

SEMINARY ADVENTURES

THE LIFE OF A FOURTH-YEAR THEOLOGIAN AT THE
PONTIFICAL NORTH AMERICAN COLLEGE

BY PATRICK AGUSTIN



The NAC pilgrimage group at the Kalwaria Basilica in Krakow, Poland

The Countdown to Diaconate Ordination Begins...

Welcome to this issue of *Seminary Adventures*! I realize I am extra late on this edition, as I normally would have sent this out earlier in the summer. But... the delay gives me the chance to fill you all in on everything that has happened through the end of the summer. There's a lot of ground to cover from the past few months: completing the requirements for my degree at university; Lent, Holy Week, and Easter; summer back in the States, etc., to name a few things. I look forward to sharing it with all of you in the next few pages.

In about two weeks, on October 3, 2019, thirty-one of my brother seminarians and I will be ordained deacons at the Altar of the Chair at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City. I don't think it has all quite set in yet. When I look back on the past five years of seminary formation, and even my life before that, I'm reminded of what King David says in 2 Samuel 7:18: "Who am I LORD God,... that you should have brought me so far?" This year has been spent preparing for life as a cleric, and I'll share a bit of what that has been like these past few months. It has been quite the adventure, but it's not over yet! I give thanks to God that He brought you all into my life to be a part of it.

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I enjoyed preparing it for all of you. *Andiamo!*

SPRING 2019 SEMESTER

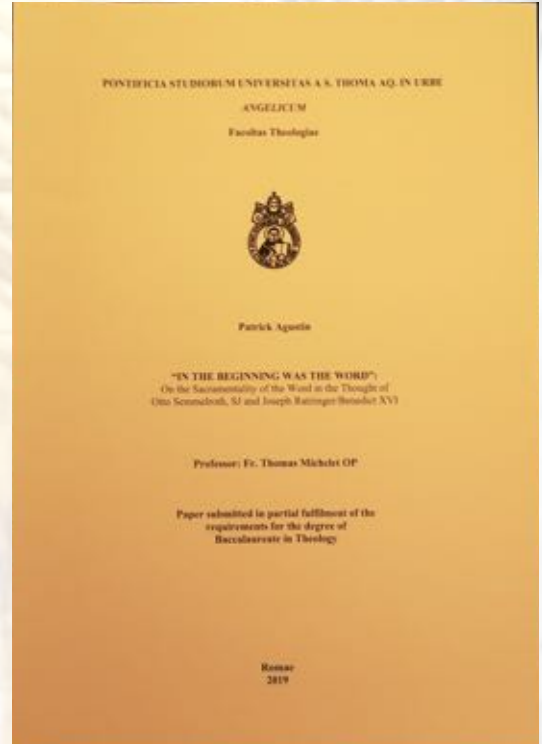
The Spring 2019 Semester marked the last semester for my completing the STB (Bachelor of Sacred Theology) degree at the Angelicum. It was a great mix of classes, with courses in the sacraments, Church history, Scripture, moral theology, and canon law. On top of finishing my coursework, I had to write a thirty-page elaborato to fulfill the degree requirements. Here's a rundown of what the semester looked like (sourced from course descriptions and syllabi):

- **Fundamental Sacramentality:** A seminar on the different aspects of fundamental sacramentality: Church as a sacrament (*Lumen Gentium*, 1); Christ as a sacrament; the sacramentality of the Word; the concept of a sacrament in Aquinas; sacramental man; is creation a sacrament? The sacramentality of the poor... A good contemporary and traditional synthesis of dogmatic theology, and a perfect complement to the annual course on sacraments.
- **The Psalms and Wisdom Books:** Name, authorship, occasions, compilation, contents, liturgical usage, literary forms, teaching; the Christian psalms; Hebrew poetry. Wisdom Literature: Concept and origin of Wisdom Literature in Ancient Near East and Israel. The Wisdom view of family, social relations, elementary morality, retribution in Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth. The development of Wisdom in the Hellenistic period: Sirach, Wisdom.
- **Eucharist:** This course will offer a theological exposition of the mystery of the Holy Eucharist in the life of the Church from the perspective of Scripture, the liturgical tradition, the Fathers, St. Thomas Aquinas, conciliar teaching and contemporary theology. The Eucharist will be seen from the perspective of sacrifice, presence and communion. The place of the Eucharist in the spiritual life centered on Christ and his Mystical Body will be shown.
- **The Sacraments in the Life of the Church [II]:** Sacraments In Particular (continued). – The Sacraments of Healing: Penance and Reconciliation; Anointing of the Sick. – The Sacraments at the Service of Communion: Holy orders; Matrimony.
- **History of the Modern Church:** The course gives a general overview of the history of the Church and of Christianity from the introduction of Christianity into the New World and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation until the present time.
- **Specialized Morals: Familial Issues:** The course intends to examine these issues in the light of approaches currently popular, biblical foundations, the moral theological tradition and the Magisterium, followed by an analysis of the key moral responsibilities involved in marriage and family life.
- **Specialized Morals: Critical international, Political, Economic Issues:** This course addresses the history, understanding and development of Catholic Social Teaching, as witnessed in the papal social encyclicals and other magisterial documents. Special attention is given to the general principles as well as the evolution of Catholic teaching on issues of labor, human rights, war and peace, globalization and economic justice.
- **The Church's Legislation on the Sacraments:** This course focuses on the aspect of the Code of Canon Law as they relate to the sacraments. I. De Ecclesiae munere sanctificandi: General introduction: communicatio in sacris (Can. 844). II. The sacraments of Christian initiation: Baptism (children and adults), Confirmation, the Eucharist (Communion of divorced and remarried - current legislation). II. The sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance (absolution of sins and censorship), the Anointing of the Sick. III. The sacraments at the service of Communion: Holy orders, Marriage. III. 1. Marriage, the nature of religious marriage, property of marriage, pastoral care of married couples, impediments, matrimonial consent, canonical form, mixed marriages. III. 2. Holy orders.

