

# Newly ordained priests see challenges, unexpected blessings amid COVID pandemic

The men ordained to the priesthood during the summer of 2020 are facing unique challenges in their first months of their priestly ministry.

Just about everything we typically associate with healthy parish life has been put on hold or changed dramatically: Mass, confession, religious education, sacramental preparation, hospitality programs, parish dinners, bingo nights, youth groups, Knights of Columbus breakfasts and more. No priest was trained to minister to their flock during a pandemic that turned the world upside down, but such drastic changes can be difficult for a newly ordained priest coming into parish ministry for the first time.

Even many ordinations and first Masses that were planned as much as a year ahead of time were postponed a month or two. For some, the wait was even longer.

[Read additional vocation articles here.](#)

Two priests who spoke with Our Sunday Visitor shared how having their ordinations delayed was an unexpected blessing, and how COVID-19 has changed their new ministries.

## Patience is a virtue

Father Gregory Liu is a Dominican and a member of the Province of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, which covers the western United States. His ordination was originally scheduled for May 30, the day before Pentecost, but it was delayed until Sept. 19 – almost four months later.

Ever the optimist, Father Liu told Our Sunday Visitor: "I am not disappointed at all that my ordination has been delayed for three and a half months. I have prepared for the priesthood for so many years, what difference do these months make?" In fact, the delay has allowed him to take his time finishing his course work and to gradually ease into the parish ministries that he will be taking on as a priest.

As a transitional deacon over the summer, Father Liu was able to continue familiarizing himself with the rubrics for baptism and burial, while practicing those of the Mass. "Furthermore," he said, "it has given me more time to prepare for the ordination, both logistically and spiritually. I know that this is a luxury that not too many priests have." All things considered, he said, the delay is providential.

Father Liu was born in Taipei, Taiwan, to a Catholic family. He moved to Canada when he was 17, did his undergraduate studies in Toronto and then earned a Ph.D. in organic chemistry at the University of Illinois. While attending the University of California-Berkeley seven years later for more advanced research, he saw a "Come and See" notice in the parish bulletin for the Dominicans – an event that changed his life.

As his ordination neared, COVID-related restrictions did not just result in a delay to the event itself, but also a number of logistical changes. Originally slated to take place at the large St. Dominic's Church in San Francisco, the rite instead was held at St. Albert's Priory chapel in Oakland, the house of formation for the Dominicans of this province. This meant that Father Liu could not invite any family or friends. However, Father Liu sees this as an opportunity to exercise the renunciation of his own desires, and to celebrate with his confreres. "After all," he said, "the priesthood is about doing God's will, not my will."

Father Liu also drew parallels between his own ordination and

that of Pope St. John Paul II, who was ordained as a priest in a clandestine Mass, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, whose mother, St. Zélie Martin, had died many years before and was not present at her vows as a Carmelite nun.

While many of the responsibilities that come with priestly ministry can be done virtually or outdoors, there are some that are proving difficult to fulfill with the COVID restrictions. Father Liu sees this as training to be flexible and think outside the box in parish ministry.

## **A positive outlook**



Father Anthony Ferguson during his ordination. Courtesy photo

Father Anthony Ferguson sees the delay in his ordination as providential, as well. Originally scheduled to be ordained June 6, his ordination was pushed back to July 11 – the

bicentennial of the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia, where Father Ferguson serves.

“In hindsight, I’m so grateful that my ordination was postponed,” Father Ferguson said. “I needed that time to be with the Lord, to focus on what was most important, and to let this beautiful sacrament be all about him, not me.”

Father Ferguson was assigned to St. Andrew’s Catholic Church in Roanoke, Virginia. Because of the delay in his ordination, he did not start his assignment until August. He said that it has been a smooth transition into priestly ministry so far, even though that ministry does not look like he always expected it would. Social interactions are an important part of joining a new community, and even this fundamental first step has been made more difficult by COVID-related restrictions.

“The masks certainly present a challenge for recognizing parishioners, remembering their names and taking social cues based on facial expressions,” Father Ferguson said. “Normal social interaction like handshakes have been put on hold, which is an added hurdle as you try to become part of a brand new parish community.”

Still, Father Ferguson has found himself greatly fed by his priestly ministry.

“Preaching and hearing confessions have been so life-giving for me,” he said. “The reality of COVID has made adjustment to parish life both harder and easier – harder because of all the precautions we need to take to make sure people are safe; easier because we’re all experiencing the same crisis together, and that actually provides a place of encounter and honesty – with both parishioners and with other people in the community.”

Also serving as a chaplain at a regional Catholic school next door to the parish, Father Ferguson walked throughout the

school blessing halls and classrooms, which brought a great peace.

“I think teachers, faculty, and staff at our parishes and Catholic schools desperately need that presence so they know they’re not alone,” he said – “that their priests are interceding for them and providing the spiritual support they need to keep serving the Church.”

Father Ferguson sees in this time of pandemic a crucial opportunity for evangelization, and this is something that is affecting his priestly ministry right from the start. “This pandemic has revealed the deepest human longings to belong and to be loved,” Father Ferguson said. “The priesthood, lived out with zeal and joy, is such a vital witness when the world as we know it seems to be changing so quickly.”

*Paul Senz writes from Oregon.*