



## CHICAGO PROVINCE JESUITS REFLECT ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FINAL STAGE OF FORMATION

**A**fter teaching for three years at Province high schools and universities during the so-called “regency” stage of their formation, most Chicago Province Jesuit scholastics seem to just disappear. At least that’s how it seems to the students, teachers, and parents with whom they worked so closely.

And to say they disappear is not wholly inaccurate. The scholastics do leave the Province for three years of theology studies—the final stage of Jesuit formation before ordination—at one of the two Jesuit theologates in the United States: Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley in Berkeley, CA, or Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA. With Jesuits so far from the Province for three years, many of the students, teachers, and friends they left behind don’t know exactly what they’re doing and wonder if they’ll ever return.

So, for those who are curious, here’s a brief overview of Jesuit theology studies.

**T**heology is the fourth and final stage of formation before ordination. It follows a two-year novitiate, a three-year program of philosophy and theology study known as “First Studies,” and a three-year regency period during which Jesuits live and work in Jesuit apostolates.

Most Jesuits in the United States study theology at one of the two American theologates, though a few Province Jesuits do pursue their theology studies abroad. After completing a three-year course of study which covers scripture, morality, Church history, systematic theology, sacraments, pastoral ministry, world religions, social justice, and much more, most Jesuits will earn either an S.T.L. (licentiate in sacred theology), which enables them to teach in a theology school, or an M.Div (master of divinity). During theology studies, each Jesuit also continues to

serve the community in some sort of ministerial work: working in a parish, counseling at-risk youth, tutoring immigrants in English, or serving at a shelter for the homeless.

The program in itself makes perfect sense. But when most people learn that, after three years of teaching, tutoring, and coaching, Jesuits are returning to the classroom as students, they often ask “Do the Jesuits really need to study more? They’ve already studied a lot more than most priests. Isn’t that enough? And why are they giving up teaching to become students again?”

The short answer: because they have to.

But there’s much more to the story. In the following pages, four Jesuit theologians—Kent A. Beausoleil, SJ, James C. Collins, SJ, Michael T. Conley, SJ, and David G. De Marco, SJ—reflect on precisely why they study theology and how it’s preparing them to become Jesuit priests.

*“My studies are also preparing me to labor in a Church that is striving to appreciate all its vocations—ordained, religious, and lay.”*

—Michael T. Conley, SJ

## *Has the theology program prepared you concretely for life as a Jesuit priest? How?*

**Dave De Marco, SJ, responds:**

“Wow,” I thought to myself as a hanging potted plant slipped off its hook in the kitchen ceiling and glanced off my head. “I guess I am supposed to be here after all.” Newly-arrived at Saint Edmund’s House of the Weston Jesuit Community in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I had—a moment before—been wondering to myself if I really was in the right place. And so began my life of studies at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, with God using a potted plant to knock some sense into me—and to begin shaping me for ministry as a Jesuit priest.

That shaping has unfolded here at Weston through my academic coursework, through my ministry of medical practice with the homeless in a shelter in nearby Waltham, through my ministry as a newly-ordained deacon to the parishioners of the Church of Saint Peter here in Cambridge, through my ministry of spiritual direction to college students, though my life in the Weston Jesuit Community, through daily Mass, and through folding all of these experiences into my per-

sonal prayer before the day begins and just as it is ending. Increasingly, I experience God working with me in every dimension of my life, deepening my understanding and acceptance of myself and others, and leading me to a more God-centered way, to God’s way of being human—leading me toward Christ in order to be sent as a member of Christ’s Church to serve his cause, God’s cause: the emerging kingdom of God.

Ultimately, the Society of Jesus sends each Jesuit to theology to provide him with the experiences and tools he’ll need in order to be sent by the Church in the service of God’s emerging reign, God’s kingdom. Our mission is the point of studying scripture, church history, pastoral counseling, and preaching. It’s the point of practicing medicine with the homeless, preaching on Sundays at Saint Peter’s Parish, and offering spiritual direction. It’s the point of living in a Jesuit community, and the point of praying each day. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6.33).



Dave De Marco, SJ, a third-year theology student at Weston Jesuit School of Theology will be ordained this summer.



Mike Conley, SJ, a first-year theologian, in class at Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley.

### Michael T. Conley, SJ, also responds:

**Theology** studies provide a privileged time to *pause*. While there is daily work to be done as a graduate student—we generally carry twelve credit hours per semester—theology provides me relatively more time to pause and catch my breath after a very demanding, but very fulfilling regency assignment at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. In general, this pause affords me an opportunity to emphasize the contemplative side of the contemplative in action ideal of Jesuit life before I become immersed in action again immediately after ordination.

In this pause, theology provides opportunities to gain *perspective*. It has been a time to let the reality sink in that I will be ordained a priest in two years. As my ordination date approaches, I feel many things: wonder at the course of my life and how God called me and led me to the Society of Jesus; humility when I consider how ordination will afford me the privilege of being a minister of sacraments through which Jesus himself heals, forgives, and calls his people; and awe when I imagine myself celebrating the Mass for the first time with family and friends. I also feel humbled when I look back at the eight years of Jesuit formation I've already received and consider the extensive training, the ministerial opportunities, the personal support and all the spiritual graces with which I've been blessed.