Finishing the STB Degree

After three years, I successfully completed the first-cycle requirements for the Bachelor of Sacred Theology (STB). The first cycle gave a synthetic presentation of fundamental theological questions, together with an introduction to the scientific method of the various theological disciplines.

You all have read about the courses I have been taking these past three years in this newsletter! In addition to passing all the examinations for my courses, I was required to complete a thirty-page *elaborato* for my Fundamental Sacramentality seminar. The focus of the seminar was to look at how the idea of a sacrament can be applied to other areas outside of the seven sacraments doctrinally recognized by the Church. The title of my paper was, "In the Beginning Was the Word: On the Sacramentality of the Word in the Thought of Otto Semmelroth, SJ, and Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI." I looked at how the Word possesses aspects of sacramentality in terms of signification, causality, and institution. It was a year-long effort, so I can't begin to describe the joy and satisfaction I received when I had the paper printed, bound, and delivered to my professor! This fall, I will begin my second-cycle studies to obtain the Licentiate in Theology (STL) with a focus on Dogma at the Angelicum. Unlike the first cycle, I will have a mix of courses taught in English and Italian.



Cover page of my STB paper

LENT IN ROME

As you may recall from previous issues of *Seminary Adventures*, the NAC helped to restore the tradition of the Roman Station Liturgy throughout the city during the season of Lent. For every day of Lent, the seminarians and faithful throughout Rome would gather for Mass at 7AM at a particular church in the city. There is a specific church assigned for each day of Lent, and more often than not, that church held relics of particular saints (especially those mentioned in Eucharistic Prayer I of the Mass, or the *Roman Canon*) or an important historical event took place there (e.g., a council, where St. Paul was imprisoned, etc.).

Each year, we begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday with Mass at Santa Sabina, the first station church. Santa Sabina is the mother church of the Dominican order and sits on the Aventine Hill. This year, I was part of a small schola that provided the music for the Mass. Thanks to EWTN, you can see a replay of the Ash Wednesday Mass here: <https://www.facebook.com/EWTNVatican/videos/1408017102669016/>.



Santa Sabina on the Aventine Hill in Rome

MINISTERING TO THE AMERICAN MILITARY AT NSA NAPLES

This semester, I continued my apostolate work at the Navy base down in Naples, Italy. Every week, a team of three seminarians drives down to the base to minister to the American military members and their families. I am grateful to be at this apostolate because it is probably as close to an American parish experience one can have at the NAC.

A typical weekend included serving at the 5PM Vigil Mass and 11AM Sunday Mass, teaching religious education classes, leading a high school youth group, hosting Theology on Tap, and sharing meals with the families. Additionally, the seminarians were tasked to plan and lead the Lenten Evening of Recollection, which is like a mini-retreat with prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, a few brief talks, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

In March, a team of four seminarians planned and led the annual Confirmation Retreat for eleven eighth-graders. Up until that point, we had been in the classroom with them and their teachers preparing them to receive this incredible sacrament of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. On the retreat, each of us gave talks on various themes, like how to encounter God on the retreat, fighting spiritual battles, mercy and forgiveness, and being on mission. As you can see, we definitely tailored the retreat to speak to the kids of military families.



At the end of the Confirmation Retreat!

There was also plenty of time for Mass, prayer, small group discussion, and recreation. It was a fruitful time for me to better understand where young people their age are nowadays in terms of the faith, what they are struggling with, and the questions that they or their peers are asking.

This upcoming year, I was asked to be the *capo* (or “head”) of this apostolate, so I will be the main coordinator working with the chaplain to plan events, assign when seminarians will be going down to the base, and ensuring that the apostolate is running smoothly for all those involved.

