

# CHOICES

FROM THE CONGREGATION OF HOLY CROSS OFFICE OF VOCATIONS

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Ordination 2016



The Vocations Team: (left) Fr. Jarrod Waugh, C.S.C., and Fr. Neil Wack, C.S.C.

## The Journey of a Lifetime

In this Ordination issue of CHOICES, you'll hear the stories of two deacons who have become priests in the Congregation of Holy Cross, United States Province of Priests and Brothers. The concept of Ordination might seem overwhelming to you – it is such a big step in the lives of our religious. Trust that it is overwhelming to everyone – our Ordinandi included – as it's not unlike one's wedding day, so deeply profound and memorable, and only just the beginning of a lifetime in service of the Lord, and in the company of an awesome community.

Be careful not to think of discernment as discerning to be *ordained*. Place one foot in front of another and take just one step at a time. Should you carry on in this work, your day will eventually come. And if it's right for you, you'll approach it, as our two young Ordinandi have, with enthusiasm and zeal.

You've heard the old adage, "it's the journey, not the destination...." This rings true for all who enter formation with Holy Cross. You are embarking on a journey to see if this life is right for you, and along the way, we provide the spiritual tools you'll need to follow in the footsteps of our *great band of men*. We have walked this path ahead of you and know where the spiritual and natural obstacles may lie. We are also here to remind you to look to the hope of Jesus Christ on the Cross as your beacon of light in days that seem dark or hard to navigate. Your spiritual compass will lead you in the direction you were meant to go, even if the ultimate destination looks different than that of Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C., and Fr. Dennis Strach II, C.S.C.

If you feel the Lord beckoning you to take the next step – to come and see if religious life is the path you are to follow, please feel free to contact us. We are humbled and excited to be your guides in discernment as you hear and answer God's call.

Our Lord's Blessing on Your Way,  
Fr. Neil Wack, C.S.C.  
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*Rev. Neil Wack, C.S.C., is director of vocations for the U.S. Province of the Congregation of Holy Cross. After earning a degree in computer science, Father Wack entered the seminary at the University of Notre Dame in 1997 and was ordained a priest at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in 2004. He was assigned to a parish in Colorado, and then transferred to his home parish of Christ the King in South Bend, Indiana, in 2005, and served there for ten years. As Director of Vocations, Father Wack coordinates vocation promotion efforts at Holy Cross campuses, parishes and other apostolates across the United States.*

## The Joy of Being a Witness to the World

Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C.



*"All is swallowed up in victory. He has nothing but gifts to offer. It remains only for us to find how even the Cross can be borne as a gift."  
(Constitution 8: 118)*

To many "outsiders," life in the Holy Cross Community - or any religious community of priests and brothers - may render up mental

images of a life lived in isolation and solitude. Any time spent with Holy Cross Religious, however, will immediately shatter this perception, as alluded to by Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C., who also urges those discerning not to be afraid to come and see the life, even if they ultimately find it is not for them.

"The first time I met a Holy Cross priest was at NDVision while I was a high school student. Seeing the joy that Fr. Dan Parrish, C.S.C., had in serving the Church, especially young people, made me feel drawn to and excited about Holy Cross. I wanted to be that joyful through that same service. Come and see. There is no 'self-help' book for religious life. It cannot be figured out on your own. It is meant to be lived with mentors and apprentices. It is a living tradition handed down by our older brothers who teach us not only the information a book could, but also the joy and holiness that they have found. If you are considering a vocation, explore it. Come and see the life. My understanding of Holy Cross is continuously broadening. I have been blessed to live with Holy Cross in a number of communities, on a couple of continents. Seeing how our mission to serve God's people and build up the Body of Christ crosses every border, uniquely applied in each culture, has been very valuable to me. I treasure the experiences of learning about Holy Cross around the world, especially from those we serve."

