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St. John's Seminary, the Boston Archdiocese's major seminary, in August started an introductory "propaedeutic year" for men studying for the priesthood. The U.S. bishops in 2019 approved a Program of Priestly Formation to improve spiritual and human formation for seminarians. (Greta Gaffin)

by Greta Gaffin

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The Boston archdiocese's primary Catholic seminary has launched a new yearlong program to better introduce Catholic men studying for the priesthood to the basics of faith formation, spiritual direction and service to the local community.

[St. John's Seminary](#) in August started the "propaedeutic year" (preparatory and introductory teaching), following the U.S. bishops' 2019 approval of a new [Program of Priestly Formation](#), which envisions a program of at least one year to help improve spiritual and human formation for seminarians.

Within the bishops' conference guidelines, each individual seminary has significant room to create a program as they see best for their students. In Boston, this looks like prayer, community, academics — and service.

Once a week, seminarians in the program head to [St. Francis House](#), a homeless shelter and services provider in downtown Boston.



Fr. Michael MacInnis directs the new introductory year program for seminarians at St. John's Seminary. (Courtesy of St. John's Seminary)

"Jesus shows us how to be human in the world. We are called to profound service to those on the margins," said Fr. Michael MacInnis, director of the new program. "By doing that, we discover Christ within us and in others."

Once a month, the seminarians also participate in [Encounter Boston](#), a ministry to the homeless centered around the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston's South End. As part of the initiative, seminarians walk around the city to have conversations with the men and women on the street.

"It's not so much providing material assistance, but rather addressing the poverty of loneliness," said Fr. Michael Zimmerman, who leads the archdiocese's [Encounter Ministry](#) and is also the assistant vocations director for the archdiocese and an adjunct professor of Scripture at the seminary.

"We confront our own poverty, and our own inability to fix anyone's problems," he said.



Fr. Michael Zimmerman leads the Boston Archdiocese's Encounter Ministry.  
(Courtesy of St. John's Seminary)

The academic aspect of the propaedeutic program is also structured to reflect the changing backgrounds of men entering seminary.

"We're not presuming they have any familiarity with the Bible," Zimmerman said. "We're starting from scratch." Only about one-third of the applicants to the Archdiocese of Boston attended a Catholic college or university, and a significant number have undergraduate degrees in scientific fields, he said.

The fall coursework focuses on the Old Testament and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the spring coursework will involve more teaching on the catechism and New Testament. It is intended to be more spiritually-focused than strictly academic. Regular reading of Scripture aloud is a part of the class, intended to prepare them for the ministry of lector and, later, to read the Gospel as a priest.

This also means a restructuring of the next academic stage, formerly known as pre-theology and now known as discipleship. The seminary hopes to be able to offer more classes related to Catholic literature and arts, as well as courses specifically related to the religious tradition of the Northeast.

The propaedeutic program is also intended to foster brotherhood and deep faith formation.

"It's based on the grace found in religious life," said MacInnis. The members of the program have their own wing of the dorm with their own chapel, with mass, the liturgy of the hours, and Holy Hours, he said. They also share in a weekly Bible study.

In January, the program participants are scheduled for a two-week pilgrimage to Rome, Assisi and the Holy Land, intended to strengthen their faith life as well as participate in service. The program year will end with an eight-week program at [St. Anselm's Abbey](#), a Benedictine monastery in New Hampshire.

MacInnis, a former Franciscan, has served at St. John's Seminary since 2016, first as a director of spiritual formation and then as director of human formation. He was also director of the postulancy program for the Order of Friars Minor 2010-16; he was incardinated in the Archdiocese of Boston in 2022.

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The assistant director of the propaedeutic program is Fr. John MacInnis (no relation), who served as spiritual director at the [Pontifical North American College](#) in Rome 1974-79, director of the office for ecumenical and inter-religious affairs for the archdiocese in the 1980s, and as spiritual director and head of spiritual formation at St. John's Seminary 1991-2000.

They are assisted by two laymen. One is [Vincent Lynch](#), a retired Boston College social work professor who previously headed noted conferences on both the HIV/AIDS crisis and the ramifications of clergy sexual abuse. The other is [Mike Manning](#), a Northeastern University professor of engineering leadership who served with the U.S. Army in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Three seminarians, all from the archdiocese, are participating in the initial St. John's program.

"There is a universal interest and desire to participate," said Fr. Eric Cadin, the archdiocese's vocations director. "It's really heartening, because it does add an extra year," he added. The archdiocese sees about 12-16 men starting the application process. He had initially worried potential candidates would see this new program negatively.

About 10-20% of applicants want to attend [Pope St. John XXIII National Seminary](#) in the Boston suburb of Weston, which educates priest candidates over 30. It does not have a propaedeutic program.

St. John's Seminary also hosts seminarians from other dioceses, both U.S. and international, as well as candidates from religious orders.