Prayer Intentions

- For my brother seminarians and me who will be ordained deacons at St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City on Thursday, October 3, 2019
- For the 39 New Men who just arrived at the NAC to begin their theology studies
- For the 10 newly ordained priests of the Archdiocese of Washington
- For the eternal repose of the soul of my grandmother, Fidela Saguros
- For those struggling to conceive children and those who have suffered miscarriages
- For the souls in purgatory

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER IN KRAKOW, POLAND

For Holy Week this year, a group of 30+ seminarians and two priests made a pilgrimage to Krakow, Poland, to enter more deeply into the mystery of Our Lord's Passion, particularly through the lens of one of my favorite saints, Saint John Paul II (as you may recall, he is the patron saint of my previous seminary in Washington, DC).

Upon arriving in Krakow on Monday, April 15, we all got settled into the retreat house and began the pilgrimage with an hour of prayer before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. We prayed Evening Prayer together and headed out for a Polish dinner, filled with an assortment of meats, pierogis (Polish dumplings), and of course, Polish beer.

The following day, the group took a bus to Wadowice, which was the birthplace and childhood home of Saint John Paul II. We had Mass at the parish church where he was baptized and served Mass as a boy and visited the museum that contains his childhood home. Later that day, we departed Wadowice for Kalwaria, a hilltop basilica dedicated to the cross of Christ. We took the pilgrim footpath to the basilica, making visits to many chapels along the way, which commemorated different aspects of the Passion.

On Wednesday, April 17, we took a coach bus to Częstochowa, which houses the miraculous icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa at the Jasna Góra Monastery. Tradition holds that Saint Luke the Evangelist painted the image upon a cedar tabletop belonging to the Holy Family. The image contains two



Statue of Saint John Paul II in Wadowice, Poland



Baptismal font where Saint John Paul II was baptized



Walking pilgrimage to Kalwaria Basilica



Mass beneath the icon of Our Lady of Częstochowa



Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday

scars on the right cheek of the Blessed Mother, which tradition says a Hussite plunderer who stole the image struck it twice with his sword. However, upon trying to strike it a third time, he fell to the ground and writhed in pain until he died. You may remember I mentioned this image of Our Lady of Częstochowa and the tradition in my last newsletter. I did not realize at the time that I would come to see the real thing! We were blessed to have Mass below Her beautiful image, and one of our deacons (who is of Polish blood) delivered a beautiful bilingual homily in English and Polish.

On Holy Thursday, many of us made a visit to Wieliczka for a tour of the salt mines there. It was massive space underneath the earth. There were even chapels down there, which goes to show how deeply rooted in the Catholic faith the Polish people are. As an aside, they told us you could lick the walls because salt is a natural antiseptic, so some of the seminarians may or may not have licked those walls.

In the evening, we celebrated the Mass of the Lord's Supper. It was a beautiful liturgy: the incense, the music, the washing of the feet, etc. We spared no detail. I was asked to put a small schola together for the pilgrimage, and the men used their musical gifts to help our other brothers pray and enter more deeply into the liturgy. We also sang an original composition of one of the seminarians from DC, based on Philippians 2:8. Later that evening, we ventured out into the city to visit the various altars of repose to pray with Our Lord.

On Good Friday, we made a trip to Auschwitz to visit the concentration camps used during the Holocaust. It was sobering to be there, and of all days on Good Friday. We saw photos of the victims, the horrible living conditions they had to endure,

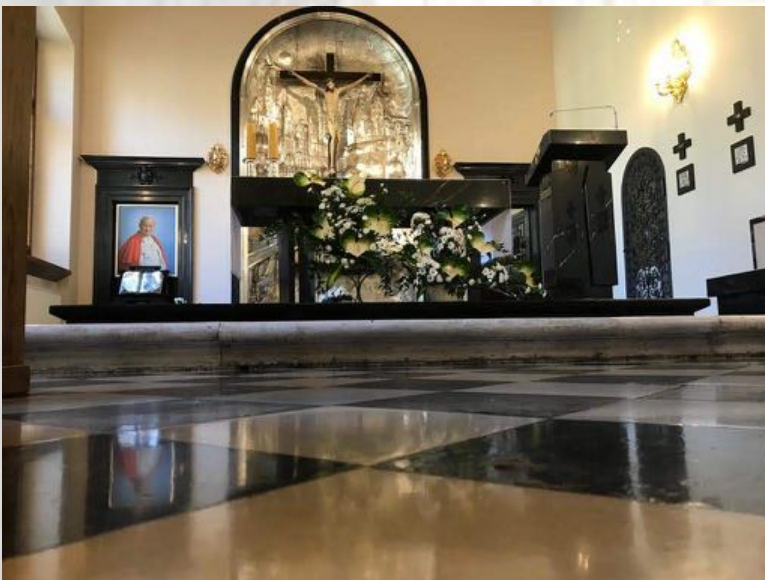


In Auschwitz

and heard of how they were mistreated. Following the visit to the incineration chambers, one of the seminarians quoted Isaiah 53:7, which says, "Though harshly treated, he submitted and did not open his mouth; Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not open his mouth." It did not take a lot of imagination to see how these victims were mistreated like Christ was on that Good Friday.