The pillar of community life in Holy Cross was not only evident the first time Fr. Matt stepped foot on Holy Cross "territory," but time has proven to him how essential it is. "The work we do is laborious. No one signs up for Holy Cross because it is an easy life we can comfortably coast through. We join this life

because we are attracted to the challenge of this life-giving work. But we do not do this work alone. We depend on one another for companionship, support, strength, and encouragement. Sitting around the table at Corby Hall, even when we do not talk about all the many things each of us does in ministry, gives me great joy and hope. Spending time as brothers rejuvenates that excitement and zeal for service within me.”



Fr. Steve Lacroix, C.S.C., gives one of his first priestly blessings to then Old Collegian Matt Hovde.

As Fr. Matt found, formation isn't just about sharing one's life with the community. It is a deeply spiritual journey and a path of sharing oneself with the world.

“Time at the Novitiate was incredibly formative, helping me develop my prayer life tremendously. I think my year as the assistant director at Old College was the most influential though. Being on the formation staff, walking with those great young men, and learning to apply all we had studied and practiced in the M.Div. was of huge importance. Getting to do full-time ministry was the best preparation I could have for life-long ministry. My prayer life has also developed a lot in my time as a Holy Cross Religious. Learning to love the Liturgy of the Hours, learning to pray differently during Mass as a deacon, and being introduced to the art of iconography have been significantly important to me. As I prepared for Ordination as a deacon, the image of John the Baptist saying ‘He must increase, I must decrease,’ became very important to my prayer life. Learning to pray not just by saying words, but by asking Jesus what the Church and world need me to pray for at this moment was a big moment for me. I think all Holy Cross Religious would agree that the Cross figures preeminently in our prayer life and spiritual life. The image of our Blessed Mother standing at the foot of the Cross with the Beloved Disciple, trusting that the glory of God is poured out before them is the bedrock of our ministerial life.”



“... words without examples are empty, mere ideas that never reach the heart ...”

*Pope Francis*

Sometimes, parents of young men discerning a call to religious life may struggle with the notion that their son will not wed or have children. This weighs on the mind of one discerning as well. There's an important choice to be made and it's not without great emotion, but Fr. Matt puts even this decision into perspective. “I miss the idea of having children. Seeing my family filled with such joy at raising my nephew can be bittersweet at moments. But Jesus promises that those who give up family life will find a hundredfold increase in the Kingdom. It has already proven to be true. As a deacon, I was already drawn into people's lives in such a deep and profound way that being a parent may be the only appropriate comparison. Living in a dorm on Notre Dame's campus, I already have 140 ‘children’ of my own. It is such a gift to be able to invest myself in those I am called to serve. I find irreplaceable joy in serving the young people here at Notre Dame in the dorms and through Campus Ministry.”



Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C., pictured offering the Blood of Christ to a resident of Sorin Hall while a transitional deacon.

Fr. Matt also demonstrates that these great personal decisions also seem quickly overshadowed by the needs of those Holy Cross Religious who are called to serve and the desire he had to bring comfort through Christ, Our Lord. “Working as a hospital chaplain during the Novitiate was very challenging. Entering into other people's suffering, not knowing what to say, and not being able to develop a long-lasting relationship was difficult. However, that experience helped me be more present in the moment, learn to listen more attentively, and most of all taught me that I do not have the answer to every question. I left that experience knowing that I do not have to solve every problem: my role as a religious is to introduce Jesus to every situation, trusting that He can bring the healing that is needed.”

Speaking of his Ordination as a Holy Cross priest, Fr. Matt recalls the two things about priesthood that he finds the most exciting: “Mass and Confessions. I assume most men who become priests are likewise attracted by the Eucharist ... I think I am equally excited to sit in the Confessional. It is a great and holy privilege to listen to people’s burdens and struggles and be the one to tell them that God’s love and mercy has no end, and that they are a beloved child of God. I feel so blessed to be ordained during this Year of Mercy that highlights the love the Father has for each of us. I am excited to be able to celebrate that Mercy with others.”

