

VIANNEY NEWS

SAINT JOHN VIANNEY COLLEGE SEMINARY
SPRING 2020



FRATERNAL
BROTHERHOOD

Dear Friends,

When we planned this issue of *Vianney News* earlier this year, COVID-19 was just beginning to fill the headlines. Today, it impacts every aspect of our lives. The precious gift of our Catholic faith has sustained us and directed us to Easter Sunday when together we proclaimed, "Alleluia, He is risen!" I pray that you and your loved ones remain healthy and are comforted by this promise of everlasting life.

As concerns surrounding the Coronavirus spread in March, we made the difficult but prudent decision to bring home 14 SJV seminarians living in Rome for spring semester. I regret that they could not complete their semester abroad, but I trust that the heart of our Church will remain in them. (See pages 6 and 7 for updates from the fall Rome experience.)

Shortly thereafter, more than 90 men in formation at SJV were required to move out of the seminary. Most returned to their home dioceses; some are living in cloister at a nearby retreat center with members of the SJV priest staff. All will continue their academic and spiritual formation in new settings off campus.

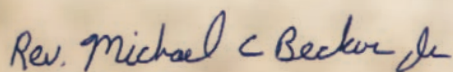
I am very proud of our seminarians and the maturity they have displayed as their college seminary experience significantly changed. They trust in God's plan for their lives, and they continue to discern under new circumstances.

Throughout this issue, you will read about the importance of college seminary formation. Our feature story on fraternal brotherhood (pages 8-11) illustrates the genuine bond of brotherhood fostered at SJV. I like to compare it to the popular World War II series "Band of Brothers." Like other war stories, it is about an ordinary group of men who share an uncommon bond as they attempt to accomplish the impossible.

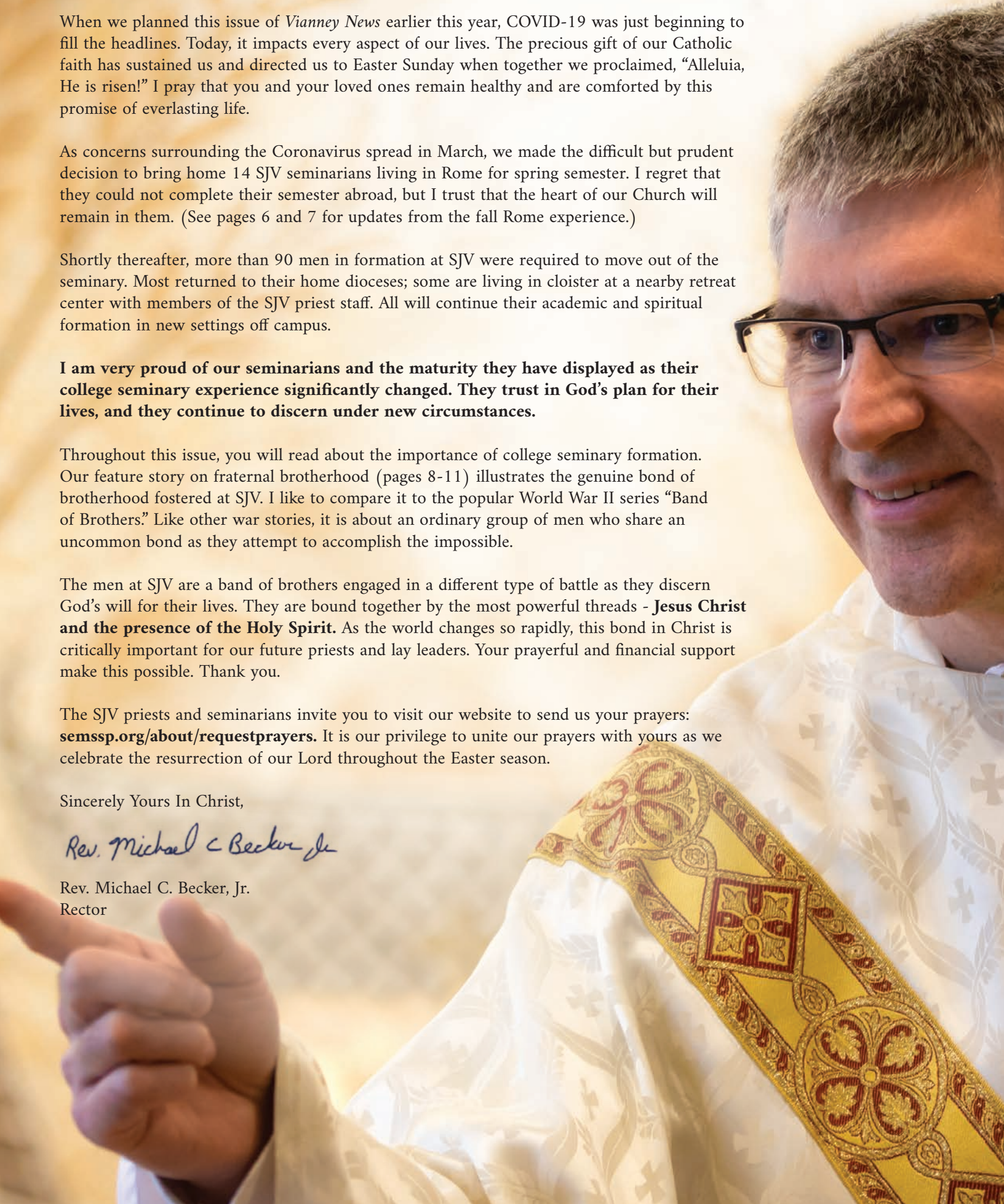
The men at SJV are a band of brothers engaged in a different type of battle as they discern God's will for their lives. They are bound together by the most powerful threads - **Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit**. As the world changes so rapidly, this bond in Christ is critically important for our future priests and lay leaders. Your prayerful and financial support make this possible. Thank you.