A particular moment of grace for me was to be able to visit the starvation cell where Saint Maximilian Kolbe died. I have a devotion to Saint Maximilian Kolbe as he was the saint I chose as my patron when I received the Sacrament of Confirmation. Saint Maximilian Kolbe was a Polish Franciscan priest who offered his life in place of a husband/father who was selected to die. Such heroic selflessness in the face of an unimaginable human evil can only be by the grace of God.

Later that afternoon, we returned to our retreat house for the Commemoration of the Passion of the Lord. We recounted the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ and venerated the Cross. The schola again provided music for this liturgy, singing beautiful hymns like the *Reproaches* and *Adoramus te Christe* by Theodore Dubois.



The chapel where Karol Wojtyla (aka John Paul II) was ordained a priest

On Holy Saturday, we did a walking tour of John Paul II's Krakow, visiting places of significance in his life, like his university and where he resided when he was bishop of Krakow. We even had the opportunity to pray in the chapel where he was ordained a priest. Because he lived during World War II, his seminary formation and his ordination was done in secret. It was a great gift to pray with my brother seminarians in the chapel where he himself was ordained, to ask him for his intercession as I prepare for my own ordination to the diaconate and to priesthood.

In the evening, we celebrated the Easter Vigil, and again we did it all: we had a Paschal flame, an Easter candle, sang the Exultet in Latin, read all the readings (all 7 Old Testament readings and St. Paul's Epistle), sang all the parts, etc. It was beautiful to celebrate the Lord's Resurrection with my brothers in such an intimate setting and in a city where the Catholic faith is still very much alive.

Easter Sunday was a lighter day overall for us. We had Easter Sunday Mass and had the rest of the day to visit around Krakow.

On Easter Monday, our last day together in the city, we made a visit to the Divine Mercy Shrine for Mass. The Divine Mercy Shrine contains one of the more common images of the Divine Mercy as well as the relics of Saint Faustina, a saint who had visions and conversations with Jesus (if you have the chance, read her *Diary*). The chapel where we had Mass was beautiful and filled with pilgrims. Following Mass, we headed back for Rome.

It was a great gift to be in Krakow for the most sacred time of the year. Our Blessed Mother guided the way, and Saint John Paul II was praying for us in heaven.



Divine Mercy Shrine

More photos: (top left) John Paul II's honorary degree from the Angelicum (my university); (right) Seminarians praying in a chapel on the way to Kalwaria Basilica; (bottom left) St. Mary's Basilica in Krakow; (bottom center) John Paul II's actual childhood bedroom that he shared with his father



LOLA

In early May, I received a call from my mom who told me that my 99-year-old grandmother (or “Lola” in the Filipino language) had not been eating for a couple of days. Lola had dementia and was confined to a wheelchair, and she was at a point in her life where she could not take care of herself. My mom asked if it would be possible for me to return home as Lola may not have much longer to live. I asked permission from the seminary, and they were gracious to allow me to make a last-minute trip back home to see my grandmother.



Fidela Saguros (April 11, 1920 – May 15, 2019)

I returned home on May 14, which happened to be my parents’ wedding anniversary, and Lola was still holding on. At this point, however, she was in hospice care at my parents’ home. My aunts from

California flew in to be with my grandmother for however much longer she had to live. She was on oxygen and had an IV to give her the nutrients she needed, but it couldn’t be a long-term solution.

The following day, May 15, I woke up from my afternoon nap to someone banging on my door. I was still pretty jet-lagged from all the travelling, so it took me a minute to come to. When I finally became a bit more alert, I could hear crying and wailing through the vents. My room at my parents’ home is situated beneath my grandmother’s room. I ran upstairs to my parents and aunts surrounding my grandmother’s bed struggling to pray the Rosary amidst the tears. I looked at Lola, and she wasn’t moving. All of a sudden, in the middle of the Rosary, my grandmother took a deep breath. There was a collective sigh from my relatives, and they continued to pray. All the while, one of my aunts who is a nurse, was checking my grandmother’s pulse. Although the pulse was faint, it was still there.

We all continued to pray the Rosary, and at the precise moment we finished (literally the precise moment), at 6:30PM, my grandmother passed away. She had no more pulse.

A lot of tears were shed at the moment we realized that Lola had died, but at the same time, there was a sense of peace. I would be so grateful to have a death like hers: she died peacefully surrounded by loved ones, having received the sacraments, and moving on to the next life in prayer. I honestly believe that it was the Blessed Mother who was the first person Lola saw when she passed.