“I hope to continue to grow in my love of Jesus Christ. Uniting myself to His Cross and being a herald of His Resurrection are the joy of my life. I hope that I can continue to live out the beautiful mystery of our vows with joy and zeal. I hope that I continue to minister alongside my brothers faithfully. I hope that one day when my ministry on this earth has ended that there are more Holy Cross Religious than when I entered, spreading the Gospel and building up God’s people in holiness.”  
Fr. Matthew Hovde, C.S.C.

## Called to Be Better Than We Are

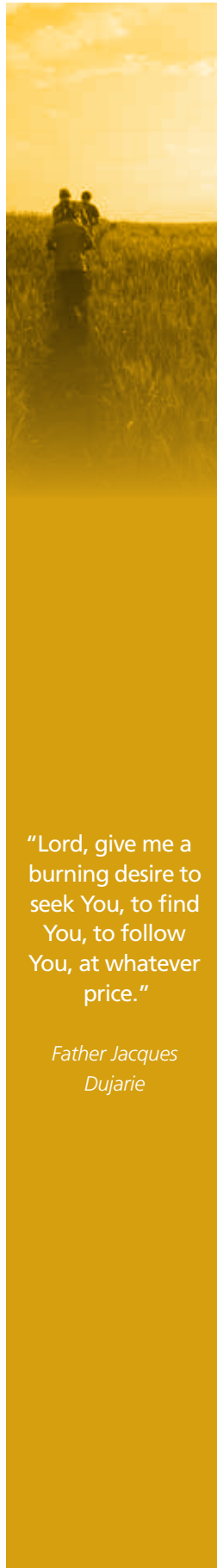
Fr. Dennis Strach II, C.S.C.



*“There is no failure the Lord’s love cannot reverse, no humiliation He cannot exchange for blessing, no anger He cannot dissolve, no routine He cannot transfigure ....”  
(Constitution 8: 118)*

Living in community sometimes has a natural by-product: “spiritual likemindedness.” For

example, Fr. Matt and Fr. Dennis, both cite *Constitution 8:118* as their favorite. And why not? Shouldn’t we all strive toward oneness in our faith and following of the Lord? This example of two newly ordained Holy Cross priests being on the same wavelength also proves a point Fr. Dennis strove to make when some people discouraged him from entering the seminary, saying

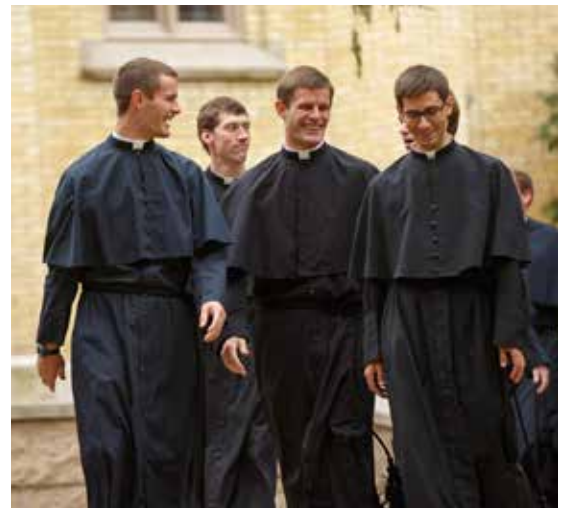


“Lord, give me a burning desire to seek You, to find You, to follow You, at whatever price.”

Father Jacques Dujarie

how his life would be lonely. Now on the “other side,” Fr. Dennis says life in community may be many things, but lonely certainly isn’t one of them.

“I was drawn to this community after meeting countless Holy Cross priests and brothers who were joyful in their vocations. It was such a simple thing but it made a tremendous impact because this joy was not matched in other religious communities I encountered. While I was discerning whether or not I should enter the seminary, a handful of people discouraged me, saying that the life of a priest would be nothing but lonely. When I met the men of Holy Cross, I met guys who were happy and fulfilled in their commitment to religious life. They depended on each other, just like a family, and supported one another on the road to holiness. If I were going to join a religious community, this was going to be the one. While every vocation brings both good days and bad days, this life brings with it so much energy, excitement, challenge, and peace.”



