

St. Lawrence Seminary Celebrates its Diverse Student Body

COLLEEN JURKIEWICZ
CATHOLIC HERALD STAFF

When the St. Lawrence Seminary junior class is confirmed each spring, the Mass will usually feature prayers of the faithful recited in close to a dozen different languages. This linguistic melange represents each native tongue of every confirmand who lives and studies at this nearly 160-year-old high school seminary in rural Wisconsin.

True, it may appear to be an unlikely and out-of-the-way place to find such a wide variety of ethnicities, but it's the result of a very intentional recruiting strategy on the part of the school, which prides itself on being "a mini-United Nations."

"We really try to make sure that there is no one dominant cultural group," said Fr. Zoy Garibay, rector and president of the seminary. "We value diversity — that's one of the ways we teach our students to respect the differences, to cherish the gifts that these other students bring to the community."

It's also an attempt to make the student population reflect the cultural reality of the modern Catholic Church, said director of admissions and recruitment Francisco Saucedo.

"We want to make sure that in this small town in Wisconsin, we have a representation of the face of the Catholic Church — which is not just one race, it's a variety," he said.

Sarita D'Souza, whose 15-year-old son Sean is a sophomore at the seminary, said that the school "has the most diverse, talented and well-mannered student population I've ever seen."

"My son has made very good friends with local and international students alike, broadening his cultural boundaries and (making him) more receptive to the



▲ Of the 182 students at St. Lawrence seminary, 26 are foreign born, and just 30 percent of the student body is Caucasian. (Submitted photo.)

needs of others who may not sound or look like him," she said.

The school, which is located about 20 minutes northeast of Fond du Lac in Mount Calvary, has 182 students who live on-campus, 26 of whom are foreign-born. Roughly 30 percent of the students are Hispanic, 30 percent are Asian and 30 percent are Caucasian; the remaining 10 percent is comprised of African-American students and students of mixed race, said Saucedo. The Asian students themselves represent an impressive six nationalities — Hmong, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, Indian and Pakistani — and many of the foreign-born students bring a broad cultural background to the school. For instance, one Ghanaian student was actually raised in Italy.

"I think it serves us well in the long run, because all students will leave the seminary with a broader world view, a more profound understanding of the world in which we live and even our Catholicity," said Fr. Garibay.

He named the celebration of Our Lady

of Guadalupe in early December, for which students' parents come to visit, as a particularly poignant intercultural celebration.

"I explained to everyone some of the wonderful symbols of Our Lady of Guadalupe as someone with child, anticipating the birth of Our Savior; we prayed the Rosary in English and Spanish, and sang verses from a tradition hymn."

The evening concluded with a traditional Mexican feast.

It was the school's strong but diverse community, as well as its academic structure, that attracted the D'Souza family, said Sarita. Sarita D'Souza was born and raised in Bombay, moving to Wisconsin after her marriage. Feeling homesick and isolated, she and several other Indian Catholic families created a thriving community. Now, she said, her son is able to experience something similar at the seminary.

Sean D'Souza said that the ethnic makeup of the student body, especially in terms of its representation of Asian

cultures, "provides a lot of variety when it comes to various parts of community, especially languages — I have heard my fair share of Vietnamese, Tagalog," he said. "The school supports this by holding events showing off culture, like the Vietnamese Tet celebration and the Cultural Heritage night."

"You're bringing, maybe, a Vietnamese student from Chicago, and then they're meeting a Vietnamese student from New Orleans or out East, and they're also meeting a Vietnamese student right from Vietnam," said Saucedo. "Yeah, they're the same race but they celebrate things differently, their cultures are different because of where they grew up and where they come from ... we're hopefully exposing them to something they wouldn't see back home."

In April, two Asian-born graduates of the high school were actually ordained as priests in the Capuchin order: Fr. Tien Dinh (class of 2005), born in Vietnam but raised in New Orleans, and Fr. Tom Nguyen (class of 2004), born in Vietnam and raised in Houston. Both were ordained in the seminary chapel.

Among its alumni community, said Saucedo (himself a 2002 graduate of the seminary), the diversity of the school is consistently ranked as one of the most valued aspects of the education offered at St. Lawrence.

"They're around each other 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They're putting study groups together Thursday nights to get ready for Friday morning tests, they're watching Super Bowls together, they're sharing a bowl of soup or a taco together when their parents come up to visit," he said. "By the end of their time here, you'll see the Asians students eating tacos and the Hispanic students eating noodles out of the bowls with chopsticks."