After calling our family members to share the news of Lola’s death, we began to pray the All Souls’ Novena for the repose of her soul. By God’s Providence, we had a visiting priest staying at our house, and he was able to pray over Lola’s body before it was taken away. I actually had my *Order of Christian Funerals* rite book with me, which the priest used to pray over Lola. My rite book had never been used in a “real” situation before. Before that, it had only been used in my priestly training for funerals.

I had to return back to Rome before the funeral, but I was at peace that I was at my grandmother’s bedside before she died. When I returned home again for the summer, I found out my parents and relatives visit my grandmother’s grave twice a week to pray for her and my deceased grandfather. It was a blessing to pray at her grave one last time before I had to leave again for Rome at the end of the summer.

Eternal rest grant unto Fidela, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her. May her soul, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

PREPARING TO BECOME A DEACON



Image of the Holy Spirit at the Altar of the Chair, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City

This entire year has been spent in preparing for life as a cleric and diaconal ministry. Getting ordained a deacon is the final step before priesthood, but very important and serious nonetheless. At diaconate ordination, I will promise to remain celibate, maintain a life of prayer, and be respectful and obedient to my bishop and his successors. But before I go into the promises, I think it's worth reflecting upon who the deacon is and what his role is in the life of the Church.

Rather than explaining it myself, I think the Church, in Her wisdom, gives the best explanation of who the deacon is and what is his role. The following comes from the Rite of Ordination of a Deacon: "He will draw **new strength from the gift of the Holy Spirit**. He will help the bishop and his body of priests as a **minister of the word, of the altar, and of charity**. He will make himself a **servant of all**. As a minister of the altar he will **proclaim the Gospel, prepare the sacrifice, and give the Lord's body and blood to the community of believers**.

It will also be his duty, at the bishop's discretion, to **bring God's word to believer and unbeliever alike, to preside over public prayer, to baptize, to assist at marriages and bless them, to give viaticum to the dying, and to lead the rites of burial**. Once he is consecrated by the laying on of hands that comes to us from the apostles and is bound more closely to the altar, he will **perform works of charity in the name of the bishop or the pastor**. **From the way he goes about these duties, may you recognize him as a disciple of Jesus, who came to serve, not to be served."**

What a gift. A lot is demanded of a deacon, but it is only by God's grace that he can carry out his ministry faithfully and joyfully. Moreover, it is only by cooperating with God's grace that the deacon-candidate can remain faithful to the promises he will make at ordination, particularly the promises of celibacy, prayer, and respect and obedience. At ordination, the bishop will ask my brothers and me the following questions, among others:

"Since you are prepared to embrace the celibate state: do you resolve to keep for ever this commitment as a sign of your dedication to Christ the Lord for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, in the service of God and man?"

"Do you resolve to maintain and deepen the spirit of prayer that is proper to your way of life and, in keeping with this spirit and what is required of you, to celebrate faithfully the Liturgy of the Hours with and for the People of God and indeed for the whole world?"

"Do you promise respect and obedience to your Ordinary?"

In complete freedom, we will all respond, "I do."

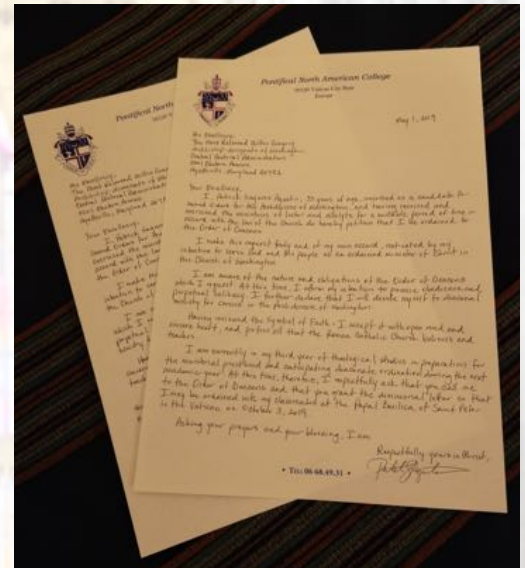
In order to prepare to make these promises at ordination, all deacon-candidates were asked to write a brief reflection on each of the promises of celibacy, prayer, and respect and obedience and to discuss them with our formation advisor. I found this exercise to be very fruitful in reflecting on what these promises mean, what is expected of me, and how I can be faithful to these promises. Additionally, we continued the NAC tradition of inviting different priests/professors from our various universities to give 20-minute reflections on the promises during one of our holy hours. It was a gift to hear other perspectives from men who have lived these promises freely and joyfully in their own priesthood.