Fr. Dennis Strach, C.S.C., walking with fellow Holy Cross seminarians.

Fears of being lonely assuaged, Fr. Dennis’s decision to apply to the seminary was based on a number of things - questions and considerations you may be evaluating for yourself right now - and what seemed particularly helpful for Fr. Dennis was talking through all of the options with someone else and making campus visits.

“Fr. Tom Eckert, C.S.C., stayed in conversation with me over the course of three years as I ran through pros and cons in my head, asking every question imaginable related to religious life. He helped me to understand that if I felt drawn to the priesthood, I would never truly know what God was inviting me to if I never had the courage to take the first step and apply to the seminary. The seminary, he explained, ‘was not a commitment to being a priest, rather it was

a commitment to *discerning* whether or not God was actually calling me to be a priest. Seminary was merely the next step.' There are only so many books you can read, so many people you can talk with, so many questions you can ask ... until you just have to take the next step and try it out. I also remember hearing Fr. Pete Jarret, C.S.C., preach at a Mass at the Basilica of the Sacred Heart one time when I was visiting campus. His message was so authentic and passionately delivered that I was greatly moved. I was deeply aware of the invitation being offered to me by Christ in the Scriptures because of Fr. Pete's joy, good use of examples and images, and the conviction with which he spoke. It was a particular moment for me when I remember thinking, *I want to do that. I want to give Christ to people in that way.*"

As Fr. Dennis also makes abundantly clear, the teachable moments do not cease when you enter the seminary ... in fact, in many ways, they multiply! "I think my summer assignment in Peru probably had the biggest impact on me when I consider particular moments when it was clear to me that religious life was what I was being called toward. I was asked by the formation staff to consider ministering for two months as a high school teacher in Canto Grande, [Lima, Peru] and it was a huge surprise because Peru was never even on my radar and was not a place I would have chosen to go. Yet the idea of trying something new was exciting, and with my background in education and Spanish it sort of made sense, so I decided to give it a shot. The experience was more rewarding than I ever could have imagined. I was also greatly influenced by my time working with Professor Kimberly Belcher on my synthesis seminar capstone project. She helped me to contextualize my vocation, and challenged me to look at my ministry from a variety of different perspectives ... she inspired me to continue in formation and dedicate my life to Christ as a priest. It was also a joy to be invited by Fr. Peter Rocca, C.S.C., to assist with liturgies at Moreau Seminary. I was able to help plan and accompany weekly community Masses, even big liturgies like our Diaconate Ordinations. Having earned my bachelor's degree in music and having worked as a music director before entering the seminary, I found this a natural way to share my gifts with the community. My interests in liturgy and sacramental theology only grew during my time in the M.Div. at Notre Dame, and I am interested to see how those interests intersect with future ministry assignments."

Young men discerning a call to serve God as a priest, whether in Holy Cross or another religious community, may wonder how one should pray. "Am I praying enough?" "Am I praying the right way?" Ask a dozen Holy Cross priests and you may get similar yet very



"Let us not forget that it is not money or talents that will do great things for God, but faith, prayer, and fidelity to our responsibilities."

*Blessed Basil Moreau*

distinct answers. For Fr. Dennis, one powerful way to remain "spiritually accountable" is to keep a notebook. "As a religious in Holy Cross and as a cleric, I pray the Liturgy of the Hours each day. In addition to those times when I pray together with my local community, I pray with Scripture, typically using the readings from Mass. I like to find a phrase or an image that I believe God is highlighting for me, so that I can take that with me throughout the day. At night before I go to bed, I recall all of the people who asked me to pray for them or anyone I met that day who was in need of God's help, and I write their names down in a notebook that I keep. It's a good way to keep track of all those people who ask for prayers throughout the day!"



