

# Answering the Call

## *Increasing Number of Alumni Answer Call to Priesthood*

(from SLUH News, Winter 2006)

Vocations to the priesthood are on the rise among SLUH students and alumni. Of the 48 men currently studying for the priesthood at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, nine are graduates of St. Louis University High. In addition, three SLUH alumni are currently training to become Jesuit priests.

Fr. Ralph Houlihan '52, S.J., serves as a vocations coordinator at SLUH. He has seen a significant rise in the level of interest in the priesthood shown by students over the past few years. "Right now, we have at least a dozen young alumni who are in training for the priesthood. If you had asked me fifteen or twenty years ago, the number would have been three or four," commented Houlihan.

"Back in the 1950s when I graduated from SLUH, typically 5 or 6 guys in each class would enter the seminary. That number declined over the years, but today it is on the rise again." Among recent graduating classes, there are two or three men in each class who have entered the seminary or are considering the Jesuit Novitiate.

Fr. Houlihan pointed out a significant difference between today's seminarians and those of his generation. Today, many young men begin their seminary training later in life rather than entering immediately out of high school. "Although it's not an official policy, most men entering the Society (of Jesus) today have already completed some college studies." This is not unique to the Jesuits. Several of the young alumni at Kenrick-Glennon also entered after attending college elsewhere.

What does SLUH do to nurture vocations in the priesthood? "The number one thing we do is maintain a prayerful atmosphere in our school," said Fr. Houlihan. "We have daily Mass, daily prayers, the rosary each Thursday, Eucharistic adorations and a vibrant retreat program. It is God who calls these young men to the priesthood, but it is our job to create an atmosphere in which young men can hear His call."

Beyond the prayerful atmosphere, there are programs run by the Jesuits to help guide students who are considering the priesthood. "There are a couple of groups of students that we meet with several times a year," said Houlihan. "We'll have them over for dinner at the Jesuit residence, or we meet for discussions here at SLUH." Once a year, a young Jesuit who is currently "in formation" (the Jesuit term for the program of studies and ministry work that Jesuits undertake leading up to ordination) will speak with these students to answer their questions and tell them their vocation story. Joe Laramie, S.J. '96 and Brian Christopher, S.J. '93 have been recent guest speakers. Laramie and

Christopher, along with Bill Sheahan, S.J. '85, are the SLUH alumni who are currently in training to become Jesuit priests.

The following are SLUH alumni currently studying at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in the Archdiocese of St. Louis:

- Brian Fallon '04
- Michael Grosch '03
- Henry (Bo) Purcell '04
- Robert Ryan '04
- Daniel Queathem '05
- Charles Samson '05
- D. Michael Bauer '96
- Eric Olsen '01
- Nicklaus Winker '02

Nick Winker '02 entered the seminary at Kenrick-Glennon last Fall, having already earned a degree from the University of Missouri at Rolla. He recalls that it was during a retreat in his Senior year at SLUH that he first began to seriously consider the priesthood. "The idea had been in the back of my mind for some time, but before (the retreat) I had refused to consider it. At the retreat I came to the conclusion that the priesthood was where I should be headed."

But this was in the Spring of his Senior year. He'd already been accepted at several colleges. "Between AP tests, college enrollment forms and high school graduation the idea faded away," said Winker.

After graduation, Winker went to UM-Rolla and studied Computer Engineering. "The idea faded even more, as I was quite happy at Rolla," says Winker. "After a year and half at Rolla, I had put the idea of the seminary out of my head. But it all came back during a Holy Thursday Mass in my second year of college. The pastor of the church in Rolla invited me to visit the Conception Seminary. This set me on the course that would lead me where I am today."

Winker graduated from Rolla a year early – largely because of the AP courses he took at SLUH – and moved back to St. Louis. He continued to discern his vocation with the help of his pastor in St. Louis, Msgr. John Leykam '64 (another SLUH alumnus).

"I visited Kenrick-Glennon last March for the Archbishop's Retreat, a retreat for men discerning their vocation given by Archbishop Burke. After that, I knew this was where I needed to be," concluded Winker.

Brian Christopher '93, S.J., was inspired in his Junior year at SLUH by a young Jesuit scholastic. "In my Junior year, Mr. Jeff Puthoff, S.J., came to teach at SLUH. Jeff was a charismatic guy with a fiery personality and an uncanny ability to ask challenging questions to push my thinking to a deeper level," recalls Christopher. Puthoff launched

the Community Service Program at SLUH, and recruited Christopher as one of his early volunteers. Puthoff took groups of SLUH students to schools and community centers in impoverished neighborhoods to work with children.

“With Jeff, community service was never simply a matter of doing nice things for poor people, then going back home unchanged. Jeff insisted on teaching us to reflect on what we were doing, which typically happened in an informal conversation during the car ride back to school,” said Christopher. This pattern of service to the poor followed by prayerful reflection sparked a fire in Christopher. “Something important was brewing inside me. My faith and my prayer life had come alive. The Gospels began to challenge me and excite me at the same time,” he recalls.

It was during his Junior Retreat at the White House that Christopher first discerned he was being called to the priesthood. “I heard a small voice inside my head that said ‘Brian, how far will you come with me?’ and I remember feeling both scared and energized.” Christopher put the idea aside for a while.

“I went to college at St. Louis University and I tested the heck out of this call,” jokes Christopher. “I spent my time going to parties, playing music, dating. I even found time to study occasionally.” Throughout college, though, Christopher stayed in conversation with the Jesuits about his calling. During his Senior year, he made up his mind to explore it fully, and upon graduation entered the Jesuit Novitiate.

After two years of Novitiate, Christopher spent three years earning another degree at Loyola University in Chicago. Then came the three years of formation the Jesuits call Regency. This is when a Jesuit scholastic “tries on” his role as a Jesuit, serving full-time in a Jesuit apostolate and living in a Jesuit community.

“I spent my first two years of Regency teaching Junior theology at SLUH, which was significant for me personally since it was in my Junior year at SLUH that I first discerned my vocation,” commented Christopher. Now in his third year of Regency he is working at St. Matthew’s parish, the Jesuit-staffed parish on the city’s North side. The next step is three years of theology studies, followed by ordination.

“Each step of the way, despite ups and downs, I have found reasons to fall in love all over again with my Jesuit vocation,” concluded Christopher.

Henry Purcell '04 first began thinking of the priesthood in the summer before his Senior year at SLUH. Henry (“Bo” to his family and friends) says, “I dismissed (the thoughts of priesthood) as quickly as they entered my mind, because I did not want God to interfere with my life. I had a plan all worked out, and I did not want to change anything.” Over the course of his Senior year, especially during a couple of retreats, the idea repeatedly crept into his mind.

So he took the initiative and decided to explore the idea further. “I contacted Fr. Butler, the Vocations Director for the diocese. I met with him a few times, and in prayer I grew

increasingly aware of God's plan for me," said Purcell. In April of his Senior year, during Holy Week, he filled out the application to Kenrick and began telling his family and friends.

"Almost all my friends were taken by surprise," Purcell said. "In general, they were all supportive of me, although some took a couple of months to show their support." Purcell is enthusiastic about his vocation, and it shows in the passionate way in which he talks about his future. "I look forward to being a priest," he says. "I'm excited about this opportunity. I look forward to bringing the Sacraments to the faithful and guiding them spiritually to Christ and His Church."