The SJV priests and seminarians invite you to visit our website to send us your prayers: semssp.org/about/requestprayers. It is our privilege to unite our prayers with yours as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord throughout the Easter season.

Sincerely Yours In Christ,



Rev. Michael C. Becker, Jr.
Rector



IN MEMORIAM

BISHOP PAUL SIRBA

The Catholic community was shocked by the news on December 1 that Bishop Paul Sirba had died unexpectedly. Appointed by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 as the ninth Bishop of Duluth, Sirba's roots ran deep across his diocese in northern Minnesota, at Saint John Vianney College Seminary and The Saint Paul Seminary, and throughout the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis.

His death was felt keenly by family and friends, including his longtime friend and brother bishop, Peter Christensen of the Diocese of Boise, Idaho.

"When I heard the news, I couldn't imagine life without him," Christensen said. "We had been friends for more than 40 years. This kind of relationship is not repeatable."

The men met in seminary and were ordained just one year apart – Christensen in 1985 and Sirba in 1986. Their respective assignments kept them close and the bonds of friendship strengthened through shared experiences.

Their paths converged at SJV when Sirba was assigned as spiritual director (1991-2000) and Christensen as rector (1992-1999).

"His presence on staff always provided a sense of peace," Christensen recalls. "He had a natural sense that what we were doing to form men for the priesthood was right."

Christensen believed that Sirba's greatest gifts at SJV were his ability to truly listen to the seminarians and to read their hearts. "The seminarians felt valued and they trusted Father Paul."

After Christensen's and Sirba's subsequent assignments throughout the archdiocese, the two men eventually became bishops in the neighboring dioceses of Superior and Duluth.



Bishop Peter Christiansen (left) and Bishop Paul Sirba meet in St. Peter's Square in Rome.

The bond grew even stronger as they called upon one another for prayerful support and encouragement.

In 2014, Christensen moved to Idaho, but the men remained in close touch as they navigated the joys and responsibilities of their offices.

"I never tired of him," Christensen said. "He was comfort food for the soul."

Bishop Christensen was among the many priests, bishops and faithful who gathered at the Cathedral of the Holy Rosary in Duluth on December 6 to celebrate the life of a holy priest and faithful friend.

Bishop Sirba's legacy lives on in the SJV seminarians, including Ben Freeman, a freshman from the Diocese of Duluth. "I will never forget the first time I met Bishop Sirba. I was initially nervous to approach him, but he was the most Christ-like person I had ever met."

What's Happening at SJV?

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS!



Father Becker holds up the Rectors' Bowl trophy after the SJV JAXX's win over The Saint Paul Seminary's Sons of Thunder. The annual October event brings together friends, seminarians, priests, and staff of The Seminaries of Saint Paul. Prayers are offered, touchdowns are made, and bragging rights are granted.

ALUMNI REUNITE DURING FALL EVENT



Current senior Frankie Floeder (left) and SJV alumnus Sean Mulcare (Class of 2019) reconnect at the annual alumni event in November. The evening began with Mass in the SJV Chapel, followed by dinner and a program. Lay and ordained alumni, representing a variety of decades, gathered to share their SJV memories and the impact that SJV has on their lives today. Details for the Fall 2020 event are forthcoming.

THANK YOU, SUE BARNETT!

