

THE COMPANION

Companions of Christ Newsletter – Winter 2024



God Is on the Move—and So Are We



Above and on the cover: The Companions of Christ pray together at their summer conference at Broom Tree Retreat Center near Irene, SD.

The past several months call to mind a quote from St. John Henry Newman: “Here below, to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Or, as another friend put it in his Christmas letter this year, “Life is a series of adjustments.”

God is at work among the Companions of Christ. This November, our brother, Father Jeff Huard, was called home, the first of the Companions to pass from this life. His priesthood impacted so many, and we are sorrowful, of course—but what a blessing to know that, God willing, he will be interceding for us for eternity! You can read more about his life and legacy on the next page.

The Lord continues his generosity in terms of vocations: Currently four transitional deacons are in formation to be Companions. Deacons Alex Rasset, Ryan Sustacek, Nick Vance, and Joe Wappes bring new life to our community, changing it and each of us for the better. They are also profiled here.

Finally, as Archbishop Bernard Hebda recently shared, three Companions priests are headed north to the Diocese of Crookston for the next three years. At the request of Bishop Andrew Cozzens and after much discernment, Father David Blume, Father Tom Niehaus, and Father Josh Salonek will be moving to Bemidji this summer, fulfilling a desire that has been in our collective hearts for years to be a blessing beyond our boundaries as missionary priests.

Archbishop Hebda shared a number of reasons for permitting us to serve in this way—first and foremost, that the need for priests in the Crookston diocese is real and immediate. We need priests locally as well, but 13 seminarians are preparing for ordination this year, and the Companions continue to draw men from outside the area and the state to serve as priests here in the Archdiocese. We believe we are called to share our abundance.

We don’t know what tomorrow holds, and so much of life consists of saying yes even when the path before us is still unclear. Please pray for the repose of the soul of Father Jeff, for our four transitional deacons, and for our three missionaries and all our priests, that we may continue to serve willingly and well through all of life’s changes.

In Christ,
Father Peter Williams
Moderator

FATHER JEFF HUARD, 1955-2023

This past fall, the Companions of Christ mourned the passing of the first of their brother priests, Father Jeff Huard. As a long-time archdiocesan priest and spiritual director at the Saint Paul Seminary, he was the father of many vocations. Father Huard passed away on November 17, 2023. He was 68.

He was born in Duluth in 1955, graduated with honors from the College of St. Thomas in 1977, and spent several years in international outreach before returning to the US to pursue priesthood. He was ordained in 1994.

According to Father Tom Margevičius, Father Huard was instrumental in forming the Companions of Christ from their earliest days.

“I met Jeff Huard in spring of 1990, when he was living in Michigan and fellow Companion of Christ Kevin Finnegan was spending the year with him to learn the ins-and-outs of getting this fledgling brotherhood in Minnesota up and running,” he recalls. “I asked him what are the sort of qualities a start-up group like ours needs to have, and he said that was the wrong question. Instead, he said we should ask, ‘Who are the men whom the Lord has already sent us? And what are their gifts?’ and then build the brotherhood upon their gifts, rather than looking for some ideal, unrealistic dream.”

Father Huard was elected to serve as the second moderator of the Companions, after Father Finnegan, and capably helped to establish the group in the archdiocese and among their fellow priests. He was known for his wordplay, which was witty, humorous, and often profound. His selflessness and joy stood out to those who knew him and trusted his guidance.



“Numerous men credit their priesthood to Father Huard, both those who decided to enter the seminary because of his example, and others who, after entering seminary, experienced some difficulties in their formation, but thanks to his support, decided to stay the course and are now happy and healthy priests,” says Father Margevičius. “Jeff was at ease with himself, and that put others at ease around him. He suffered both in body and in soul, yet was not one to complain, but bore it with grace. Whenever someone phoned with serious troubles in their lives—and numerous people called him often!—he was present to them without focusing on himself.”

