the time they become priests. The student body at Mount Saint Mary's includes a doctor, a concert pianist and several military officers -- evidence of the rising number of "second career" priests who embarked upon secular lives after college, but then experienced spiritual epiphanies that upended those lives and remade them.

Tom Fesen, 30, a deacon from Trenton, took a job after college at Chemical Bank in New York, where he commuted each day from his home in New Jersey. "There were two buses; one came too late and one came too early," he recalls. "So I came early. The bus dropped me off across the street from a church, so I decided, I'll go into this church, get a little peace of mind. Mass would be about 20 minutes. So six months into this, the reader left, and the priest came up to me and said, 'Do you want to read during Mass?' I said: 'No, I don't want to. I'm just here a little early.' Immediately after that, he said, 'Well, do you want to be a priest?' "I was so irritated," Fesen continues. "Where does he come off? I'm going to be a banker; get married; 2.5 kids, house in the suburbs, dog. But after that I couldn't get the thought out of my mind."

**Bashista regards celibacy as a crucial aspect of his priesthood, which will not be a job so much as a way of life -- a marriage to the church. 'Some days I'll think: What if I was back at the architecture firm? Would I be a partner now? Married? Have kids?' he says. 'But the match has been made.'**

Fesen's story -- of having his vocation acknowledged by someone else before he knew it himself-- is one you hear repeatedly from seminarians, many of whom fell away from the church at some point in their lives. Michael Dobbins, 32, a husky, mirthful deacon from Arlington and therefore a "D.B.," or diocesan brother, to Bashista, had the sort of childhood that might have resulted in a fairly direct journey to the priesthood in a prior era. "I played Mass as a kid," he says. "My sisters were the altar boys. My dad had this old copper chalice for his beer on football Sundays, so I used that. And Wonder Bread, something white, you'd press it down flat and use a glass to cut a circle out. I wasn't very clear on the vestments, so I used a big bedspread."

In college, though, Dobbins stopped going to a Catholic church and began attending a Baptist church instead, where he became involved with a Baptist woman. At one point in college, he was briefly engaged. "In my last year," he recounts, "I was reading my Bible, and I got to John 6. At the end it says, 'And some of his disciples no longer followed him.' I'd read that a thousand times before, but something in that passage hit me like a big brick. And I was like, holy cow -- that's me. I cried like a baby."

For some, the conversion experience rescued them from paths that Holloway refers to, in his own case, as "serious darkness and sin." A onetime actor and a singer in an alternative-rock band, Holloway had dropped out of college and was living with fellow musicians when his parents persuaded him to attend a weekend conference devoted to the Virgin Mary. At the end, the keynote speaker invited all of those who believed they might have vocations to approach the stage. Holloway remembers: "I had an interior experience almost as if Our Lady was standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders, leaning down to say, 'If you will put your vocation in my hands, I will take care of all the things you consider obstacles.' My heart was pounding. And I found myself climbing over this balcony and going down there."

ONE AFTERNOON LAST NOVEMBER, I WENT WITH BASHISTA TO Arlington, and we visited the two-story suburban house where he grew up and where his parents still live, from which his father, an electrical engineer, commutes to his job at the Naval Research Lab in Washington. Modest and immaculate, with lots of carpeting and an abundance of pink and mauve in the decor, the Bashistas' home veritably thrummed with the quiet, vehement faith of his mother, Aileen, who looks like Bashista only fairer, with pale blue eyes and gold-rimmed glasses. Hefty painted statuettes of Christ and the Virgin Mary stood before a window in the kitchen, and in the living room, near a graduation photo of Bashista smiling over a giant bow tie, there was a small table covered with lace, where holy water, candles and a relic -- a bone of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint -- were on display.

"I always prayed that the Lord would take my sons to be His holy priests," Aileen Bashista told me. "You know it's nothing you deserve. It's God's gift."

Bashista's younger brother, Christopher, a drummer until a car injury left him unable to play, now a senior at George Mason University who lives at home, had a different reaction: relief. "Mom got her priest," he said.