After serving SJV for 15 years, Sue Barnett retired in January. Her most recent title was Seminary Administrator. Her excellent administrative and communication skills benefited SJV in its important relationships with sending bishops, vocations directors, seminarians, parents and the University of St. Thomas. She will be missed. Please pray for Sue as she begins her next chapter.



DEGROOD NAMED BISHOP OF SIOUX FALLS



In December, Pope Francis named Father Donald DeGrood bishop of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He was installed by the Most Reverend Bernard Hebda, Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, on February 13. Bishop DeGrood is an SJV alumnus and served on staff as a spiritual director (2000-2004). He was ordained for the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis in 1997.

There are currently two seminarians from the Diocese of Sioux Falls in formation at SJV, Nick Ahrens and Gerald "J.P." Thornton. Both are elated about the appointment.

"Bishop DeGrood brings a renewed sense of mission to the diocese," Thornton said. "He is a man who looks at life through his relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

Ahrens was blessed to serve the Installation Mass in the Cathedral of Saint Joseph: "As I knelt right next to Bishop DeGrood, the Holy Spirit was tangible in that moment. I am very excited for him to lead the diocese and to lead me in my vocation."

DeGrood is often described as a man of deep prayer. Thornton has already observed this in his new shepherd and desires the same for himself.

"I know now what a life of prayer looks like, and I want to live like that."



Pope Francis greets SJV seminarian Nick Ahrens at the Vatican.

Surrounded by Holiness: An Update from Rome

by Margaret Johnson

A semester in Rome is an opportunity unlike any other for the SJV seminarians. Last fall, nine men took advantage of this extraordinary gift to live and learn in the center of the Catholic Church. In hindsight, they are deeply grateful for the experience as Italy and the world changed so rapidly this spring in response to COVID-19.

Residing at the beautiful Pontifical Irish College, just a stone's throw from the Colosseum, the seminarians flourished under the leadership of Msgr. Aloysius Callaghan, SJV spiritual director and rector emeritus of The Saint Paul Seminary. For four months, they admired the beauty of Rome and strengthened their prayer lives within the heart of the Universal Church.

The SJV seminarians have lived at the Irish College during their semesters abroad since 2016. Seminarians from Ireland and various countries around the world also make up this community of prayer.

“There were seminarians and priests from more than 50 dioceses, including Iran and Russia,” said Chris Yanta, a senior from the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. “We learned about the Church in their countries, the struggles that it is facing, and the good things that are happening. It gives me a deeper perspective.”

Before the seminarians moved into their temporary residence, they trekked across the Continent for a few weeks. Starting with the

Pilgrimage of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the “Camino” was a retreat and time to bond before a busy semester. The men then split into smaller groups and traveled throughout Europe.

Once settled in Rome, the seminarians were allowed more freedom than is typical on campus. They still began each day with prayer, attended classes, and ate every meal together. The difference is that they didn’t have a communal holy hour. Instead, they committed to time in front of the Blessed Sacrament by themselves each day. This gave them the chance to be formed by the Rome experience. Each evening, they came together for Mass with the entire Irish College community.

Yanta described this flexible schedule as a blessing. “It cultivated a deeper desire to pray when it came from my own will. It was good to build habits first at SJV then really practice them on my own,” he said.

For Nick Ahrens from the Diocese of Sioux Falls, witnessing the Universal Church made an impact on his formation: “Watching Italians and Irish saying the same Mass, seeing collars and habits everywhere, and being able to pray in different churches around the city was inspiring. It was hard not to have a strict timeline, but it demanded more responsibility and maturity from me.”

The Rome experience also made Ahrens reflective and thankful for what he has at home. “When I saw a beautiful but empty church, I would think about the beauty that we have in America. Youth ministry programs are a great example. When I see a kid meet Jesus for the first time at a summer camp, that’s more beautiful than any church building.”

Yanta took advantage of the Universal Church that surrounded him. “It is really cool being in Rome with so many priests and religious and seeing their joy. I will try to bring it back with me.”

One of the biggest blessings for the seminarians last semester was having Msgr. Callaghan as a spiritual director. With his deep knowledge of Rome, he was an insightful leader. And, with his quick Irish wit, Monsignor fondly referred to the nine men as his “baseball team,” each member with his own nickname. In return, the men called their coach “Don Luigi.”

Together, the nine seminarians served the poor with the Missionaries of Charity, served a Mass of Thanksgiving for the canonization of St. John Henry Newman, and attended Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at St. Peter’s. Weekend excursions to Luca and Assisi were highlights outside of the city. The semester ended with an experience they will never forget: a meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican.