“It is our conviction that there is no such thing as a crisis of vocations. Christ is always calling. If few are taking up the priestly call, we need to look elsewhere for the problem. It is usually to be found in a crisis of preaching the Gospel and living its truths in such a way that a vocation can be heard and nurtured. Preaching and living the Gospel is of course a task for the whole Church—families, parishes, renewal movements, everyone.” – **Father Jeff Huard** (quoted on Catholic Online, December 25, 2003)

“I have been long inspired and convinced of the truth of the Scriptures that say two are better than one and a three-ply cord is not easily broken. Many proverbs also speak of the strength that comes when brother supports brother, for example, a brother helped is like a strong city. I have also experienced the power of Christ Jesus forming community—wherever the life of God is, community forms.” – **Father Jeff Huard** (quoted on Catholic Online, December 25, 2003)

“The greatest gift is to try to be like him, in his virtue, his kindness and his love.” – **Father Tony O’Neill** (about Father Jeff Huard, quoted in The Catholic Spirit, December 4, 2023)



weddings, funerals—the standard and wonderful rhythm of parish life that is never the same from day to day.”

Deacon Rasset also lived and served with Companions.

“I was assigned to Our Lady of the Lake in Mound with Father Peter Richards, and to St. Boniface in St. Bonifacius and Immaculate Conception in Watertown with Father Peter Hughes,” he says. “I lived in the rectory at Our Lady of the Lake with both of them, as well as Father Kyle Kowalczyk of St. Maximilian Kolbe in Delano. During the week I would assist at daily Mass in one of the three parishes. After Mass, if there were any meetings or parish events, I would usually attend those. Otherwise, I would spend time working on my homily for the weekend. I was able to preach every weekend, switching off between the three parishes. In the evenings I would frequently go to families’ homes for dinner, which I really enjoyed.”

“I was so blessed by my experience in the parish. Getting to proclaim the Gospel and preach the homily every weekend was a huge gift. Preaching made me so eager to share Jesus Christ and his message of salvation to his people. I also loved just spending time with

parishioners and families—it is such a blessing to be welcomed into so many people’s lives.”

Deacon Sustacek was assigned to St. Therese in Deephaven with Father Lenny Andrie. Typically, their days began with prayer and spiritual reading, leading into the morning Mass. Then, each day looked different.

“Sometimes it was a meeting or two, sometimes preparation time for a talk or a homily, sometimes a funeral or a home visit. In the evening, one of my favorite parts of the summer was sharing meals with families and Father. Hearing about their love for God and their contagious joy was a highlight for sure,” he says.

Top left: Newly ordained deacons Nicholas Vance, Alexander Rasset (facing away), and Ryan Sustacek greet each other at their Ordination Mass at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Minneapolis in May 2023. (Photo courtesy of Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit.) Bottom right: Deacon Joe Wappes is ordained in Rome in September 2023. (Photo courtesy of the Pontifical North American College.) All four transitional deacons are completing preparations for priestly ordination this spring and are in formation as Companions of Christ.

MARKED MEN

Four aspiring Companions share their first few months as deacons on the way to priesthood

Last May, 16 men from the Saint Paul Seminary were ordained to the transitional diaconate, including 11 from the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. Ordination to the diaconate occurs through the sacrament of Holy Orders, so transitional deacons are marked men—branded as deacons forever, even after they become priests.

Serving as deacons in their final months of formation opens new opportunities to experience ordained ministry firsthand. Four new deacons—Alexander Rasset, Ryan Sustacek, Nicholas Vance, and Joseph Wappes—are also in formation for the Companions of Christ. Three of the four were ordained in May and served as summer deacons in parishes around the Archdiocese; the fourth, Deacon Wappes, was ordained in Rome last fall, where he is studying at the Pontifical North American College.

A NEW SEASON

Deacon Vance served at St. Michael Catholic Church in St. Michael, living in community with three Companions priests, Father Brian Park, Father Connor McGinnis, and Father Joseph Zabinski of St. Albert in Albertville.

