

A VALUABLE LESSON

BY JEFFREY KIRBY

Seminarians from the North American College in Rome were privileged to serve as honor guards during the distribution of Communion at the beatification Mass of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta last Oct. 19.

This was an exciting event for each of us. As the day neared, we made sure our cassocks were clean, with no loose buttons or threads. We secured our tickets to the Mass and located the exact spots where we would be helping with Communion.

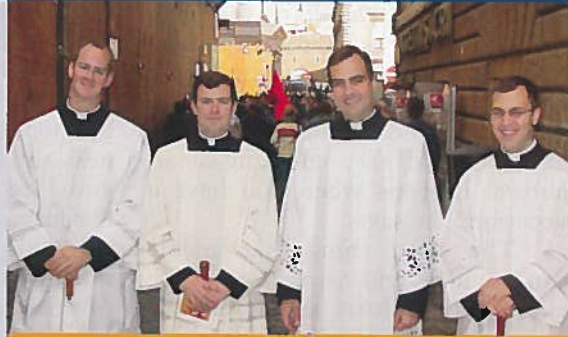
Bookended by the papal anniversary on Oct. 16 and the consistory of cardinals on Oct. 21, the beatification Mass on World Mission Sunday was a moment none of us will soon forget.

The morning of the beatification we seminarians headed to St. Peter's Basilica and checked in for our assignments. We each received a white umbrella, which are used during papal liturgies to designate where Communion will be offered. People were everywhere and soon filled St. Peter's Square and beyond. News reports said that more than 300,000 people attended the celebration. Joyous anticipation filled the air.

The Mass began and the beatification decree was proclaimed. Next, the tapestry depicting the smiling, prayerful Mother Teresa of Calcutta was unveiled. It was a magnificent event. The "Gloria" was chanted and Teresa became Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

It wasn't until holy Communion that I realized fully the truth of what was taking place. As my classmates and I stood at our Communion stations we saw the multitudes whose special devotion to Mother Teresa had brought them to Rome.

They were from different countries and cultures. Some had dirty hands. Others were missing teeth. Many bore the marks of illness. All of them came to show their love and devotion to the nun who had loved and respected them



NAC seminarians Zack Weber, the author, Carter Griffin and Dan Wathen at Mother Teresa's beatification Mass.

through her service to the poorest of the poor.

These were Christ's little ones, Mother Teresa's little ones: the cancer patient with no hair, the elderly person struggling to make it through the crowd, the teenager with spiked hair... They all approached Christ in the Eucharist. They knew that in him their dignity as children of God was restored.

All of the practical details of our service at Mass were forgotten. All of the confusion and anxiety that went into our preparations for the big day had faded away. We were all focused on our Lord.

In those moments we returned to the important event that was occurring. We were being inspired by Blessed Teresa's life, her unconditional and selfless service to the poorest of the poor in humble imitation of our Lord.

My fellow seminarians and I learned a valuable lesson that morning. What we learned was Blessed Teresa's capacity to see Christ in everyone and that he loves them unconditionally. This is Blessed Teresa's message to the 21st century.

It's a lesson that is too easily forgotten or ignored. But now, thanks to God, we have Blessed Teresa of Calcutta in heaven to remind us, to pray for us and to encourage us as we seek to apply the lessons of her saintly life to our own.

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us.

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Gregorian University, known in the English-speaking community as "The Greg." In fact, Americans have shorthand names for many of Rome's universities. The Angelicum, for example, is "The Ange."

The Rome universities provide academic formation in theology, philosophy, sociology and anthropology. "But we teach them a lot about pastoral life and the practical reality of the priesthood," says Msgr. McCoy, whose straight talk is a credit to his surname. "We get down to the nitty-gritty. The universities play a fundamental role, but we teach them where the rubber meets the road. We can't do it all. We can't tell them what to expect every time the doorbell rings after they become priests, but we try."

About 75 of the Latin Rite dioceses in the United States are currently represented among the students of the NAC. Of the 14 staff members, five are spiritual directors and five are formation advisers.



Msgr. Kevin McCoy, rector of North American College, welcomes Supreme Knight Anderson on a recent visit there.

VOCATIONS STORIES

As in any seminary, every vocation tells a story. At 39, Gonzalez, a Cuban-born American from the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., is a late vocation. He had a good career and a good job, and his friends wondered why he would want to leave it all.

"I think the questions are a reflection of the culture itself in a country that is so rich materially, where people are calling their investment brokers every day to

check their portfolio. In a culture that is so bottom-line driven it's easy to figure out why they are asking 'Why aren't you doing the same thing as all of us? Why aren't you worried about the nice retirement and the summer house? What, are you nuts?' There is no other explanation except that something supernatural happens when you have a vocation," he says.