Aileen Bashista makes weekly visits to Seton High School, where Bashista's younger sister, Mary-Beth, is a senior, to teach rosary making. She is also a lay member of an order of Carmelite nuns. She prays that Mary-Beth will become a nun too, though she admitted that the possibility seemed remote for her lively, sociable daughter, who is chairman of her prom committee.



*Dobbins prepares publicity material for an anti-abortion march.*

"He seldom knocks us off a horse like he did Paul," Aileen reflected. "If we're always listening to rock music or doing homework and busy with worldly things, you seldom get to hear our Lord."

"Enough," said Mary-Beth.

Brian Bashista's upbringing was not intensely religious, and he and his older brother, John, now married and a father, attended public schools. "My mom and dad were not always so strong in their faith," Bashista explained. "John and I were never altar boys." When he was in junior high school, his mother plunged more deeply into Catholicism and pressed her son Brian to do the same.

"In her fervor, it wasn't necessarily an invitation," he said. "It was: 'You need to do this. It will help you.' John and I were teen-agers, and we both resisted. 'Say the family rosary, Mom, are you kidding? I'm going out with friends.'" "These memories may partly explain Bashista's scrupulous effort never to sound overbearing or judgmental. "Propose, not impose," is a phrase he often repeats. "Lead them to the truth, don't slam them with it. That's not the way Jesus did it."

Bashista is more judgmental when describing his own life before he entered the seminary. "Our Lord gave me everything I ever wanted," he recalled. "I worked for the firm I wanted to work for, I had a lot of friends. But *I* was my first priority, and if being nice to people helped me, then I did it. I was engrossed in the office gossip: Oh, we shouldn't be saying this, but loving every minute of it. I'd go buy clothes. You don't want to wear the same pants or shirt in one week. ... Are you kidding? I'd get extremely frustrated over the stupidest things, getting ink on a new white \$70 shirt and going ballistic."

Underneath, he said, "there was a real spiritual poverty. I felt a sense of loneliness and emptiness." Bashista's disquiet culminated one night five years after he'd graduated from college: "I was in my apartment, and I was so confused and unhappy. I just felt broken. I was in tears." That night, he said, he turned to God: "I said: Lord, I have no other roads to exhaust. I'm going to make a sincere effort to live as You've called me to live."

After that night, thoughts of the priesthood began once again to visit Bashista, and finally he made a furtive visit to a chancery office in Charlotte, N.C., where he lived at the time. "I thought, I'll just get a book on priesthood, find out what it's all about," he recalled. "So the receptionist said, 'Well, let's go up to the library.' Then a priest walked by, and the receptionist goes, 'Wait a minute, that's the vocation director!' I just got a chill. I said, 'Father, I have this friend, ...' and I

bombarded him with an hour and a half of questions. At the end he goes, 'You have an awfully inquisitive friend.'"

Still, Bashista resisted: "My response was not yes; it was, I'll consider it. I call it my one-sided argument with Our Lord; it was about four months long. I said, 'I don't have to be a priest to be holy.' Finally the response came: 'You're right, but this is what I call *you* to.' And then that was it, I knew I'd lost. Not lost, but won. I'd won the life. Immediately I said, 'Yes.' I was just flooded with peace."

The process known as discernment, by which a seminarian determines whether the call to the priesthood is real and lasting, continues until the day of his diaconate ordination, when he makes the promises of celibacy and obedience. On the wall of Dobbins's room is a photograph of his and Bashista's diaconate class four years ago; Dobbins has pasted smiley-face stickers over the heads of the 10 -- out of 42 -- who have left. Some are not actually gone; they're taking pastoral or spiritual years required by their dioceses, or have joined religious orders; others are now married and fathers, including one of Bashista's former roommates.

Bashista's views on celibacy have changed. Now he regards it as a crucial aspect of his priesthood, which will not be a job so much as a way of life -- a marriage to the church. (Some priests actually wear wedding rings after their ordinations.) "Some days I'll think: What if I was back in the architecture firm? Would I be a partner now? Married? Have kids?" he said. "But the match has been made. One reason I had thoughts of marriage with this one girl was that connection, that longing to be with this person. And then that feeling was not sustained. It was strong, it was present, but it wasn't deep. And this is deep. I really feel like I'm in love. I'm engaged, and I'm getting ready to get married."

