



Orthodox
Studies Institute

The American Orthodox Priest Shortage Crisis

By **Matthew Namee**

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Past Discussions of the Priest Shortage. For at least the past quarter-century, Orthodox jurisdictions in America have been discussing the “priest shortage” problem. The OCA addressed this at its All-American Council in 1999 and again in 2005, when it observed that 400 priests would soon retire and 100 new missions were expected to open over the next decade, with only 20-25 priests per year being ordained. The same year, 2005, the Greek Archdiocese also addressed the priest shortage problem. Then in 2020, the OCA website reported that 30% of active OCA priests were aged 65 or older, while the main OCA seminaries were expected to produce only 12 new priests per year. The article observed, “This rate is, therefore, insufficiently meeting the urgent priest shortage the Church is already experiencing today. If the enrollment at our seminaries remains steady, over the next 5-10 years, when the 164 priests in the age group 55-64 currently serving will enter retirement age, another 40+ parishes across the Orthodox Church in America will not have a full-time parish priest.”

Outflows

Expected Vacancies 2023-2027. Based on 2022-23 data we collected covering 636 parishes (248 OCA, 187 Greek, 121 Antiochian, 80 ACROD), 25.6% of parishes are expected to need a new priest in the next five years. (Note that the OCA Diocese of Alaska, which currently has a vacancy rate of over 50%, is *not* included in this study.) Projected across the roughly 2,000 Orthodox parishes in America, this suggests approximately 512 vacancies over the five-year period, or 102 per year.

Depositions. From 2015 to 2022, the OCA deposed/laicized 36 priests. In 30 months from 2015-17 (the most recent years for which data is available), the GOA deposed 12 priests. Thus these jurisdictions appear to be losing roughly five priests each, per year, due to depositions. This suggests 5 vacancies per year each for the OCA and GOA due to depositions, plus perhaps 2-3 for the Antiochians and another 5 or so for the other jurisdictions. Altogether, we might reasonably expect 15-20 depositions/laicizations per year, or 75-100 over the next 5 years. Of course, not all of these deposed priests are necessarily parish rectors.

Total Expected Vacancies. Combining the expected vacancies with the projected depositions/laicizations, we can expect perhaps 575 vacancies in the next 5 years, or 115 per year.



Inflows

Seminary M.Div. Graduates. From 2018-22, the three largest Orthodox seminaries in America – St Vladimir’s, St Tikhon’s, and Holy Cross – produced a total of 115 male, Eastern Orthodox M.Div. graduates (23 per year). Historically, only about two-thirds of male, Eastern Orthodox M.Div. graduates go on to become priests. Thus, we can expect about 77 of those recent seminary graduates to be ordained – just over 15 per year. M.Div. enrollment has been in decline for many years, so we can expect the output of priests from the seminaries to drop in the future. (For St Vladimir’s and St Tikhon’s, comparing the 2008-15 period to 2016-23, ordainable M.Div. graduates have fallen by 29%.)

In addition, Holy Trinity Seminary (Jordanville) produces 3-4 M.Div. graduates per year, although many more ROCOR clergy are produced via the online Orthodox Pastoral School and Jordanville’s bachelor degree program. The Antiochian House of Studies (AHOS) has a new non-residential M.Div. program with about 20 second-year and 8 third-year students pursuing ordination.

Combined, then, we might generously expect the various M.Div. programs to produce around 30 candidates for ordination per year, although not all of these men will necessarily be viable candidates.

Immigration. An unknown number of priests are added to the jurisdictions via immigration. This varies from one jurisdiction to another. In 2020, approximately 20% of parish priests in the GOA and 13% in the Antiochian Archdiocese were born outside of North America. Of course, not all of these foreign-born priests came to America as priests; many of them still went through an M.Div. program in America and were ordained in their respective jurisdiction. For the sake of argument, we might roughly estimate that 10% of vacancies are fillable via immigration, although this is an extremely rough estimate. Ten percent of 575 vacancies is 58 priests; we’ll round up to 60 and assume that the jurisdictions will be able to bring in 12 priests per year via immigration.