"The other thing that people can't understand is celibacy," he adds. "The culture is so sexually and sensually saturated that the idea of a man giving his life to God, including his sexuality, is so radical that people question it. ... They can't understand that. It's so radical, it's the radical part of the Gospel."

Christopher M. Mahar, 33, a deacon from Providence, R.I., and member of Msgr. Peter Blessing Council 5273 in Coventry, also had his share of funny looks when he told friends he wanted to be a priest. "They wanted to know why I would want to waste my life by acting in the person of Christ, seeing Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, serving God and forgiving people's sins. That is such an odd question from someone who is Catholic. I told them, 'If you consider that a waste of a life you have no faith at all. You are only focused on this life and have no sense of the supernatural.'"

James Lease, 28, of Harrisburg, Pa., was a Methodist until he attended the Mass Pope John Paul II celebrated in New York's Central Park during his 1995 pastoral visit to the United States.

"I said to myself: 'Here is someone who is preaching the Gospel. He has been an icon for all of us, a witness to hope. I think he is the greatest advertisement the Catholic Church has and we really haven't used him to his potential in the United States. We apologize for him instead of showing him to our other brothers and sisters. In fact, sometimes our Protestant brothers and sisters respond more favorably to him than Catholics at home,'" Lease says.

The other men at the NAC also say John Paul has been a beacon for them and for their vocations. For most, he is the only pope they have ever known. Luke Tomson, 22, of

Spokane, Wash., was born three years after John Paul was elected.

The pope's presence is felt every day at the NAC, which has one of Rome's nicest and closest views of the dome of St. Peter's Basilica.

"I had not realized how much the pope was part of my consciousness. By being here, you feel like you are neighbors," says Karl Bissinger, 33, of Fall River, Mass.

"This guy has experienced so much. But when I read *Gift and Mystery* [a papal letter on his priesthood], I could see his joy in being a priest," says Mahar. "He rejoiced in the priesthood, not in the papacy. And I said 'Oh my goodness, this is what I feel called to, this

is what I'm applying to the seminary for. This is the pope and he's excited by the very same thing." The Knights of Columbus gave seminarians at the NAC and in the United States and Canada a special edition of *Gift and Mystery* in honor of the 25th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's election (see related story page 18).

MADE STRONGER BY SCANDAL

Keeping vocations on track costs money and the NAC has many supporters among the American community in Rome and benefactors on both sides of the Atlantic who help meet the \$7 million yearly budget. Traditionally, the serving American ambassador to the Vatican is one of its greatest cheerleaders.

"We have to thank those who had the vision to put a seminary over here," says the current envoy, Jim Nicholson, a member of Denver Council 539. "I think it fits the future leaders of the Church in America to study at the great universities here, to be familiar and comfortable with the hierarchy of the central Church and for the burgeoning leaders from the United States."

In the past three years since the sex abuse scandal exploded in the United States, the seminarians, whether they will return to be diocesan officials or parish priests, have had to deal with it.

Msgr. McCoy recalls: "I told the first class that returned to the States

after the scandal broke: 'I don't know what you are going to find at home but go there, you know who you are, be what you need to be. Be priests for these people. Do what we've trained you to do.'

"Now, in 2004, the newest classes are not so concerned because they have been home since then, they've done parish work, they know the people and they know the people love the priest."

In fact, the students say the scandal galvanized them.

Their prayer is to remain faithful to the school's motto: 'My heart is steadfast.'

"A lot of people say it must be very hard to be called to be a priest at this time," says Mahar. "My response is simple. This is the exact time that God has called me to be a priest and for good reason. This is his good will, his timing. This is something I need to trust, so I would not want to be a priest at any other time."

But they also realize their work has been cut out for them.

"Those of us who are being ordained after this bad news don't take anything for granted," says DeAscanis. "We can't take the faithful for granted. They are going to be questioning us and so we have to prove ourselves and we have to prove the Church to them and prove the goodness of God, the forgiveness of God, the power of grace. That can be a benefit to us newly ordained priests because it's an added incentive and motivation. We know that there's a lot of faith and trust that needs to be regained. And so, as is always the case, through anything bad and anything evil, something good can come from it if we're able to recognize what that is."

In fact, the students say that despite the difficulties they may find back home and throughout their lives, they pray to remain faithful to the motto on the college's coat of arms: *Firmum est cor meum* — My heart is steadfast. ■

Philip Pulella, a Reuters correspondent in Rome, was associate editor and lead writer of the book, *Pope John Paul — Reaching Out Across Borders* (2003: Prentice Hall).