

America's New Catholic Priests: Young, Confident and Conservative

In an era of deep divisions in the church, newly ordained priests overwhelmingly lean right in their theology, practices and politics.

By Ruth Graham Photographs by Nick Hagen

Ruth Graham, who covers religion, reported from the Milwaukee area.

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On a sunny afternoon in May, Zachary Galante was sitting in a conference room in St. Francis de Sales Seminary with several other young men, talking about what it meant for them to choose the Catholic priesthood in the year 2024. The next morning, they would make lifelong promises of celibacy and obedience, and they were palpably elated by the prospect.

“It’s a beautiful life,” Deacon Galante, soon to become Father Galante, said.

There was a time where the church “maybe apologized for being Catholic,” he said later in the conversation. He and the other new priests agreed they were called to something different: advancing the Catholic faith, even the parts that could seem out of place in an increasingly hostile world. “The church *is* Catholic, and so we should announce that joyfully,” he said.

In an era of deep divisions in the American Catholic Church, and ongoing pain over the continuing revelations of sexual abuse by priests over decades, there is increasing unity among the men joining the priesthood: They are overwhelmingly conservative in their theology, their liturgical tastes and their politics.

Priests ordained since 2010 “are clearly the most conservative cohort of priests we’ve seen in a long time,” said Brad Vermurlen, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, who has studied the rightward shift of the American priesthood. Surveys tracking the opinions of priests have found that, starting in the 1980s, each new wave of priests in the United States is noticeably more conservative than the one before it, Dr. Vermurlen said.

His and his colleagues’ analysis found newer priests were significantly more conservative than their elders on questions including whether homosexual behavior is always a sin, and whether women should be able to serve as deacons and priests, for example.



“The church is Catholic, and so we should announce that joyfully,” said Father Zachary Galante.



The class of Milwaukee seminarians from St. Francis de Sales lying prostrate during their ordination, symbolizing their dependence on God.



Every priest at the ordination mass placed their hands upon the men joining their ranks that day.

More than 80 percent of priests ordained since 2020 describe themselves as theologically “conservative/orthodox” or “very conservative/orthodox,” according to a nationally representative survey of 3,500 priests published by the Catholic Project at the Catholic University of America. Foreign-born priests in the United States, a significant presence as ordination rates remain below replacement levels, are less conservative theologically than their American-born peers. But still, not a single surveyed priest who was ordained after 2020 described himself as “very progressive.”

Politically, the trend is similar, with almost all priests ordained in 2020 or later describing themselves as moderate or conservative.

That represents a sharp contrast with priests ordained in the 1960s, about half of whom describe themselves as politically liberal, and an even greater share as theologically progressive.

In the near future, in other words, the liberal Catholic priest could essentially be extinct in the United States. The shift toward more uniform conservatism puts the rising generations of priests increasingly at odds with secular culture, which has broadly moved to the left on questions of gender, sexuality, reproductive issues and roles for women.

The Catholic population itself in the United States has historically been politically diverse, and people in the pews do not always endorse church teachings on issues like abortion, birth control and the meaning of the eucharist.

Changing attitudes will reshape parish life, where priests choose topics for homilies and have discretion over matters like whether girls can volunteer as altar servers and lay people can assist in the distribution of Communion. It will also influence the leadership ranks of the American church, which already has a global reputation for conservatism, and antagonism to Pope Francis's more pastoral tone in leadership. That gap is poised to harden as current bishops retire and die.

The tilt partly reflects broader cultural changes, including the fact that liberals are becoming increasingly secular and having fewer children, said Michael Sean Winters, a columnist for National Catholic Reporter, a left-leaning newspaper. Today, "there are fewer liberals in the pews with large families," he said, adding that parents with more children have typically been more willing to offer one of them to the church.

Mr. Winters, who attended seminary himself for a few years in the 1980s before deciding not to pursue ordination, said he was concerned that some conservative priests take an overly nostalgic view of history, imagining a golden era in which church teaching was widely respected and obeyed. But he takes comfort in the fact that a majority of a parish priest's duties are not defined by ideology.

"The day-in, day-out practice of burying the dead, baptizing the young and preparing couples for marriage — there's not really a left or right cast to that," he said.



Almost all priests ordained in 2020 or later described themselves as politically moderate or conservative, according to one survey.



Priests have discretion over matters like whether or not girls can volunteer as altar servers.



The Catholic population in the United States has historically been politically diverse.

Today's young priests don't see themselves as a conservative insurgency, but as part of a new generation who embrace difficult church teachings rather than soft-pedaling them in what they see as the misguided pursuit of big-tent evangelism.

In an attempt to make the church seem more welcoming and difficult teachings easier to accept, Father Galante said, generations of clergy softened expectations around everything from regular prayer to cohabitation before marriage to dressing nicely for Sunday Mass.

Many priests in the 1970s and '80s, he said, "were looking at the world and saying, 'The world is changing, we need to change, too.'"

That approach didn't work, as he sees it. Among Father Galante's peers in Catholic grade school, only a handful out of more than 30 still practice the faith, he said. Mass attendance has been broadly declining for decades.

Many young priests see morals and political sensibilities having swung dramatically, even in their living memory.

