

The Florida Catholic

Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition front page story

Three men ordained to the priesthood for the diocese

By Peggy DeKeyser, Pensacola

Three men who had followed very different paths through life all came to the same place May 20 with the same sense of purpose. Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, ordained them to the priesthood for the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart.

Father Charles Collins, 51, approached the day with excitement. "I know my mother's prayers have gotten me to this point. Although my parents are both deceased, I really feel their presence with me today. I know they're both very happy, and they're with me in spirit."

His extended family came from nearby Baldwin County, Ala., for the ceremony. Father Collins, who once operated earth-moving equipment to earn a living, has been named the parochial vicar for St. Dominic Parish in Panama City.

Father Craig Smith, 36, admitted to being "a little nervous" before the ordination, but planned to leave it all "up to the Holy Spirit." His parents and sisters came from Georgia to share the day with him.



TFC PHOTO BY PEGGY DEKEYSER

Fathers Smith, Valenzuela and Collins shortly after ordination.

Father Smith completed a career in the military before entering the seminary. He has been named parochial vicar for Good Shepherd Parish, Tallahassee.

Father James Valenzuela, 27, talked of having spent his whole life preparing for this day. "It's not just the six years of formation. As those years come to an end though, this is a whole new beginning. Even with all the excitement, I feel a profound sense of peace."

Father Valenzuela welcomed guests, including his mother and three brothers and their families, from as far away as the Philippines, New York, and California. He grew up in Tallahassee and entered the seminary after graduating from Florida State University.

Father Valenzuela said that his father, who died shortly after he entered the seminary, seemed to know that his son would be ordained one day. "I think he would tell me to 'Stay true; be a man of your word, and now, of the word.'" Father Valenzuela will serve at St. Ann Parish in Gulf Breeze as parochial vicar.

The Mass was concelebrated by more than 30 priests of the diocese and representatives of the seminaries where the priests received their formation.

In his homily, Bishop Ricard told the assembly that "even as many times as we gather as a church to celebrate, all of which are important, it is this celebration that gives all the others their meaning."

Addressing the families and friends of the candidates, the bishop said, "To you I express my profound thanks and the thanks of the whole church of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, for giving us your sons, handing them over to us to serve the people of God." He also pledged the local church's support for the men in their priestly ministry.

Speaking directly to the men, Bishop Ricard recalled the Old Testament account of the priesthood of Aaron, to whom the Lord gave "no portion of the land of Canaan, directing that instead, God was to be Aaron's whole portion." He challenged the men to never lose sight of this, telling them to hold on to God as their whole portion with the "whole fiber of your wills and your beings."

Msgr. Slade Crawford, director of vocations, presented the candidates to Bishop Ricard, after which Msgr. Stephen Bosso, rector of St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach attested to the worthiness of candidates Smith and Valenzuela; and Father Paul Fitzpatrick, professor of Scripture at Blessed John XXIII Seminary in Weston, Mass., spoke of the worthiness of candidate Collins.

The three then vowed, before the bishop and the people filling the cathedral to overflowing, to discharge their duties as priests "without fail," caring for the Lord's flock, preaching the Gospel and teaching the Catholic faith, celebrating the sacraments, praying without ceasing, and consecrating themselves to Christ.

In a period of solemn prayer, the three men prostrated themselves before the altar as the diocesan choir intoned the Litany of the Saints.

Then each approached the bishop, who imposed his hands on their heads, transmitting to each the sacramental power of holy orders. Following this, the assembled presbyterate also laid hands on each of the men.

Bishop Ricard prayed the prayer of consecration over the men, imploring God that they be granted "the dignity of priesthood ... the spirit of holiness" and that they might be "faithful stewards of your mysteries, so that your people may be renewed in the waters of rebirth and nourished from your altar, so that sinners may be reconciled and the sick raised up."

After the men traded their deacons' dalmatics for chasubles and stoles, Bishop Ricard anointed the hands of each with sacred chrism, and extended to each a paten and chalice while exhorting them about the celebration of the Eucharist.

The ordination rite concluded with a gesture of peace.

Fathers Collins, Smith and Valenzuela joined Bishop Ricard at the altar to pray the words of the Eucharistic Prayer.

At the end of Mass, the cathedral erupted with thunderous applause in welcome and congratulations for the new priests.

Following Mass, the celebration continued in the parish hall, where Fathers Collins, Smith and Valenzuela offered "first blessings" to many.

All three are approaching their first assignments as assistant pastors with high hopes.

Father Valenzuela expressed his hopes for continuing to develop relationships that aid him in becoming a holy person, and returning to others the love that has nurtured him.

Father Collins said, "I only hope to be a good servant and to continue to learn what it means to be a good priest."

Father Smith echoed his hope to continue learning and to serve and lead the people of the diocese.

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