Fourteen men who were in Rome for spring semester returned to the United States in early March due to concerns surrounding the outbreak of Coronavirus. We pray they will return to Rome one day to be surrounded by holiness.



SJV seminarians “do what the Romans do” and walk the streets of the ancient city.



the Holy Spirit. In addition, SJV has a cultural methodology that has been passed down from previous rectors and is actively reinforced by Father Becker and the staff priests to help foster true fraternity among the seminarians.

A Friendship in Christ

Father Becker was quick to think of Sirach 6:16 when asked about friendship: “Faithful friends are life-saving medicine.” True friendship in Christ is remarkable. It looks at us with mercy and love, while at the same time challenges us to grow and reminds us of our true calling. “The guys call me outside of myself for the better,” Sustacek said. “In this community, you also have brothers who recognize when you are excited or sad because they really know

you.” He sees that friendship such as this is only possible because of the unity that Christ brings. “Our brotherhood is at its peak during 6:30 a.m. morning prayer in the chapel.”

And when the going gets tough, Gerald “J.P.” Thornton, a senior from Sioux Falls, relies on his brother seminarians to keep moving forward. “It is easy for me to be frozen by the demands of seminary formation. The fraternity at SJV gives me the support and energy I need to conform myself more fully to Christ.”

No Cliques

“There are no cliques in the seminary,” Father Becker said, “because charity knows no limit nor does it exclude anyone.” Regardless of what

continued on next page...





talents, weaknesses or struggles a seminarian may have, he is invited into brotherhood.

“Men who were picked on in high school or had difficulties are fully accepted here,” Father Becker said, recalling moments of charity he has witnessed over the years as Rector.

One example comes to his mind. He remembers a young seminarian, uneasy because he was bad at sports, was met with a surprise when a brother seminarian asked him to join his competitive basketball team. He was shocked and realized he was welcome here regardless of whether he was popular or good on the field or court. “This fraternity shows the men, first and foremost, the love and mercy Christ has for us,” Father Becker said.

Communal Living

Father Becker emphasizes a culture where young seminarians look to the upper classmen. Every seminarian is assigned to live on a specific floor along with a priest formator. Once a week, they meet for night prayer, a talk from

the priest leader, and a moment to honor one another. The honoring time serves as a great occasion to affirm a brother’s growth. Whether that be their hard work in school or that they have grown in a virtue, the honoring is a crucial moment for seminarians to help each other grow in holiness.

Fraternal Groups

Besides floor assignments, fraternal groups specific to each diocese meet every other week for dinner and an activity. The diocesan groups serve as an intentional time to grow in friendship with the men they will be serving with and for in their home diocese. Lastly, the men have small groups of men the same age that meet every other week. “The variety of fraternal groups help to hold me accountable,” Sustacek said.

Priestly Fraternity

"I hope the men continue living a fraternal friendship among their peers in the priesthood," Father Becker said. "A group of brothers helps you navigate through the joys and struggles of life."

SJV alumnus Father Andrew Zipp, Class of 2014, recognizes the value of ongoing fraternity as a newly ordained priest. "Many of my SJV friendships formed me into the priest that I am today. I am so thankful for the impact that these men have on my life."

And, as he moves into a new role as a priest, his desire to become friends with the priests around him has grown. "To grow in my relationships with other priests will always be important to me."



Below: Father Joseph Kuharski, spiritual director, and Ryan Sustacek enjoy fraternal brotherhood between classes.



SJV are Men for Life!

How do you engage more than 100 college seminarians in the pro-life movement? Just invite Kristan Hawkins, president of Students for Life of America, to speak and engagement begins.

The SJV men had the privilege of hearing the dynamic Hawkins in February when she was in the Twin Cities. Inspired by her unwavering conviction that the Church can help to end abortion, the seminarians were on their feet and energized for the cause.

“Students for Life has a two-fold goal,” Hawkins shared. “To make abortion illegal and unthinkable.”

She encouraged the men to know that they are needed to achieve these goals, regardless of their ultimate vocation.

And, she encouraged them to have courage now and in their future parishes or communities. “We cannot operate out of fear or let fear rule this issue.”

Students for Life has more than 1,200 chapters on high school and college campuses across the country. Hawkins travels widely and works tirelessly to keep this issue at the top of the minds and hearts of Church leaders, students and law makers. She is not about to let anyone feel comfortable with the abortion laws in this country, including the seminarians.

“I am encouraged how they tuned in to what I had to say,” she said. “I gave them a hard challenge; now it’s their job to do something with it.”