**O**N A BRIGHT, CRISP AFTERNOON LAST FALL, I JOINED ALL 159 MOUNT Saint Mary's seminarians outside McSweeney Hall, the seminary's main building, an eccentric, gabled edifice made of slabs of thickly grouted granite, perched midway up a hill among a patchwork of farms and woods. We boarded buses and rode an hour and a half to the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, where the seminarians had been invited to view an exhibit of religious artwork from the Vatican Museums.

Mount Saint Mary's is the second-largest seminary in the country, after Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, and is also among the most conservative -- scrupulously adherent to the magisterium, or teaching authority, of the Pope. A man seeking to become a diocesan priest must first be accepted to a diocese, whose bishop usually underwrites his education and chooses the seminary where it will take place; bishops appointed under Pope John Paul II tend to be morally conservative, upholding the Pope's stringent views on such controversial topics as contraception and the ordination of women.

But conservative at Mount St. Mary's does not mean sour or grim. A mood of buoyant optimism surges among the men -- a sense, accurate or not, that the bad times are over for the priesthood, and something new and momentous is in the making. "There was a period of confusion and uncertainty after the Second Vatican Council, even going into the 80's," the Rev. Kevin Rhoades, the cheerful rector of Mount Saint Mary's, told me. "But now we've had 20 years of a very strong pontificate. I think we're at a new era, and these men represent it."

Among liberal Catholics, including liberal priests -- many of whom regard John Paul II as authoritarian and reactionary -- there is the perception that new seminarians like those at Mount St. Mary's are rigid and narrow-minded, merely parroting the Pope's views without learning to think for themselves. Certainly there is a passionate devotion to the Pope among the men of Mount St. Mary's. They often quote him -- in particular the phrase, "Be not afraid." Bashista put it this way: "We're the John Paul II generation. That's a great sign of hope."

But at the gallery, the seminarians scrutinized Medieval and Renaissance paintings with a feverish -- and sometimes wistful -- attention to the past, a past that still pertains directly to their lives. Raphael Hall, 42, one of five seminarians at Mount St. Mary's from the Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word in Birmingham, Ala., moved about the gallery in a brown Franciscan habit, the beads of a long wooden rosary clicking softly from his cord belt as he searched for works by Fra Angelico, a 15th-century Dominican painter who would have dressed almost identically. There were chalices and vestments on display -- the very items that Bashista and the other deacons were in the process of choosing before their ordinations. (It is customary for family members or friends to pay for a seminarian's gold or silver chalice, the cup in which wine and water are believed to be transformed into Christ's blood, and whose essential role in a priest's life is likened to a doctor's stethoscope.)

"This was the cover of a tax book," one seminarian remarked to me, as he looked at a painted "Annunciation" by Giovanni di Paolo. Then he added, "That's how much religion was a part of life."

In mainstream America it is no longer so; indeed, for a young man pursuing a life of celibate devotion to Christ, the world outside the seminary is a minefield of temptations and distractions. Tom Holloway, the former alt-rocker, said once, "Every morning when we get out of bed, there's a war going on, and we're right in the middle of it." The world threatens in a multitude of ways; even something as simple as grocery shopping can pose hazards. "Lots of magazine covers don't reach Christian modesty," Magat said. "I have to pretty much stare straight ahead -- there are half-naked women all over the place!" The world threatened, too, during the White House sex scandal, when seminarians had to grapple with whether to read the sexually explicit Starr report. Many did not; some who did went to confession afterward. All whom I spoke to said they prayed for the President, though politically they deplore his support for abortion rights. (In general, their opposition to abortion drives them to the right politically, but not without misgivings -- the Republicans, in their view, do not show enough concern for the poor.)