Fr. Dennis Strach baptizing a baby, his first during his deacon placement at St. Ignatius Martyr Parish in Austin, Texas.

As Fr. Dennis looks to his future as a Holy Cross priest, he doesn't think of things in terms of an "old life vs. new life." At his core, he says, he's very much the same person. "The only difference is that I have developed in my knowledge and awareness of God, in my pastoral skills, and I have been called forth and affirmed by the Body of Christ to live out my life in service to God and His people. When you're living your life in a way that brings you fulfillment and joy, you don't dwell too much on what you gave up, you just delight in what you're able to do."

"I'm happy to have found a vocation that makes use of all of my talents, that provides me with a deep sense of joy and fulfillment, and a vocation that continually calls me to be better than I am – that is, to live as God has created me."

Fr. Dennis Strach II, C.S.C.

### Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C.

**Born:** December 27, 1988

**Parents:** Robert and Cynthia Hovde, Miami, Florida

**College:** University of Notre Dame, B.A. 2011

**Graduate Study:** Notre Dame, M.Div., 2015

**Entered Formation:** 2007, Old College

**First Vows:** July 28, 2012

**Final Vows:** August 29, 2015

**Deacon Placement:** Assistant Rector of Sorin College, University of Notre Dame and in Campus Ministry, University of Notre Dame.

### Fr. Dennis Strach II, C.S.C.

**Born:** October 18, 1988

**Parents:** Dennis and Carla Strach, Rochester Hills, Michigan

**College:** Oakland University, B.A., 2010

**Graduate Study:** Notre Dame, M.Div., 2015

**Entered Formation:** 2010, Postulant

**First Vows:** July 28, 2012

**Final Vows:** August 29, 2015

**Deacon Placement:** St. Ignatius Martyr Catholic Church, Austin, Texas

## We Have Left Our Homes and Followed You

### *Dennis and Carla Strach*

We often hear stories of how our religious came to be part of the Holy Cross Community, but what's not trumpeted as loudly are the stories from the parents of our religious. We caught up with Dennis and Carla Strach, to talk briefly about what it's like to be the parents of a young Holy Cross Religious.

**When you learned Fr. Dennis was interested in discerning a vocation to priesthood, what was your reaction?**

**Carla:** Dennis always expressed an interest. After Mass, we would come home and he'd put out my old shirts as a vestment, flatten out white bread for the Host ... the dog would get Communion .... Later on, for career day,



"Ours is to plant the seeds: God sees to the fruits of our labors."

*Pope Francis*

he wanted to dress up as a priest. He wasn't obsessed, but we thought he would maybe grow out of it. In high school, at the very first parent/teacher conference, one of the Marist priests who ministered at the school said, "I think your son has the calling." That was the first time that someone else had mentioned the priesthood as a possibility for Den. We were really taken aback!

**Dennis:** Dennis wanted to enter formation right out of high school ... but he was just 17 and barely driving. We thought he ought to go to college first, and have an education to fall back on in case he changed his mind. He went to a local college and got his B.A. in music and a minor in Spanish. Then it came to a point where Dennis said, "I can only talk to so many people and read so many books - it's time to give this a shot."

**What were your feelings toward the Congregation of Holy Cross?**

**Carla:** As a mom, I never thought he'd want to (nor did I want him to) go *away*. I knew he wanted to check out being a priest, but where was Moreau Seminary and what was "Holy Cross"? Dennis had never talked about religious orders. I didn't even know what that was!

**Dennis:** Our first assumption was that he was going to be a priest in a parish somewhere in town - somewhere we could drive to every Sunday. We had to learn a bit more about it. When I visited the University of Notre Dame with Dennis, I was particularly impressed. Fr. Tom Eckert, C.S.C., made a comment, "I've had guys in my dorm that want to be a chemical engineer or a lawyer, and two years later they decide it's not for them ... this is also Dennis's time to determine if he has a calling." It was a clever way of introducing it to us. This was a trial time to make sure he loved it. Our attitude changed seeing him happy here.

