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The Rev. Alberto Tamayo says he knew from the seventh grade that he wanted to be a priest.

Three find path to priesthood through one parish in Linden

BY JEFF DIAMANT
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While most Catholic dioceses are struggling to find enough men to become priests, a church in Linden has had remarkable success. In the past year, three men from the parish have entered the priesthood.

St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church will have sent half as many men to the priesthood as the entire Archdiocese of New York is ordaining this year (six).

Two of the three men from St. Elizabeth are working in the Trenton Diocese. The third has been assigned to the Newark Archdiocese.

"I keep telling everybody, it doesn't get any better than this as a pastor," said the Rev. Benedict Worry, pastor at St. Elizabeth for 12 years. "These are the happiest occasions you can have in this day and age. It's such an unusual blessing.

"Is this a coincidence? It's a most unusual coincidence, but God doesn't work in coincidences. For some reason this parish has been the pad from which these three young men are emerging as priests all these years and discernments."

Two of the three, the Rev. Patrick McPartland and the Rev. Alberto Tamayo, grew up in Linden and knew each other from St. Elizabeth's school and parish, where both were altar servers. The third, Bismarck Pedro Chau, moved to Linden 11 years ago after working years as an accounting clerk for a life insurance company.

Chau is being ordained today

and will learn his assignment over the weekend. McPartland was ordained last weekend and assigned to St. Joseph's Church in Toms River. Tamayo was ordained last May and works at St. Barnabas in Bayville.

The priesthood they enter faces a shortage of undisputed severity.

From 1965 to 2007, the number of American Catholics rose from 45 million to 65 million, while the number of priests in the United States declined from 56,632 to 41,449, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at George University.

Annual ordinations of Catholic priests in this country declined from 994 in 1965 to 456 last year.

The long-term result? Far more churches are managed now by lay parish administrators rather than by priests who can administer sacraments. In 1965, about 3 percent of churches lacked a resident priest, compared to 23 percent last year.

Against that backdrop, St. Elizabeth's output "is highly unusual, and ever so refreshing to see," said Msgr. Edward Burns, executive director Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. "It's great to see a parish community that is so alive that the young men in the parish just want to become leaders of a similar community."

■ McPartland, 34, worked first as an engineer and realized after a desired work promotion came

through, in his mid-20s, that he wanted more out of life, he said. He worked as a youth minister.

■ Tamayo, 35, knew since the seventh grade he wanted to be a priest but worked a few years for a design firm in Manhattan before entering the seminary, he said.

■ Chau, 40, had wanted to become a priest since he was a child. Eventually, after years working as an accounting clerk, he made the jump to seminarian. He also worked as a youth minister.

The men credited the Rev. Worry and the Benedictine monks at St. Elizabeth with helping them spiritually over the years. And they said the joy at St. Elizabeth over their ordinations has warmed their hearts.

"They're thrilled. They're very supportive in the parish," McPartland said. "The people in the community have been praying for vocations. They have the same spirituality as the monks."

Indeed, parishioners this week at the church, where McPartland said his first Mass last Sunday and where Tamayo is scheduled to do so tomorrow, have said they were happy about the vocations.

"I knew the mother of two of them," said Pauline Samer, 70, "and the other boy, Bismarck, was in a program I was involved in, and I could see he had some kind of calling from the way he talked about God."

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Bismarck Pedro Chau, left, who is to be ordained today, joined the procession for the Rev. Patrick McPartland's first Mass last week.