Shortfall

Combining the expected vacancy rate with the projected deposition rate, it appears that the American Orthodox jurisdictions will need a combined 115 new priests per year, while the M.Div. programs are producing ordination candidates at a rate of 30 per year. The result is a shortfall of 85 per year, or 425 over the next five years. Immigration may slightly reduce that shortfall, perhaps by 12 per year (60 total). This means that the “priest deficit” is approximately 365 over the next 5 years, or 73 parishes per year.

It is important to note that, for purposes of this study, a parish is not considered vacant as long as it has one priest, even if it is so large that it ideally would be served by two or more priests. Many



parishes are understaffed, and in an ideal situation, they would have more priests than they currently do.

Financial Challenges

In addition to the general shortage problem, we have a related problem of parish financial viability. While our data on this subject is more limited, sample estimates suggest that perhaps 40-50% of the parishes with projected vacancies are not in a financial condition to afford a full-time parish priest, even if one is available. (Relatedly, 60% of OCA parishes are reported to have 100 parishioners or less.)

An example may help illustrate this challenge. One parish in the study is part of the Antiochian Archdiocese and is located in the suburbs of a major U.S. city. It is the only Orthodox parish within a reasonable driving distance. It is a smaller community, with fewer than 100 parishioners. It is currently served by a semi-retired priest who is over age 70 and receives only a partial income from the parish (the remainder of his funds come from retirement income). Once this priest retires or dies, the parish would not be able to pay a new priest enough to support a family. However, it would be unfortunate if this parish is forced to close, as it serves an important need in its region. This example is repeated in communities across the country, in many jurisdictions.

Clergy Recruitment

Deacons. In recent decades, thanks to various diaconal training and distance learning programs, many jurisdictions have dramatically increased the number of deacons. However, the use of deacons varies widely depending on the jurisdiction:

Jurisdiction	Deacons/Parish
Antiochian	0.83
ROCOR E. American Diocese	0.81
OCA	0.40
Greek	0.14

With perhaps a tiny number of exceptions, no deacons are full-time parish employees, but rather earn their income from secular professions and serve their parishes for little or no compensation. Presumably, some of these deacons might be qualified to be ordained priests, although some are best suited to remain deacons, and it would be unfortunate to deprive parishes of the important and distinctive liturgical and community roles that deacons serve. Having said this, it seems inevitable that some of these deacons will be pressed into service as priests in the coming years, due to the increasing priest deficit.



Demographics of New M.Div.-Graduate Priests. Ordainable M.Div. students in seminary programs tend to come from two relatively narrow groups:

- Cradle Orthodox men in their 20s and 30s, and
- Convert men in their 20s, 30s, and (occasionally) 40s, most of whom converted to Orthodoxy within the past 5 to 15 years.

In the 21st century, 7 in 10 cradle Orthodox priests were ordained before they turned 40, and many of those ordained at 40 or older were seminarians in their 20s or 30s, but waited to be ordained (e.g., waiting to find a wife). In general, if a cradle Orthodox man reaches age 40, he is not a serious candidate to go to seminary.

Convert priests tend to enroll in seminary within the first fifteen years of becoming Orthodox. It's very rare for a convert of 20 years or more to begin an M.Div. program.

“Market Inefficiencies.” These trends have created what might be termed “market inefficiencies”: middle-aged (40+) men, both cradle Orthodox and long-time (15+ year) converts, who, for one reason or another, chose not to attend seminary, and have instead made their living through a secular career. Many of these men have established themselves as stable and reliable servants and leaders in their parish community, some serving as readers and subdeacons and/or in parish council leadership positions. They welcome newcomers to the parish and are go-to choices as sponsors/godfathers. They are knowledgeable about the Orthodox faith but are content to serve in a lay role in their local community. Very, very few of these men will even consider the existing models of the various distance learning / late vocations programs that are offered by the jurisdictions – they aren't interested in going back to school and writing papers for a grade in their 40s or 50s or 60s.