Father David Sweeney, 31, who was ordained with Father Galante, recalled that it was only during his freshman year in college that President Obama first endorsed same-sex marriage. Today, the idea of the country's top Democrat not sharing that view is almost unimaginable.

"That's a core tenet of our faith that our culture has shifted drastically on in the last 12 years," Father Sweeney said. "If we're saying that we're holding to eternal truth, something that is changeless, and the world changes, well, now I guess I've changed in my relation to the world."

Father Galante added, "Maybe we're more conservative now because the culture moved, not because we moved."

Father Galante and Father Sweeney were two of nine priests to be ordained in the archdiocese of Milwaukee, the largest group in the ecclesiastical region in more than 30 years.

"Young guys today desire sacrifice, they desire to do something great with their life," said Father Luke Strand, a former director of vocations for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Father Strand, 43, serves as rector at St. Francis de Sales Seminary, which has sent 35 men on to be ordained in the last three years, 20 for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Two of his own brothers are also priests.



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Seminarians playing cornhole at St. Francis De Sales Seminary.



Catholic priests make lifelong promises of celibacy and obedience.

St. Francis de Sales has become a place where young men experience “a deep sense of fraternity,” Father Strand said. On Saturday nights, the men watch sports together, play basketball in the gym, or bowl in the seminary’s small alley. Promotional videos for the seminary introduce the students like football recruits.

“It becomes really attractive for a young man to then say, ‘Boy, am I called to this?’” he said. “There are a lot of normal guys here.”

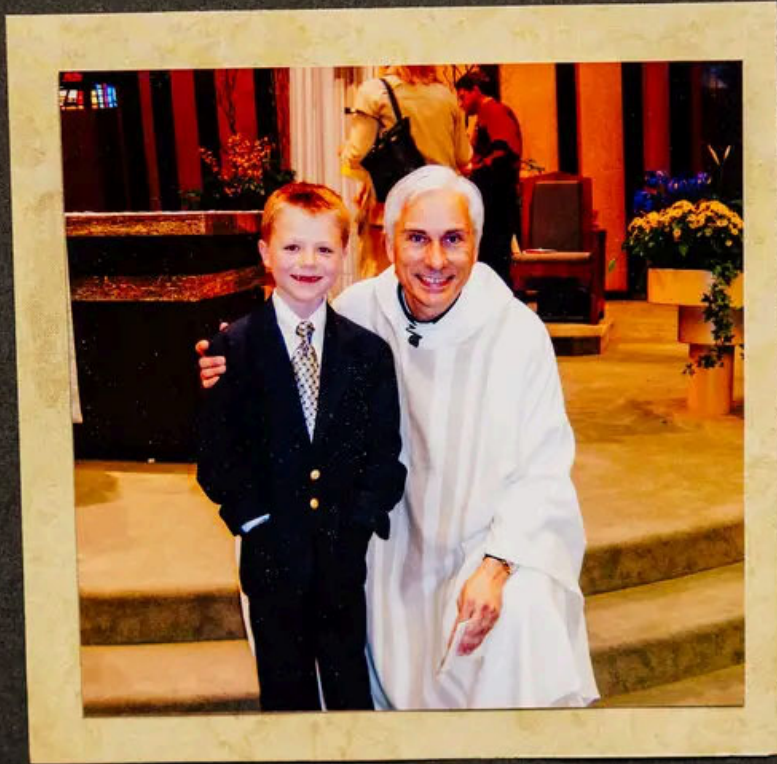
The idea of “normalcy” looms large in Catholic seminaries in the long wake of revelations of widespread sexual abuse of children and young adults by clergy over decades. Applicants are now screened for psychosexual maturity, and St. Francis de Sales’s program includes an emphasis on “healthy and balanced celibacy.”

For priests like Father Strand, the community’s palpable confidence is a part of its success. He cited a quotation he attributed to Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, a former archbishop of Milwaukee: No man will give his life for a question mark; he will for an exclamation point.

Hours after his ordination ceremony at the cathedral in downtown Milwaukee, Father Galante was presiding over his first Mass at St. Frances Cabrini Parish in West Bend, about 40 miles northwest of the city. It was the parish in which he had been baptized, confirmed and raised. More than 600 people attended the two-hour Saturday afternoon Mass, a crowd so large that ushers ran out of bulletins and had to scramble to line up extra chairs along the back wall of the sanctuary.



Hours after being ordained, Father Galante distributed communion at his first Mass at his childhood parish, St. Frances Cabrini.



A photo of Father Galante with Bishop Jeffrey Haines, when he was a priest at Father Galante's childhood church.



A reception for Father Galante after he celebrated his first Mass at St. Frances Cabrini.

After the service, attendees walked across the parking lot to the parish's school, where men and women from the church had set up long tables of ham sandwiches, pasta salads and cookies in the gym, with a beverage station that included coffee and Miller High Life. The mood was cheerful. A few teenage altar servers, who had taken off their robes and were sitting together with plates of sandwiches and brownies, said they were thinking of becoming priests themselves someday.

Father Galante was not eating. He was standing at the end of the hallway outside, facing a growing line of parishioners who were waiting to receive one of his first blessings as a priest. One by one, he greeted them, smiled, placed his hands on their heads or their shoulders, murmured a prayer, shook their hands. Outside, the sun was setting over his hometown. His work had just begun.

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