After all the reflections, doing my own written self-evaluation, and asking my brothers for peer evaluations, I had to be evaluated by the entire formation faculty of the NAC. As you can imagine, it is pretty daunting! We have evaluations every year, but this was the big one! You walk into a conference room with your spiritual director and formation advisor and you immediately see a long conference table with all the formators on one side, and you on the other. The Rector (the head of our seminary) asks the candidate to open up the evaluation in prayer and share a few opening words. At that point, the Rector asks a question, then all the other formation advisors are given the opportunity to ask you one question. The questions usually pertained to each priest's area of expertise: liturgy, preaching, intellectual formation, etc. But sometimes you get a curveball question! My favorite question that I got asked (and apparently no one else got asked this) was, "How do you think we can use the transcendentals - the Good, the True, and the Beautiful - to evangelize our culture? Where would you start?" I smiled, but unphased by the question (thanks to Bishop Barron), I responded with, "I'd start with Beauty. As corporeal beings, we take in information through our senses - seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching. We respond to beautiful things. That's why it's important to have beautiful churches, to celebrate the Mass beautifully, and to share the treasures of the Church because they remind us that there is Someone bigger than us. All these things point us to the Divine." The formator seemed happy with my answer.

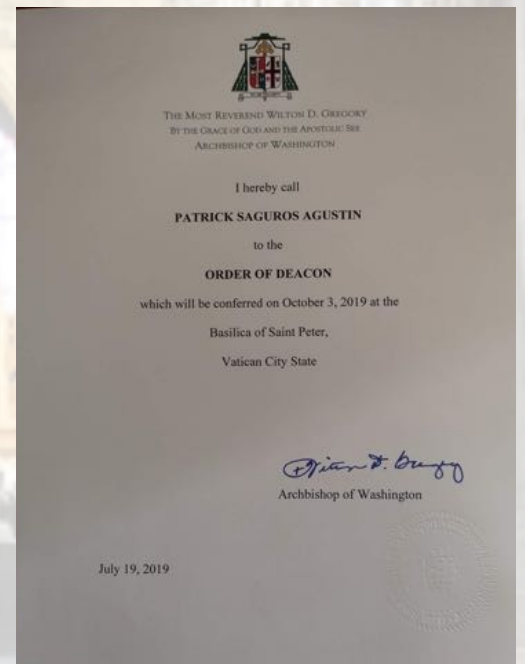
After successfully completing my faculty evaluation, I was ready to petition my Archbishop to be ordained to the Order of Deacons. I had to hand-write two letters to my new Archbishop, and after months of waiting, I finally received my Call to Orders, which means he accepted my request to be ordained (without the call to orders, I couldn't get ordained). Talk about a huge sigh of relief!

With the Call to Orders, I am pretty much set for diaconate ordination! I get emotional and excited thinking about getting ordained at St. Peter's Basilica on October 3, 2019. Preparations for that are well underway here at the seminary, but I'll leave all those details for the next edition of *Seminary Adventures*.

In the meantime, I humbly ask you to continue to pray for my brothers and me, that we will be courageous witnesses of the Gospel and that we will continue to remain faithful to God and His will.



My letters petitioning my Archbishop to be ordained a deacon



My Call to Orders

RETURNING TO THE U.S. FOR THE SUMMER

I returned home to DC for the summer on June 7, after successfully completing my final exams and the STB paper. I couldn't get too comfortable at home because the next day, on June 8, four of my brother seminarians studying back in the Archdiocese of Washington were getting ordained transitional deacons. This is the same ordination that will occur for my classmates and me in October. The three DC guys getting ordained in Rome will be joining our four brothers at priesthood ordination next year.

It was a joy to be at the Cathedral of Saint Matthew in Washington, DC, for this joyous occasion. It was the first time I got to see all my brother seminarians from home, to see how their year of formation went, and what they were looking forward to during the summer.

After all the greetings, the time for the ordination began. I was grateful to be present at my classmates' diaconate ordination, because I'm sure my own will go by in a flash! Being in the congregation gave me an opportunity to savor every word of the Rite of Ordination. It was awesome to see my brothers - men whom I've studied with and known for years - laying down their lives for Christ and His Church.

Following the ordination, I greeted each of them personally, and they were all beaming with joy, being another step closer to priesthood.

A week later, on June 15, it was the Archdiocese of Washington's Ordination to the Priesthood at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in DC. Ten men were getting ready to realize the vocation God had been calling them to before they were even born. I looked up to each of these men because they were the ones who welcomed me into Saint John Paul II Seminary five years ago. It has been amazing to see their growth in holiness, the increased confidence in their vocation, and the deepening joy they have experienced these past few years.

Following the priesthood ordinations, it is tradition for the newly ordained to go to the Crypt Level of the Basilica and give their first blessings to the faithful. It's a sight to see! Lines of people waiting patiently yet eagerly to get a blessing from the new priests. I made my rounds to my brothers-turned-Fathers to ask for their blessing.

One of the newly ordained, Fr. Joe Cwik, I've grown especially close to these past few years. He also studies with me at the NAC, and we shared the same apostolate a few years ago. When I approached him and asked for his blessing, he said, "Oh, this will be good!" I knelt before him as he prayed over me. What a gift to receive a blessing from a friend! The Church has a beautiful tradition where a member of the clergy vests the newly ordained deacon with the deacon vestments known as the stole and dalmatic (something similar also happens at priesthood ordination). When I get ordained in October, Fr. Joe will be the one to vest me.

