



THE JOURNEY TO BECOME A PRIEST

SINCE THE 1970S, the number of ordained priests and religious per year in our country has been on a sharp decline, while our parishes have grown in size. The ratio of priests to parishioners is a shocking 2,086 Catholics to one priest (reference: The Vatican's Central Office of Church Statistics 2022). It's a big challenge for our diocese where many parishes do not have more than one or two priests. Retired priests fill in graciously and regularly celebrate Mass and support the Sacraments. In response to the problem, Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg recently announced an important vocation initiative for our diocese. He has partnered with the team at Vocation Ministry (vocationministry.com/) in Houston, Texas to develop training programs and resources around building a culture of priesthood and religious vocations for the Diocese of Reno.

Becoming a priest is a very long journey. The average education is approximately six to eight years including both undergraduate and graduate studies. It is divided into two parts of study. Part one is four years studying philosophy. If a student has an undergraduate degree, the length can be compressed. After completing philosophy, a seminarian moves to part two, and spends another four years studying theology. During the last four years of theology, a student may be asked to complete a pastoral internship in their home diocese to support a parish and build relationships with the clergy of their diocese. They return to school and then are ordained as a deacon. After their final year in seminary formation, they are ordained a priest for their diocese and assigned a parish. Each seminarian has trained seminary staff who guide their formation along the way with countless others who support them through prayer and other means. The Bishop and vocation director guide the seminarian through the application and admittance, accompanying them through the seminary process with the help of priests and professors. The assigned formation advisor and spiritual director check in on the human, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation of the seminarian, eventually forming a man well-suited for parish life and ministry.



MEET OUR SEMINARIANS



ANTHONY RIZO, 25, Elko NV

“I knew I wanted to be a priest when I was five years old,” said Anthony. This is how he describes the beginning of his journey to the seminary. Born and raised Catholic to Hispanic parents from Mexico, he and his older sister and brother were raised around a culture of prayer, adoration and the rosary. As an altar server, Anthony experienced close up what it meant to be a priest, and it helped him with his discernment early on. He has always felt a deep love for the Eucharist and appreciates Adoration for the quietness and ability to become focused only on prayer. He never stopped thinking about becoming a priest throughout his youth. Anthony’s favorite Sacrament is Confirmation, where he was overfilled with the joy of the Holy Spirit, bringing him closer to Christ. He was influenced by his parish priest who helped him with his discernment, beginning when he served as an altar boy, through his acceptance to the seminary. While serving at the altar, he realized he was learning what a diocesan priest does day to day. While his path seemed clear to him, his journey to the seminary was not straight-forward. Upon high school graduation in 2015, he attended college in Elko, while he applied to Mount Angel Seminary in Benedictine, Oregon. His parents and family supported his decision to join the seminary. They were surprised when Anthony decided he needed a break to reflect if the seminary was for him after completing his first year. He was unsure of his ability to stay with the commitment and decided to leave the seminary for further discernment. He spent time on career interests and relocated to Oregon to live near his brother, but the priesthood never left his heart. He reconnected with his parish priest in 2019 while he was in Oregon. During his conversation with the parish priest, he listened to words of encouragement that caused him to reflect why he first desired the vocation. Anthony was reminded, “I have gifts God has given me, and I want to share them with the community and help people come closer to Christ.” He considered returning to the seminary but was still uncertain. In 2020, he wanted to move back to Northern Nevada in order to reapply to join formation, but due to the pandemic his plans were delayed. He was finally able to return to Elko in 2021 and after discussion with another priest at his parish felt certain about his decision. Anthony is now in year two in the philosophy seminary program at Mount Angel Seminary. Following his own passion to become a priest from a young age, Anthony feels called to work with the youth once he is ordained.

The most important aspect of the seminary is the time spent in discernment with God. In every class, stage and experience, there is an ongoing conversation and the formation team helps to ensure that the priesthood is the right calling for the seminarian. At any time, the seminarian can choose to dismiss himself from the program. It is not uncommon for a seminarian to leave and later return when the time is right for him. The result is a very spiritual man, who views life through a new God-focused lens.

Seminarians share a passionate journey in heeding the call from God. The moment that inspired him to follow this path leaves an unforgettable impression for their lifetime. In the Diocese of Reno there are currently three seminarians dedicated to their call, along with a handful of others who are actively discerning entering seminary formation.

While their paths have not been straightforward, their commitment and discernment is constant and keeps them on a straight path. Each of them has a unique narrative and perspective of their vocation journey. As disciples, our actions can be to support these men both spiritually in prayer and by demonstrating our love and care for them through their journey to becoming a priest.