**A Mother's Dream** *The Bashistas with their son the future priest.*

To protect themselves from visual affronts, seminarians employ what they call "custody of the eyes." Bashista explained this concept: "You just look down. You don't have to make a big deal of it. It's playing with fire. Sometimes these images will bombard your memory." If he begins to feel aroused, Bashista said, "you have to channel that energy in productive ways. Doing something for someone else. If you're looking at ladies, getting some thoughts or ideas, just refocus."

And yet, many of these men were reared on popular culture and find it difficult to give up. "On a lot of TV shows, you know married couples are contracepting," Magat said. "And any time Jerry hooked up with some girl in 'Seinfeld,' we knew they were sleeping together. . . . Should I find these things funny? This is the stuff I'm going to be preaching against!" Magat stopped watching "Seinfeld," but kept track of what was happening on the show to the very end from nonseminary friends.

For a long time, Michael Dobbins was a devoted fan of James Taylor. "I went to several of his concerts and I had his T-shirts, his CD's -- I was taking guitar lessons so I could learn to play his songs," he said. "Then I began to realize that a lot of his lyrics are like, peace, love and butterflies are free -- whatever goes. But whatever goes really isn't the truth, you know? And finally one day I'm listening to this James Taylor concert on the radio, and he says, 'This is a hymn to the goddess Gaya.' I don't know who the goddess Gaya is, but that's not my God. I was just like, That's it. Click -- stopped the radio. Went over to the closet, pulled out my concert shirts and threw them in the trash can. Pulled out my James Taylor CD's -- dunk. See ya, James."

Magat summed it up this way: "You have to detach from these things, or you become numb to them. We're trying to live as a sign of contradiction in the world."

But living as a sign of contradiction is not the same as retreating from the world altogether, and the seminarians struggle to achieve what they regard as the ideal balance: being *in* the world but not *of* it, a phrase they often repeat. They see themselves as witnesses -- testifying through their very presence and clerical attire to the Catholic Church and all that it holds true. Bashista provided an example: in the gym at Mount Saint Mary's, college students sometimes play music whose lyrics he finds objectionable. "It's an opportunity," he said. "It's a time to evangelize. You don't go up and rip the tape out, but you say: 'Can you share with me some of those words? I'm not sure I'm hearing them right.' A lot of times they don't even know what the words are. It's got to be proposing, not imposing, which is the tougher way. It's our Lord's way."

Witnessing is crucial, say the seminarians, because the world is starving for the message they represent. And here lies the crux of their sense of mission, and the optimism that fuels it: the so-called freedoms of our secular and relativistic culture have not paid off, they insist; on the contrary, they have created a dangerous and uninhibited world where families are ravaged by divorce, abortion, addiction and violence. "Someone who chooses something they know is destructive, that's not freedom -- that's slavery," said Bashista. "Freedom is knowing your choices and then choosing the truth."

There is another reason to resist being *of* this world -- not just for seminarians but also for all fervid Catholics. "This world is not the end," Bashista reminded me. "That communion we're seeking will happen in the next life." Heaven is the subject of rich fantasy among the seminarians; they imagine it as a place unfettered by limitations of time or space, where they will meet and love the many anonymous strangers they pass each day in restaurants and highways. Jim Crisman, a seminarian from Denver who taught for a time in Slovakia, recalled one day: "I'd go to a 4:00 Mass every day in Slovakia, and I'd see the old women coming in. I couldn't communicate with them. And I was thinking, I don't know anything about them, but I will someday. This isn't the last time that I'll see them."

**A** WEEK AFTER THE MUSEUM TRIP, I JOINED THE SEMINARIANS FOR MASS, which is at 7:00 each morning in Immaculate Conception Chapel, whose putty-colored walls are trimmed with gold and turquoise, and which smelled that morning of incense and after-shave. Many seminarians had been praying in the chapel since 6:15; prayer forms the core of the seminary experience, and the men talk about their prayer lives the way most people talk about their love lives. At times their prayer is strong, full and deep (some seminarians call this feeling the "warm fuzzies"); at others it is dry and without feeling, reverberating an emptiness through their lives.