Challenge accepted.

The SJV men participate in pro life efforts throughout their seminary formation.

Before fall classes begin, new men receive sidewalk training and then pray twice a month at a Planned Parenthood facility near campus.

Additionally, senior Ed Burke from the Archdiocese of Anchorage, Alaska, organizes volunteer prayer partners to gather at the same facility every Friday throughout the school year. Known as Operation Shut it Down, the group consists of approximately 20 seminarians and University of St. Thomas students who spend an hour on site praying for families, their unborn babies and the sidewalk counselors.

“The best thing I’ve ever experienced is when someone changed their mind about having an abortion,” Burke said. “I’ll do this for the rest of my life.”

The SJV men also join forces with other pro-life partners, including like Pro Life Across America and Pro Life Action Ministries, who share the same belief that together we can bring an end to abortion.

Students for Life President, Kristan Hawkins, inspires the SJV seminarians to stand up for life.



Spotlight on Alumni

As a seminarian in 2008, Joseph Nguyen remembers returning to SJV after spring break: “It felt like coming home. I had never been part of a community that cares for one another and builds each other up like SJV.”

In formation for the Archdiocese of Denver, he only attended SJV during his final year of college, but says it was one of the most important years of his life. “SJV really formed me to become the person I am today.”

Twelve years later, Nguyen takes little for granted, including his own life. In 2009, while in formation for the priesthood at Mundelein Seminary in Illinois, Joseph contracted a virus and fell into a 32-day coma. The doctors considered him dead while his parents prayed to the Venerable Cardinal Van Thuan, an icon in the Vietnamese Church.

In what he calls a miracle, Nguyen recovered completely. He later told Catholic News Agency, “The only two things I remember are two visions of Cardinal Van Thuan...”

Vatican officials are currently researching Nguyen’s testimony as evidence in Van Tuan’s case for sainthood.

Nguyen eventually discerned out of seminary and now works as a criminal investigator for the City of Denver. “The formators at SJV taught me that there are several ways to serve the community,” he said. “SJV forms you to be a good Catholic priest or a good Catholic layperson.”

SJV’s three-part motto still holds particular meaning for Nguyen:

Men in Christ: “We were formed to be in the exact image of Christ.”

Men of the Church: “We need to be witnesses to the faith.”

Men for Others: “We need to be hospitable and show people compassion.”

Nguyen recently visited SJV and connected with his friend and former spiritual director, Father Paul Gitter (pictured above). Just like his return from spring break as an undergraduate, he felt like he was coming home again.



SJV Alumni: We love to hear from you!

Send us your updates and
share your SJV stories.

Tizoc Rosales
Director of Advancement
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(651) 358-3345

Dear Friends



Thank you for all that you do to support the important work taking place at Saint John Vianney College Seminary.

These words of gratitude are more meaningful today than ever before as we watch the world change every day. I give thanks for you and that which does not change: **our God who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.**

I also give thanks that you have made an investment in our future priests. I know many of you pray for our college seminarians every day, and I know many of you financially support their formation as they discern their future ministries as priests or husbands and fathers. You make a direct impact on their formation, and you are an important reason why you see the joy on their faces in this issue of *Vianney News*.

Since planning this newsletter, COVID-19 has required that we make temporary changes at SJV. Our seminarians have moved back to their home dioceses or a retreat center, our priests have put in place new ways to deliver spiritual formation, and we have all learned to interact from a distance. Yet, we still experience God's grace in so many ways!

The seminarians have shown great charity, generosity and obedience in their new circumstances; our priests are using this time to pray ever more fervently for the Church and the world; and we are adapting to our changing circumstances in our homes, offices and parishes. None of this would be possible without a foundation of faith.

At this point in my letter I would normally ask you to consider making a financial gift to SJV, and I would be deeply grateful if you are able to share your resources at this time. This time I invite you to use the enclosed envelope to send us your prayer requests. **Our priests and seminarians would be honored to pray for you and your intentions.**

Amid all that is going on around us, it is my hope that you will experience the joy and promise of the Easter season that only our Lord can provide.

May God bless you,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Tizoc Rosales". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Tizoc Rosales
Director of Advancement

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The Spring Mass and May Crowning will be **ONLINE** this year!

Please join Archbishop Bernard Hebda, Bishop Andrew Cozzens, and Father Michael Becker on Sunday, May 3, 2020, at 10:00 a.m. for a virtual Mass & May Crowning, followed by a brief program, as together we honor the Blessed Virgin Mary and benefit the important mission of SJV!

Please visit
semssp.org/virtualmaycrowning
for more information.