RENÉ RODRIGUEZ-HUERTA,
27, ELKO NV

René is also from Elko, raised by parents born in Mexico, and is the oldest of the family with one brother and one sister. He and his family were active in the church, yet René struggled with his relationship with the church. Feeling that his relationship with the church and Mass was obligatory, he had a negative view of his faith post-graduation when he would be on his own and pursue his career goals. He was completely surprised when his mother registered him for the Steubenville Youth Conference, which turned out to be the experience that changed his life. Father Mike Schmitz, a well-known Catholic priest and global evangelist, was one of the keynote speakers that touched his heart in an unforgettable way. By the end of the retreat, he had a very different view about his faith, and his commitment to the church. René said, "During the closing event of the conference, the attendees were asked to pray for anyone who was considering religious life. After prayer, we were also asked to pray for all the people who were just starting to think about it. That spoke to my heart in a way I was not expecting." While René felt a strong pull to explore priesthood after the conference, he didn't take any immediate action. However, people would mention to him that he would be a good priest. It confused him and he quietly wondered if his mother was paying people to say this to him? He would simply respond, no that was not for him. After high school graduation, he secured a job in banking, which was what he planned to do, but he was also beginning to explore the priesthood. He spent time with his parish priest and realized he was questioning his worthiness to pursue it. During a homily one day, the parish priest preached about Pope Saint John Paul II, and reflected how during his ministry his work was all underground and illegal. The fear was real for him, but his bravery and love of Christ prevailed. René felt as if the priest looked straight at him when he said "be not afraid." René went home and decided to share his interest in considering seminary life with the priest. The timing was perfect, because the Bishop was coincidentally celebrating Confirmation in his church that same week. René had the immediate opportunity to meet with him. René's decision became clear. He applied to Mount Angel Seminary and was quickly accepted. René is now at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California and is in the second phase of his formation, having just returned from pastoral service at St. Therese of the Little Flower. He enjoyed the parish life, and while he's returned to campus, the impact the pastoral year had on him is evident. René has two more years in seminary, where he will complete the theology program, be ordained as a deacon in the spring and be ordained as a priest a year later.





**SEAN SCHERSHEL,
43, FALLON NV**

Sean grew up with military parents and has one sister. Both of his parents were in the Air Force, and he attended military schools. The family lived in Texas, Colorado, England and finally

settled in Fallon when he was in 6th grade. During this time he was exposed to many cultures and religions. As a Catholic family, they attended Mass and were active parishioners, with Sean as an altar server. His first experience in considering the priesthood came upon him in junior high. As an altar server, he was spending time at the church and during Lent was introduced to Adoration. He recalls vividly, "I was praying in front of the tabernacle and just felt a sense of rightness that invited me to ask the question, what does God want me to do?" The impactful moment passed, and Sean went on with his own plans, pursuing his passion for education and technology. He graduated college with a degree in humanities and psychology, and secured a teaching job. After a few years as an educator in Nevada, he decided to join the Peace Corp and took an assignment in the Philippines for three years as an IT professional. Near the end of his term, he sent an email to his military chaplain in Fallon, sharing that he was at a crossroads. He was unsure if he should pursue his own goals or



look more deeply into the priesthood. He did not receive a response from the chaplain. He wondered what had happened but just set it aside. He returned to teaching and took an assignment in Tokyo, Japan. During that time he became engaged to be married, but later learned the relationship was not centered on faith. Sean realized there was no future with the relationship. He began to explore the priesthood again, spending time in Fallon. While he was exploring, he felt his mind and heart were not in the right place, and the conversations with several priests suggested to him he was not ready. He returned to Japan for the next few years with a new assignment in Yokohama, and continued to make frequent visits home. He used this time to engage in daily prayer, religious research and deep studies of different faith walks. He found himself at another crossroads in becoming a religious or priest, and whether to stay in Japan or return home to Nevada. Sean recalls the final conversation with a priest who said, "Sean I think it's time you come back to Nevada, don't you?" At the age of 40, Sean was interviewed by the vocation council and made his official application into St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California. He reached out to the military chaplain, who this time responded to him with both his *original* email from while he was in the Philippines, which was never responded to, and a letter of recommendation for Sean. Sean recalls his letter in return, "He shared with me that my younger email was from a very hopeful Sean, but it was inspiring to see that I still had the same love of God all these years later." Sean believes there are no accidents or mistakes, it is all God's will. Said Sean, "This is where my life needs to be, this is the thing that completes me." Sean is in his third year of seminary and year one in theology studies. †



FEELING A CALL IN YOUR HEART TO EXPLORE THE SEMINARY FURTHER? Both St. John's and Mount Angel Seminary offer "Come and See Weekends" where you can experience what seminary life could be like for you and meet other men discerning God's will.

- stjohnsem.edu
- www.mountangelabbey.org/seminary

Weekends are offered through recommendation from the Bishop's Office.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN EXPLORING THE SEMINARY for the Diocese of Reno or would like more information on discernment and vocations, please contact **Tom Malone**, Vice-Chancellor in the Bishop's Office at tmalone@catholicreno.org or call (775) 326-9428. Please see our website for more on vocations and seminarians in our diocese here: www.highdesertcatholic.org/vocations