“No two days were the same, but there were certainly common elements, like Morning Prayer and a holy hour together, as well as Mass,” he recalls. “Though we would bump into each other a lot throughout the day, we would still seek intentional fraternal time several times a week in order to touch base, spend time together, and support one another in ministry. I would go to meetings at the parish and shadow the pastor on various activities. I would spend time with parishioners, either throughout the day or for dinner in the evenings. I spent a week with the students out at Extreme Faith Camp. I would do homily prep, prayer ministry, youth events, baptisms,



“As a deacon, I was preaching multiple times a week, baptizing, visiting homes, spending time with the youth group and the elderly. After being in a seminary environment for seven years, getting an extended taste of ministry was amazing. God is madly in love with His people, and the people—myself included—are starving to receive that love!”

SUMMER FRUITS

According to Deacon Vance, summer deacon assignments serve two purposes: first, to get an extended experience of full-time ministry as a cleric, and second, to shadow an established and experienced pastor as he leads a parish.

“I got to sit in on plenty of meetings, brainstorming sessions, marriage prep, you name it. I was able to ask questions and workshop different ideas as I was gaining more of an understanding of everything that goes into running a parish,” he says. “My biggest takeaway was the value of being a stable presence for people. People want to know that their priests and deacons care about them, and that is often manifested in how they choose to spend their time and being present with them.”

“After having been in seminary for seven years preparing for a life of parish ministry, it was very exciting and life-giving to be able to put into practice what I’ve been preparing for,” says Deacon Rasset. “Another special grace from the summer was getting to baptize five children. It still has me in awe how generous God is to his little ones in that He is pleased to pour out His grace upon them and bestow the gift of divine life won for them by Jesus Christ. And it was so humbling that God used me as the minister to bestow that gift!”

For Deacon Sustacek, his service in Deephaven was a deeper affirmation of his call to priesthood.

“This summer was an experience of being a bridge for people to receive and encounter the love of God: through prayer, teaching, the sacraments, preaching, and living life,” he says. “This summer made me excited to spend the rest of my time in service to God and His Church, to make Him known and loved—it was another confirmation from God that my heart was made to do this!”

A DEACON ABROAD

While his brother seminarians were being ordained in Saint Paul, Joseph Wappes was finishing his third year of theological studies in Rome. He spent last summer as a seminarian at St. Jude of the Lake in Mahtomedi, assisting Companions priest Father Chad VanHoose with liturgies, spending time with the youth and families, visiting the homebound, and being involved in other activities around the parish. He went back to Italy at the end of August to continue his studies and prepare for



Deacons Rasset, Sustacek, and Vance pray with the other new deacons at their Ordination Mass.

diaconate ordination in Rome at the end of September.

“I live at the Pontifical North American College with about 100 other seminarians from the United States,” Deacon Wappes says. “Our seminary is located just a few minutes away from the Vatican, where we have a marvelous view overlooking the city of Rome. On a typical day, we have Morning Prayer and Mass together at the seminary before walking a few miles across the city to the university where we attend theology classes. The afternoons and evenings are generally open for study, prayer, meetings with priests, doing ministry with American college students who study abroad in Rome, and spending time with the other seminarians.

“While day-to-day life often looks very similar to how it did before being ordained, I am so grateful for the chances to preach and to minister as a deacon. One blessing of doing my formation in Rome is being so connected to the Universal Church. A moment that manifested this reality was when I had the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel at the Opening Mass for the Angelicum University, where I attend class, presided by Cardinal Walter Kasper. I am also very grateful for the chance to have served as a deacon at Mass at the tombs of some of my favorite saints, whose priestly examples inspire me to be a holy priest: St. Peter, St. Paul, St. John Bosco, and St. Charles Borromeo. These moments have been very special in helping me to fix my eyes on the priesthood and to be formed into the priest that God desires me to be.”

UNITED FOR CHRIST



From Rome to Glacier, at recreation or at rest, the Companions of Christ are brothers dwelling in unity.





The Companions of Christ

DIOCESAN PRIESTS LIVING IN FRATERNITY

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Lenten Morning of Reflection



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Holy Spirit Catholic Church

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SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24 | 9:00AM - 12:30PM