**Carla:** I only have one child and I don't know why he can't keep doing Mass in our family room! But the more I learned, the more I cried, because I knew it was *right*. After understanding and being a part of Holy Cross ourselves, we see how there's so many ways for him to grow.



Fr. Dennis Strach II, C.S.C.'s chalice is set with a diamond from his mother's wedding ring. His mom and dad see it for the first time.



# The Holy Cross Family

*Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C.*

Throughout my time in formation, I always understood that Holy Cross was like an extended family. It was something we just picked up on. No one needed to say it. We all knew that we somehow belonged to each other's families. Ordination weekends seemed more like family reunions, and not only for the Holy Cross Religious present. Slowly, I got to know the families of my brothers in Holy Cross. Eventually, they became part of my family. Similarly, my family became a part of Holy Cross.



Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C., greets a friend at the luncheon hosted by the Holy Cross Congregation after Final Vows.

I think that funerals were always important to us as a community. When someone's family member died, the whole community always had a great outpouring of support and affection. I remember traveling to several funerals for the family members of other guys in the seminary. But this has been felt most keenly and poignantly when it was my family members. A few summers ago, my Uncle Richard passed away. The community, as always, began praying for my family, and especially my uncle. I was so touched to find that three of my brothers in the seminary made the five-hour drive out to Wisconsin to be with my family. I already knew that they were supporting me and praying for me. But now my family did too. My family knew that Holy Cross deeply cared for them. Holy Cross is their extended family and will always be there for them.

Likewise, this past summer my grandfather died in Miami, Florida, and last month, my grandmother in Wisconsin. I knew that certainly Florida would be

too far to travel for most of my brothers. However, I made a retreat earlier in the summer at our residence in Cocoa Beach. It is a community for older members of Holy Cross, but still very active men in service and ministry. The priest who celebrated my grandfather's funeral could not make it to the cemetery due to another funeral immediately following my grandfather's. At a moment's notice, Fr. Jim Lackenmier, C.S.C., the superior of the Cocoa Beach Community, came to be with my family, and to preside at the interment of my grandfather. I knew that Fr. Jim was my brother in Holy Cross, but again, now my family did too. He joined us for a reception at the house my grandfather built. Only family members came. And it made perfect sense to have Fr. Jim join us.

In Holy Cross, we truly are one family. I have loved getting to know the families of my classmates. I hope the families of other men in formation come out for my Ordination. I hope they get to experience that they are part of a much larger extended family. They are welcome in Holy Cross, and Holy Cross longs to be a part of their life. And in those most difficult moments, those moments of loss and grief, moments of suffering for families; it is then that Holy Cross will be most profoundly felt. They are loved by their extended family in Holy Cross. I have kept the dozens and dozens of Mass cards sent to me by priests who could not make it down to Florida for my grandfather's funeral or to Wisconsin for my uncle's or my grandmother's. Some of them were from close friends who were recently ordained. Some came from acquaintances. Some I had never met. I keep them as a reminder of who Holy Cross is to my family. My parents, my brother and sister, my brother-in-law and nephew, my aunts and uncles and cousins all belong to this community. They are always welcome. Holy Cross is their family.



Fr. Matt Hovde, C.S.C., and Fr. Dennis Strach II, C.S.C., are welcomed by the Holy Cross community after professing their Final Vows.

Discerning God's will is not something to do on your own. You can pray and research on your own, but finding the right next step often only comes by reaching out to a vocations director. Our role is not to convince you to join our community; it is to help you hear and answer God's call. In hearing and answering God's call you will find something greater than what you might uncover on your own. Drop us a line and we will help you to discover how God's call is leading to the fulfillment of your deepest longing.



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