

What About Older Vocations?

By Deacon Steve Kramer, D. Min.

At least once a week I receive a phone call/email that begins with, “I’m 55 years old and would like to become a priest. Can you help guide me?” And I answer, “YES! It is indeed possible.” There are sponsoring dioceses that we have long term relationships with who send their older candidates to us. Additionally, there are men whose diocese does not accept older men to seminary, and we can assist them in finding a diocese who is open to older candidates.

Since 2014, I have served as Professor of Pastoral Studies, Director of Homiletics, and Director of Recruitment at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology (SHSST) in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee. We are a national seminary that serves dioceses and religious orders throughout the US. Our niche in the world of preparing men for the priesthood is that of forming men who are older – not the typical 23 to 30-year-old seminarians just out of college or young men who have spent a few years in the business world and have discerned that God has called them to the priesthood. The majority of the men at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology are men who have heard a whispering of the Holy Spirit for decades and now God is “upping the volume”- calling them to the altar at a later stage of life. Personally, I like the

term “more mature” rather than older, because these men bring a lifetime of mature experience in relationships and worship.

Some are single, some have been married, divorced, or widowed. They have spent decades in business, education, the military, or have been self-employed. Some of our seminarians have children and/or grandchildren. The common thread is that at this moment in their life, God has called them to be His priest, and many dioceses have strict age limits on accepting men for formation. Even if a diocese will accept a man in his 40s, 50s, or 60s for seminary, it’s often a tough fit for someone to be living and learning with fellow students who are young enough to be their grandkids.

Since the late 1960s the Priests of the Sacred Heart have served the needs of dioceses and religious orders from around the United States and the international community by creating an environment compatible with men who have lived and worked in the world for many years. Since the implementation of the PPF6 (Program for Priestly Formation), we have developed and implemented a unique Propaedeutic Year program geared towards mature men. This has been instrumental in preparing seminarians for their Human, Pastoral, and Spiritual formation in addition to their academic/intellectual formation. Our seminarians have diverse backgrounds; education-



ally, culturally, and generationally. We work closely with the bishops and vocation directors to ascertain the needs of their students as well as the necessities of their diocese. Our faculty and formation advisors are attuned to the essential requirements of urban, suburban, rural, and international ministries. Every seminarian has an academic plan that has been designed for their specific needs. Some men may receive an M.Div. degree, others a modified M.Div., and there are options for courses of studies which will result in a certificate of priestly ministry. Pastoral assignments consider the mature man's life experiences. Parish placements in hospital, prison, nursing home, and other justice and peace activities enhance the seminarian's overall development.

We have an excellent Homiletics program which prepares students for real world application. In addition to classroom lectures and numerous homilies preached to their peers, there are guest speakers, homilies that are video-recorded, and the men spend time in local parishes shadowing priests/deacons as they celebrate baptisms, weddings, funerals, and other liturgical services. Once ordained deacon, the seminarian is assigned to a local parish to preach on a regular basis. There they receive weekly feedback from parishioners. Those observations are shared with the homiletics professor and their formation advisors to ascertain progress.

One of the most important aspects of sending an older candidate to SHSST is that of community. Oftentimes we form groups of men who are widowed/divorced so that they can share those experiences and strategies for working through difficulties. Most years we have one or two permanent deacons who are single or have been widowed who also need community –

others who share similar experiences. There are men who have advanced degrees and others who may only have an associate degree in a specific subject. There are even options for men to obtain a combination BA/M.Div. degree if a sponsoring diocese would require. SHSST has a robust ECS program. Years ago, we called it an ESL program – English as a Second Language. Today, many of our students speak three or four languages! Therefore, the ECS (English and Culture Studies) was born. The ECS program not only teaches language, but addresses accent modification, and cultural differences between a student's home country and life in the US. Numerous dioceses have sent men to us to study the English language and culture so that we can prepare them for theological studies and eventual life and ministry here in the US.

Every seminary does splendid work in forming men for the priesthood. However, SHSST is in a different category. A religious order or diocese may have six seminarians, and one or two may be 35 + years old. It behooves the bishop/religious superior to send the older man to SHSST because we understand. We listen with empathetic ears, understand his needs, and will form him to be a solid, healthy, joyful priest.

Please reach out to Deacon Steve Kramer, D.Min at skramer@shsst.edu with any questions or concerns. We look forward to helping you form men to serve at the altar of the Lord.

