

By Tanya Connor

WORCESTER – Life is changing for the Augustinians of the Assumption, as their numbers rise again with men coming here from various countries, and modern technology poses new challenges to the formation process. Tuesday six men from six countries made their first vows during the “Rite of First Religious Profession” at Mass at Assumption College.

Father Richard Lamoureux, their novice master, said the size of the group was encouraging for everybody. The 71-year-old, who is also director of formation for the Province of North America and the Philippines, said he thought that there were seven men in his novitiate 51 years ago, that the province’s biggest class had 10, and that the only bigger class – 15-20 members – was in Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Altogether, the Assumptionists have 17 men in formation in Massachusetts, where all their U.S. communities are now located, Father Lamoureux said. (An 18th man returns home to Mexico Monday to continue his formation individually.) All 18 have spent or are spending at least part of their formation in the Worcester Diocese, where four of the five communities lie. There are three communities in Worcester at or near Assumption College, one at St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish in Sturbridge, which the Assumptionists staff, and one in Brighton.

The six newly professed men – from India, Vietnam, Guatemala, Mexico, Ecuador, and the United States – just finished their novitiate, a year of retreat from their previous lifestyle and focused activities to form them into Assumptionist brothers and priests.

All but one of the six are part of this province, which consists of the United States, Canada, Mexico and the Philippines, Father Lamoureux said. The novitiate here is currently the only formal one in the province, he said. The Assumptionists' first man from India came to them through the Philippines, and the Vietnamese and Guatemalan were in the United States before affiliating with them. The Ecuadoran came here because his province – the Province of Chile and Argentina – didn't have a novitiate last year.

On Aug. 28, the feast of St. Augustine, five men – from India, Mexico, Peru and the Philippines – are to receive the habit and begin the novitiate here. Also that day, one man from the Philippines and one from China are to renew their vows.

On April 20 one man from the Philippines made his final vows. Three more – from Vietnam, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – are priests serving here who are still in formation, as they were ordained within the last few years, Father Lamoureux said.

As Superior General from 1999-2011, the Worcester native headed the Assumptionists worldwide – from Rome. This year he again dealt with the world – from home.

"It really reminds us of the changing face of the congregation," he said of having men from several countries in formation here. "Assumption is becoming more and more international," said Father Alex Castro, assistant novice master. He came here in 2001 to discern an Assumptionist vocation, and by 2006 was returning to his native Philippines to help establish the congregation there.

"The sense of mission – you're an Assumptionist not only of your province or country, but the whole congregation," he said. "We are required to learn two of the three major languages of the congregation: English, French and Spanish."

"It's a very personal experience for me and for them," Father Lamoureux said of the novitiate and novices. "It's all about transformation. It's not learning a skill; it's trying to learn how to be a disciple of Christ as an Assumptionist religious. I think there was some significant evolution that took place in each of them." He said he describes the novitiate, which, canonically, must be at least 365 days long, as a kind of retreat, because the novices pull back from their families, friends and previous activities to focus on their formation. He asks them to hand over their cell phones and credit cards, he said. After their novitiate, they can have cell phones, but are to close bank accounts, since religious take a vow of poverty and share things in common.

Some technology poses further challenges.

"All of a sudden I'm trying to figure out whether novices should be on Facebook," Father Lamoureux had said when last year's novitiate began.

His decision?

"We had a rule: they had access to the internet one hour a day." On a common computer.

Some had their own computers for other work, he said. They had courses – about religious life and the Assumptionists – and wrote papers, but weren't graded. There were guest lectures, monthly one-day retreats, and a three-week silent retreat. They served at St. John's soup kitchen to experience poverty and ministry.

"The whole purpose is to make them into Assumptionists in 12 months – if you can do that," Father Lamoureux said.

"We tend to call them 'Brother' as soon as they enter the noviatiate," he said. At that point they receive the habit, because they are becoming members of the congregation. If they die during the novitiate, they are buried in the habit.

The novitiate is not their first step, nor their last.

Father Lamoureux said that when a man is showing interest in the Assumptionists, but has not decided to pursue the vocation, he is a "candidate."

Next comes postulancy – asking for entrance into the congregation – which can last from one month to three years, he said.

After the novitiate, a man makes his first profession, or vows, for one year, he said. The next two years he renews them, then is eligible to make final vows or to keep renewing vows annually, usually for another one to three years.

During Tuesday's profession rite, Father Lamoureux called the novices by name and they responded, "Present." Father Peter Precourt, the provincial's delegate for the U.S. territory and pastor of St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish, asked them what they sought.

"The mercy of God, and a life in common with you," they responded.

"We ourselves cannot grant you God's mercy, but we believe that mercy was given to you when the Lord God inspired you to join the Assumption Family," Father Precourt told them. "As for a life in common with us, we are very happy to welcome you and accept your first profession of vows." As a sign of approval, the congregation applauded.

Each novice made his profession in his own language, placing his hand on the Rule of Life as he knelt before Father Precourt.

The Assumptionists, and the Religious of the Assumption from one of their sister congregations, embraced them.

Bishop McManus, main celebrant, thanked them. Father John Franck, assistant general in Rome, who is back here visiting, preached and read a welcome from Father Miguel Diaz Ayllon, the provincial.

Father Franck told how their founder, Father Emmanuel d'Alzon, gave up property, prestige and the chance to be an influential lay reformer.

"I am more and more convinced … that there is no happiness except in religion and the full practice of religion," Father d'Alzon wrote.

He told St. Marie Eugénie, Religious of the Assumption foundress: "We live in a century that makes gods of men and denies the rights of God. Re-establishing these rights is such a worthwhile enterprise that it could fill a lifetime."

Father Franck told the novices they will become Father d'Alzon's sons when they are willing to risk all in re-establishing God's rights and, as their Rule of Life says, go "wherever God is threatened in man and man is threatened as the image of God.'"

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