Thanks Be to God for the gift of 10 new priests for the Church of Washington!



The three DC NAC seminarians with our classmate, Deacon Stefan Yap



With the newly ordained Fr. Joe Cwik

Summer Parish Assignment at Saint Peter's

In God's Providence, my assignment for the summer was at a parish named St. Peter's (this was special to me given the proximity of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City). St. Peter's is located in Waldorf, MD, which is a suburb forty minutes outside of Washington, DC, and only twenty-five minutes away from my parents' home. Having spent previous assignments at parishes in Montgomery County, I asked to be placed in a different area of the Archdiocese in order to get exposure to another demographic of our local church.

I had an awesome experience at St. Peter's. There were three priests at the parish: Fr. Woods, the pastor; Fr. Jorge, the parochial vicar; and Msgr. McGready, a retired priest in residence. There is a school attached to the parish, and I had the opportunity to spend time with the teachers and students during their last week of classes. I had a little Q&A session with the 2nd graders, and they asked me questions about studying to become a priest, living in Rome, and working in Hollywood. It was a lot of fun!

Some of the other things I got involved with at the parish include: serving at daily and weekend Masses, weddings, funerals, and baptisms; did a pre-nuptial investigation for a couple seeking marriage; worked with the St. Vincent de Paul Society to drop off food to low-income families; set up vocations displays in the church; ministered to the Spanish-speaking community; and gave three talks as part of a summer adult faith formation series, discussing the questions, "Who is God?", "What is the Church?" and "What are the sacraments?" I also helped the parish get a headstart on the parish Christmas card and Christmas gift.



Sanctuary at St. Peter's Church in Waldorf, MD



Stained glass window of St. Peter at the parish

One of the things I always look forward to during my assignments is bringing Holy Communion to the sick and elderly. I did this on a weekly basis at St. Peter's. There was one particular couple I particularly enjoyed visiting. It was a blessing to go to their home every week and to hear stories about their lives: how they met as teenagers, how they immigrated to this country from Cuba without much money, how they made a living for themselves in the States, how they grieved over the loss of two of their four children, etc. At the same time, you could see how still very much in love they were with each other, and they attribute it to their faith in God. They have been married for 69 years and counting! The love they shared for one another gave me great hope that holy and happy marriages can still flourish in this day and age.

I left my assignment at St. Peter's after a full and fruitful eight weeks there. I am so grateful for the priests and parishioners who were so welcoming. I promised them that I would remember them and pray for them when I visit St. Peter's in Rome and to ask for his intercession for them. The experience there and at all my assignments only makes me even more excited about the priesthood.

A Time for Rest and Relaxation

Following my time at St. Peter's, I had about a month off before I was due back in Rome. I spent that time visiting my siblings and their families in New York, catching up with friends back in DC, hanging out with my brother seminarians, and organizing my parents' house. It was also a great gift to spend some time at my home parish of Saint Columba and serve at Sunday Mass a few weekends.

With all that time on my hands, I knew making a retreat would be beneficial, particularly to reflect on the events from the summer assignment as well as to prepare myself a bit for diaconate ordination. I went to Holy Cross Abbey in Berryville, VA, which is run by a group of Cistercian (Trappist) monks. It was a gift to be able to spend five days in silence with the Lord, to pray with the monks, and to catch up on some spiritual reading and rest. I took the Rite of Ordination for Deacons with me to pray with. After much time in prayer with the Rite, you realize what a tall order it is! A lot is demanded of the man who is to become a deacon. At the same time, you realize that none of what is asked of him is possible except by the grace of God. In that, I take great comfort and hope.



Entrance to Holy Cross Abbey, Berryville, VA

I left the retreat refreshed and ready to return to Rome, looking ahead with great anticipation toward diaconate ordination.

Camino de Santiago



One of the markers on the Camino de Santiago

Prior to returning to the grind of seminary, I headed back to Europe a week before I was due back in order to cross something off of my bucket list: to walk the Camino de Santiago. The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St. James, is comprised of a number of paths that eventually lead to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where the tomb of St. James rests. There are various routes one can take and for various time periods. I could only afford to do five days on the Camino, but some people decide to do up to a month to complete the entire thing!

There are an infinite number of reasons why people decide to do the Camino. Some do it because they're searching for something. Others do it for the exercise. Some others do it as a pilgrimage or means of penance. Others do it to cross it off their bucket list.

While it was something I wanted to do for a while, to be honest, I wasn't really looking for anything. I've found Who I've been searching for (rather He's found me), and He's revealed the vocation He's been calling me to. So, I saw walking the Camino as something to do with the One I love.