More concretely, theology provides *preparation* on many levels. So far I have taken

classes in systematic theology, Hebrew Scriptures, church history, moral theology and Catholic social teaching. Regardless of the specific subject area, I realize that our theology program is preparing me to become more fluent in the various intellectual languages that the Church uses to better understand and express the deep realities of who God is, who we humans are as spiritual beings, and who this Jesus is that we call Lord, Savior, and friend. If I can become more fluent in these theological languages, in my ministry as a Jesuit priest, I may be more effective in helping students, parishioners, retreatants, and others to understand how these theological truths can be understood, even in the context of daily life.

Through my work ministering to a group of Korean Catholic young adults at UC Berkeley, this stage of formation is preparing me to ask what the best way is to bring those theological truths into cultures that may be very different from my own. My studies are also preparing me to labor in a Church that is striving to appreciate all its vocations—ordained, religious, and lay—and have challenged me to imagine how we might better co-labor so that together we might accomplish what the Church has always considered its core mission: to preach the Gospel with great dynamism, to feed, heal, and call the People of God through the sacraments, to nurture supportive relationships through Christian community and to invigorate the desire to serve others.

*Jesuit formation takes longer than almost any other religious formation program. Why, then, is it so important that every Jesuit pursue three more years of costly theology study before ordination?*



### James C. Collins, SJ, responds:

**I tend** to focus on the practical usefulness of theology studies. I'm studying not for me, but for the benefit of the people with whom I'll be working in my future ministries. What will the People of God expect of me once I'm ordained and finally working full time?

I'm still in school—by my count, in 23rd

grade—so that I'll be able to articulate our faith and help name grace as I preach at daily Mass. I'm using my classes to prepare for our "Ministries of the Word." They say that "mist in the pulpit becomes dense fog in the pews." The people of God with whom I'll be working don't deserve foggy articulations of God's active word. So I not only need to

understand the language of our Scriptures and the content of our faith's teachings, but I need to know it well enough to pass it on faithfully and help actualize it in a way that feeds the faith lives of God's people.

My ministerial aspirations are not academic but pastoral, so I've focused my attention during theology studies on scripture and pastoral classes. St. Jerome said that "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." Studying Scripture helps me to fall in love with the Christ of our scriptures. While scripture is the "soul of theology," it also serves as a bridge between theology and real life. I'm grateful for the opportunity to have taken courses in all the sections of the Bible, and for Weston's highly esteemed Scripture scholars who've continually expanded my understanding of our rich scriptural inheritance.

Keeping myself busy in part time ministry at a Boston prison and in a parish has helped me keep focused on my practical learning goals. Thinking ahead to my future pastoral

roles, I've also had the opportunity to take advantage of practical pastoral theology courses. I've studied The Spiritual Exercises, pastoral approaches to suffering, grief, and loss, as well as liturgy, and sacraments. Driven by my own practical learning goals, I invented a course in Hispanic Parish Leadership. These studies have helped me prepare my pastoral tool kit for future assignments.

In some ways I feel sequestered in the ivory towers of academia. I long to return to full-time ministry in God's vineyards. But once I'm back, with my enhanced tool kit in hand, I know I'll be even more grateful for this time of theological preparation.

Community life is an important part of every stage of formation. Here Jim Collins, SJ, a third-year theologian at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, cleans the community kitchen with Ignatius Ikunza, SJ, of the East Africa Province.



Kent Beausoleil, SJ, visited Internado Infantil, a Mexico City orphanage, during a service immersion that was part of the first-year theology curriculum.

### Kent A. Beausoleil, SJ, also responds:

**The length** of Jesuit formation and the movement toward ordained ministry bespeak the Society's desire to train its men well. Doing anything well requires not only passion but also dedication and time. Great basketball players have a love for the game but they also know that passion for the game isn't enough. In order to succeed, they'll need to practice. Currently, I am blessed to study theology in California about an hour's drive south of the Sonoma and Napa wine producing regions. Many people have a passion for wine, for producing it, and for savoring it. A wine of exceptional character is the result of a good harvest, loving care, hard work, and, of course, time.

I have a love, outside my vocation, for cooking and in particular baking. Every person in my family is a good cook and we've all been cooking since we were little. As a boy, I often worked in the kitchen with my father, mother, and other brothers and sisters, peeling potatoes, stirring sauces, and rolling out pie dough.

Chefs, in order to create their mouth-wa-

tering creations, need to have years of education and on-site training, which require discipline, dedication, and passion. I know that to bake well, many things need to be in place: good ingredients, passion, cooking skills, the right equipment and pans, patience, and time. If anyone has ever made bread, they know all of this.

Priestly formation in the Society of Jesus is a lot like learning to cook well. One cannot develop the skills necessary to minister to Christ and God's people overnight. Passion is not enough. Much learning, study, development, prayer, and personal testing need to occur before the day of ordination. The Society of Jesus takes very seriously its responsibility to form Jesuits well. Just as a good chef would never remove a cake from the oven before its time, the Society of Jesus does not rush formation. Priestly formation in the Society of Jesus is supported by an underlying truth: the responsibility of ordained ministers to the world is great. To become well-trained ministers requires time, training, and commitment, all of which are evident in the Society's way of proceeding with respect to priestly formation. ■