After morning Mass and breakfast, the seminarians attend classes, which include moral theology, philosophy, scripture and church history. During their fourth year, they practice celebrating the Mass and hearing confession, often from recent graduates, who return to campus and play the penitents, inventing sins for seminarians to hear. The Rev. Mark Moretti, one such volunteer who is now an associate pastor in Alexandria, Va., explained the purpose of such role playing: "Are you able to judge what you're hearing? Are you able to give a suitable penance? If you have a little old lady coming in to confess her sins and you hammer her with a novena" -- a penance lasting nine days -- you're too extreme."

Bashista and the other deacons' first class this day was Marriage and Family, where seminarians were learning to prepare betrothed couples for marriage. After the class recited the Our Father, the teacher, Sister Paula Jean Miller, got down to business: the topic of the day was "the theology of sexuality." Drawing on Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, Miller explained that "total self-donation," or "self-gift," is the goal for human relationships -- and also a way of explaining why married people should not use contraception.

"Sexual intercourse is a cause of grace within the sacrament of marriage," Miller said. "Just as the Father gives himself totally to the Son and the Son gives himself back totally to the father, that's the standard of love for us. Contraception is a holding back of some very critical aspect of ourselves, of who I am. It's saying to you, I want you but I don't want your fertility, at least not right now. And the goal is total self-gift." (Actually, a majority of Catholic theologians disagree with this position.)

Only in the last 30 years has the concept of self-gift come to coexist with procreation in the Catholic Church as the criterion for the moral rightness of a sexual act, according to Richard McCormick, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame. Self-gift, the seminarians are taught, can be used to explain what is wrong with masturbation (it involves no giving to another), lust (it involves taking rather than giving, thus reducing one's partner to the status of an object) and homosexuality (the "other" is not other, and thus self-gift is not really possible).

That an intricate discussion of sex and morality was being conducted by 40 men and one woman who have taken vows of celibacy is a stark reminder of a major difficulty facing the Catholic Church in America: how can a celibate clergy persuade sexually active lay people to allow the church to regulate their sex lives?

For while American Catholics tend to believe and accept the church's teaching on most doctrinal issues, according to Gallup polls, more than 80 percent of them, in defiance of doctrine, approve of artificial contraception, two-thirds say that premarital sex is morally acceptable (among Catholics under 35, the figure is as high as 9 out of 10), nearly half say that homosexual activity can be morally acceptable and roughly half say that abortion (excluding late-term "partial birth"

abortions) should be legal in many or all cases. In addition, most American Catholics would support a married clergy, and most approve of the notion of female priests.

Diocesan priests, as liaisons between the church hierarchy and the laity, are caught in a morality gap between the two -- asked to promote unpopular views that in many cases they themselves do not share. According to a 1994 Los Angeles Times survey, nearly half of American priests believe that birth control is seldom or never wrong; even more say the same of masturbation. As a result, few Catholics hear preaching on touchy sexual issues on any given Sunday.

**Any time Jerry hooked up with some girl in "Seinfeld," we knew they were sleeping together,' Magat says. 'Should I find these things funny? This is the stuff I'm going to be preaching against!' Magat stopped watching 'Seinfeld,' but kept track of what was happening to the very end from nonseminary friends.**

This is about to change, say the seminarians at Mount Saint Mary's -- they have every intention of preaching on these topics, and some deacons already have done so in the parishes they were assigned to last summer. "If people had the great opportunity we have to learn and to pray and to study," Bashista said, "maybe they would come to a consensus with what the church is teaching and think of the beauty of it rather than the Thou Shalt Not. And that is our obligation: to preach and to teach the truth in charity and in love, and to be patient."

After asking permission from his pastor, Cook preached against contraception in the parish he was assigned in Omaha, Neb., last summer. "I was nervous," he recalled. "If I hadn't really prayed on it and done it in a way that I think was not overbearing. ... I said: 'What is the nature of marriage? To give of oneself.' I didn't use the word 'contraception' until the end. People came up to me afterward and said: 'No one ever preaches on that. Thank you.' "

Holloway gave me a tape of a lecture he delivered to teen-age boys, in which he told them: "Let me be perfectly clear. Sometimes people just won't say this: masturbation is always a seriously disordered act. . . . In itself, it is always wrong." He urged the boys to confess their sins, and afterward, I was told, they did, lining up in scores outside the confessionals.