Possible Paths Forward

On the one hand, we need many hundreds of men to become priests in the next five years, while existing M.Div. programs and immigration meet just a fraction of that need. Even if we were to double or triple seminary enrollment, we would still be operating at a deficit – and we would still have the problem of financial viability, with many parishes that need priests unable to pay a living wage. In some cases, parishes will simply be closed. This might be the right answer in certain regions (e.g., the Northeast) where Orthodoxy, and populations and economies in general, have been shrinking for decades, but it is not an acceptable solution in areas where Orthodoxy is growing. Small and mission parishes should not be closed if there are faithful who need them; in fact, in many places, new missions need to be established.

On the other hand, we have an untapped reservoir of potentially worthy candidates for ordination who are not being reached by the existing supply chain – mature, experienced Orthodox men who



have stable jobs and are committed to their local parish. With roughly 2,000 parishes in America, we might reasonably estimate that perhaps 5,000 or more men fall into this category (2-3 per parish). If just a small percentage of these men were to be ordained, we would not only go from a shortfall to a surplus, but we would be able to put multiple priests in parishes that now have just one, and we would be equipped to begin new missions as the need arises.

This raises the question: How might we provide a path for these already-formed, mature, and financially stable men to receive the requisite training for the priesthood without requiring them to relocate, give up their careers, and spend time on purely academic (non-priestly) requirements?

In answering this question, it may be instructive to consider the example of Orthodox Churches in other parts of the world. For example, in the Patriarchate of Antioch, the St John of Damascus Institute of Theology at Balamand University is the preeminent theological institution. However, not all clergy in Lebanon and Syria are required to obtain degrees from this school. The various Archdioceses (which are geographically quite small – Lebanon and Syria put together cover roughly the same land area as the state of Nebraska) have their own theological institutes. These local institutes offer a non-residential course of study to train future priests. These programs are less academic than what is offered at the Balamand, and priests who come out of these programs are generally given smaller parishes and fewer responsibilities than Balamand graduates. Similar types of programs exist elsewhere in the Orthodox world (e.g., Greece). In the United States, the internet-based Orthodox Pastoral School, operated by ROCOR, offers a similar type of program, with the result that ROCOR appears to be better positioned than the other jurisdictions to avoid a clergy shortage crisis in the coming years.

These models, which have longstanding historical precedent, may offer a solution to the shortage problem. Adapted to an American context, this may suggest a two-track solution: (1) a 3-year residential seminary for senior clergy positions (e.g., proistamenos of a larger parish), and mandatory for men under age 40 and recent converts, and (2) a non-residential program for older men and longtime converts, with clergy produced by such a program not eligible for senior clergy positions.

Another solution may be to shift in-person, residential seminaries to become more regional in scope. The main existing Orthodox seminaries in America are concentrated in the Northeast (New York, Boston, and eastern Pennsylvania). If smaller seminaries were located in various parts of the United States, this might have the effect of increasing the number of students. This solution would preserve the benefits of residential seminaries while potentially producing more priests. Downsides to this option include (1) multiple regional seminaries are likely to be quite expensive to establish and maintain; (2) implementation would inevitably take many years, which would not solve the imminent priest shortage problem; and (3) it is unlikely to attract the kind of older, established man described in this report, for whom relocation and full-time studies are not a viable option. Thus, smaller and



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more regionally-focused regional seminaries may be worth considering over the long-term, but only as one component of a solution, rather than the only path forward.

Undoubtedly, more alternatives may be worth considering, as well. I present these options not as the only way forward, but as a thought exercise to contribute to the finding of a solution (or multiple solutions) to the priest shortage crisis that is emerging.