I began in Sarria, Spain, which is 116km (~72 miles) away from Santiago de Compostela (in order to say that you have done the Camino you have to walk a minimum of 100 km). From there, I walked anywhere from 20-30km a day, staying in hostels along the way. I made stops in Portomarín, Palas de Rei, Arzúa, and O Pedrouzo, before arriving at my destination at Santiago de Compostela. The stops were tailored to pilgrims as they always had a Pilgrims' Mass in the evenings.

I'm so grateful to have done the Camino. I met a number of people along the way and got to swap stories with them. For example, when I hopped off the train at Sarria, I ran into a 21-year-old university student from Barcelona named Gerard who was also doing the Camino alone. It was kind of "the blind leading the blind" as we tried to figure out where to start and what we had to do. We shared stories of our families, our travels, and the faith. I also met Peggy, an American woman in her late-60s who was doing the Camino with a group from her church. She told me about her church and the missionary work that they do, and I shared my vocation story with her and how I'm preparing to become a Catholic priest. I also got to teach her about the Rosary. Before we departed from each other, we prayed together. It was a gift to meet people from different walks of life with different reasons for doing the Camino.

As you can imagine, walking the Camino by yourself affords you hours to pray and reflect. I realized that the Camino was a metaphor for the spiritual life. The spiritual life can seem to wind every which way, sometimes going up, sometimes going down, but always you move forward, much like the Camino. On the Camino, you don't know what lies ahead, but you trust the people that have walked the path before, perhaps even some of your own friends. The spiritual life is like that, too... you don't know what lies ahead, but you can look to your friends the saints who have trodden the path before you and now wear the crown of glory. The Camino is full of signs pointing you in the direction to go to reach your final destination. The ultimate sign in the spiritual life is the Cross, for the Cross is the means to our salvation. I could go on and on about different insights the Lord gave me during our walk together, but I should save some of this for future homilies!



Upon arriving in Santiago de Compostela, I was overjoyed! There was no better way to end my time on the Camino than with the celebration of the Holy Mass, to bring it all to the Father and to thank Him for keeping me safe and healthy along the way.

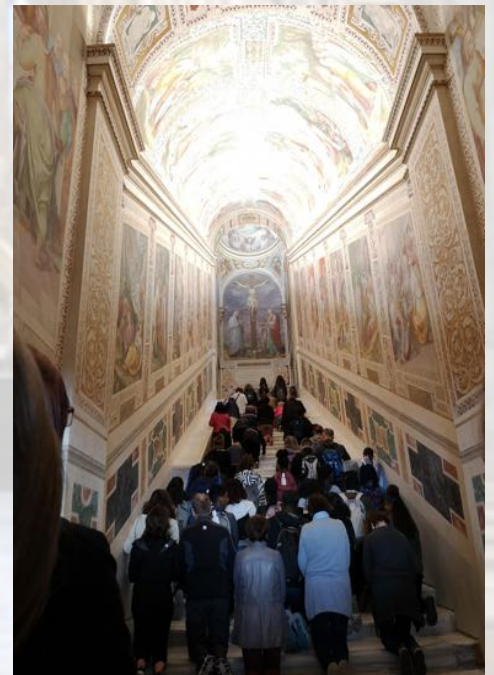
Finished the Camino and made it to Santiago de Compostela!

Know that I prayed for you all daily as I walked the Camino, asking the intercession of Our Blessed Mother and Saint James.

MORE PHOTOS



Clockwise from top left: Dinner with some of the DC seminarians; in the dugout of the DC Nationals Baseball Team; on the NAC tower with new friends from Germany, Stephan and Nadina; getting ready to climb the Scala Santa, or Holy Stairs, climbed by Christ at His Passion; (below) visit from a brother seminarian from Orlando, Thomas; visit to Tencarola with the Bassan family; (bottom left) visit from the now Fr. Andy from Cleveland; dinner at the home of the Larsen family; (right) dinner in DC with Deacon Ramon from Joliet



CLOSING WORDS



Infant of Prague

I'm back in Rome, and seminary life is in full swing. We welcomed 39 New Men to the NAC, including two men from the Archdiocese of Washington. The month of September is filled with various workshops, particularly related to family and marriage preparation, as well as liturgical formation. It's really where rubber meets the road because we're practicing how to celebrate the Mass and reviewing how to celebrate the sacraments. From September 22-28, my classmates and I will be headed on retreat in advance of our diaconate ordination.

Upon returning from retreat, our families and friends will be coming to Rome to join us for diaconate ordination on October 3rd. It will be a great gift to me to be able to share a little bit of what has been my life these past couple of years.

I have a deep sense of peace that this is the vocation God is calling me to. But this doesn't mean that I feel worthy or even remotely prepared for such an incredible gift. I am relying on God's grace and your continued prayers to help me to be a faithful, joyful, and holy deacon, and God-willing next year, priest.

I can't thank you all enough for your prayers and support. May God bless you always.

In Christ,
Patrick

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