And if they hadn't?

"If you preach on these topics, you're going to endure a wrath," Bashista said. "But if you are indeed teaching the truth -- what the church is saying, that has transcended time -- Christ says, you're going to endure ridicule. Because He did."

**O**N A SUNNY SATURDAY, I RODE WITH BASHISTA FROM MOUNT SAINT Mary's to Blessed Sacrament, the parish in Arlington where he served last summer and now spends two weekends each month. We drove in the low-slung gold Honda Civic that he purchased during his architecture days, and I asked Bashista what has become of that old egotistical, materialistic version of himself.

"It's there, but it's been transformed," he said. "St. Paul said, I'm a new creation. The old self is dead. And in a sense that's true."

Now, Bashista said, the energy he once spent serving his own interests is directed toward other people who need his help, both in prayer and in deed; like most seminarians, he keeps lists of people who have asked him to pray for them, or else he prays for them in the moment of promising to do so. According to the Pope's theology of the body, the passionate intensity of sexual love is also the model for celibate love -- the total self-donation of a priest to his people. The needs of the sick and the poor are a particular focus; there is perhaps no setting in America -- neither the halls of government nor the campuses of elite colleges anymore -- where you hear the poor evoked more often, and more sympathetically, than in a Catholic seminary.

At Blessed Sacrament, Bashista checked in with the pastor and made some last-minute adjustments to his homily, which he would deliver at Mass that evening. (In contemporary Catholicism, the sabbath begins on Saturday night.) Then he stopped at the chapel to "pick up our Lord" -- that is, the consecrated Hosts, which he carries to Inova Alexandria Hospital in a gold-plated cylinder called a pyx.

At the hospital reception desk, Bashista was given a printed list of Catholic patients to whom he would offer Communion. First we headed for intensive care; he had been told there was a parishioner from Blessed Sacrament there. As usual, Bashista wore his clerics and Roman collar; when people he passed in the hospital halls met his eye, he smiled and said hello, and when they avoided his gaze, he let it pass.

The woman in intensive care, who appeared to be in her 50's, was attached to a respirator. It hiked up her chest every few seconds and injected air into her lungs with a gasping noise. Her skin was deeply jaundiced everywhere but her hands, which were bright purple. Bashista stood close to the woman and leaned over her. When he spoke her name, her eyelids parted and she looked up at him. Bashista introduced himself and asked how she was feeling, but she couldn't speak; the respirator attachment filled her mouth. He leaned close and took one of her plum-colored hands in his. "You've got a good strong grip," he said.

A priest had told Bashista that the woman felt close to a guardian angel, whom she had named. "Father told me about Emily," Bashista said now. "She's a sweet little angel. She's with you, too. You're not suffering alone, O.K.? We're suffering with you." The woman watched him desperately over her bucking chest.

She could not take Communion because of the respirator, so Bashista offered her a spiritual communion instead. He placed the heel of his palm against her forehead and spread his fingers to encompass the front of her skull. As he prayed aloud, she closed her eyes. Watching this, I remembered something Bashista told me once: "If the church is your bride, intimacy is what you have caring for the sick. You're giving of yourself, and it's being received. There is nothing more gratifying."

When the prayer was done, the woman relaxed into her pillow, as if some tension inside her had been set free. After some minutes, Bashista gently extricated his hand from hers. "I'll be back in two weeks," he told her. "You'll probably be home by then. I'll come find you."

Afterward, he told me: "If this life were all there was, I couldn't do that. Suffering and pain are senseless if there's not an afterlife. This woman might see Jesus face to face tonight, and don't get me wrong" -- he chuckled -- "life is wonderful, it's a gift from God. But we're pilgrims here. This is not our home."

Later, the bright, modern church in Arlington was packed for 5:00 Mass, which features 11 white-gloved parishioners, known as dingers, ringing hand bells, and seven singing children. A sprawling, populous complex that serves 3,600 families and runs an elementary school, Blessed Sacrament has a pastor, three associate priests and Bashista, reflecting a bounty of vocations in and around Arlington that is out of keeping with the general trend. Bashista assumed at first that he would join a diocese in greater need of priests, he said, "but in that process, some doors open, other doors close. The match seemed to be in Arlington."

Bashista may spend as many as 15 years as an associate pastor, whereas in priest-starved dioceses like Denver, where Crisman will be ordained, a new priest might be placed in charge of a parish as soon as two years after ordination -- thrown into a vast organizational and fiscal job (parishes are financially independent, though they may borrow money from their dioceses) that can put a great deal of pressure on an inexperienced priest.

After the Mass, parishioners gathered around Bashista and the other priests outside the church. Several complimented Bashista on his homily. One woman had a little boy with her who was afraid to make his first confession; would Bashista talk with him? A young drummer with an Army band thought he might have a vocation; Bashista promised to send him some information. A number of people asked him to pray for them, and he always assented -- and asked them to pray for *him*, too. (Later, he recorded the names of new parishioners he had met in a small book to help him remember them.)

When they'd all gone, Bashista unvested, returning the white alb and patterned green dalmatic to their hangers in the vestry. Clearly, the Mass and the meeting with parishioners afterward elated him. "I'm in the honeymoon phase," he said. "But what you're seeing is the future -- I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe that."

Others in the church anticipate more conflict. The Rev. Richard McBrien, a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, told me that the shortage of American priests would deepen the division between clergy and laity. "What happens now is that people shop," he said. "They go where they can get the best Mass, the best music, the best sermons. But when the day comes that there aren't enough good priests left, I think the people are absolutely going to demand from the government of the church that they have married priests."

Progressive Catholic organizations hope that the successor to John Paul II will be less authoritarian and more collegial -- the true spirit of Vatican II, they believe. There is talk of the resentment many bishops are said to feel toward John Paul II, who has centralized authority at their expense. ("He treats bishops like altar boys" is a phrase I heard more than once from liberal priests and nuns.) Will the man chosen to be the next Pope be willing to give bishops greater autonomy -- thus opening the door for discussion of other changes, like relaxing the moral doctrine and even reconsidering celibacy and the role of women?

Whatever happens, the Catholic laity may well continue do as it thinks best in the moral sphere. "American Catholics have matured," says William D'Antonio, a research professor at Catholic University. "Vatican II has succeeded. The real documents of Vatican II are freedom of conscience and the responsibility of individuals not to blithely follow the leader." According to the University of Maryland Survey Research Center, more than two-thirds of Catholics say that when their conscience is at odds with the Pope, they should follow their conscience.

**F**OR THE SEMINARIANS AT MOUNT SAINT MARY'S, THERE IS LITTLE question about what will ultimately happen. "We already know the end of the story," Bashista says. "God will triumph. The church will triumph. That doesn't mean that the present trials aren't there. Think of fourth-century Arianism, when two-thirds of the church, including bishops, didn't believe that Jesus was God! But the threats will never succeed. The essentials will never change. How do we know that? Because Christ said so."

Still, they admit, the sheer magnitude of what they're up against in their wish to transform a largely indifferent world can be crushing at times. "I always think of 'Cliffhanger,'" says Magat, referring to the Sylvester Stallone thriller. "They have to climb up the cliff with no ropes, going backward. That is our life. There's a lot of skepticism out there, a lot of cynicism. The easiest thing is to say, Forget it, this is not my responsibility. Let someone else do it. And I think that's what a lot of guys are saying when they don't answer the call to the priesthood."

Bashista keeps a folder titled "Thanks Be to God," in which he places any cards or letters he receives describing the impact he has had on people's lives. When he mentioned the folder to the others at the diner that winter night, each admitted that he, too, was amassing a similar file.

"There may come a day when I say, Was this all worth it?" Holloway explained, as dessert was cleared away. "What am I doing here? Has this made any difference to anybody? And if I ever come to that, I'm going to open the folder on that day. And if I get to the end of my life without ever having opened it, that'd be awesome."

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