

# Oblate, Assumption have sixth largest U.S. seminary enrollment

BY J. MICHAEL PARKER  
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Oblate School of Theology (OST) and Assumption Seminary have been ranked in the 10 largest Catholic theological schools in the nation for the second time in four years, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University (CARA). According to a chart on the center's Web site, <http://cara.georgetown.edu>, Oblate made the list, placing number six with 109 seminarians for the academic year 2007-08. Final registration figures are not yet available for this fall, but 106 had registered by Aug. 19, and several more were expected shortly, Oblate registrar James Oberhausen said.

What's more, Oblate's enrollment increase from the previous year — a net gain of 23 seminarians — led the top 10. Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon was second with 17, and most of the others gained two to four each. Two lost seminarians.

The honors belong to Assumption, too, because the 93-year-old archdiocesan seminary and the 105-year-old theology school operated by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate are partners in training seminarians, not only for the Archdiocese of San Antonio and the Oblates, but for nearly 20 other dioceses and several other religious congregations.

Assumption Seminary is a formation center where seminarians live together and are formed and mentored spiritually, morally and pastorally to live the vocation of a Catholic priest. Oblate provides their professional graduate-level theology and philosophy training.

"The continued steady growth in the numbers of men preparing for the priesthood in San Antonio reflects a renewed effort to present a solid Catholic identity and a pastoral program oriented to serve a diverse Catholic community," Archbishop José H. Gomez said.

"This increase in numbers, and academic excellence in the formation faculty at Assumption Seminary, have made an impressive contribution to the spiritual and pastoral care of the seminarians and helped them to have better academic results at Oblate School of Theology."

The archbishop said that these factors, plus improved collaboration between the faculties of the two institutions, will lead to an even more solid program and will allow Assumption and OST to maintain a leading role among priestly formation and education institutions.

Although this year is the first time both schools' leaders learned of their presence in the

*'This ranking is a wonderful sign of growth for both Assumption Seminary and Oblate School of Theology.'*

**FATHER RON ROLHEISER**  
President, OST

top 10, *Today's Catholic* learned recently that Oblate and Assumption were eighth nationally in 2003-04, with 96 seminarians, according to a chart provided to *Today's Catholic* by CARA researcher Mary Gautier.

The chart shows the schools' rankings since the 1997-98 academic year.

The 2003-04 school year is believed to be the first time the two San Antonio schools earned a top 10 ranking, since school officials have no statistics indicating such rankings previously. As recently as seven years ago, the San Antonio schools were 27th, but in the past decade, while the rankings have fluctuated, the schools have remained among the top 20 every year except for 1999-2002.

The nation's largest Catholic theological schools, based on the 2007-08 figures, are Mundelein Seminary, Chicago, 204; Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., 159; Pontifical North American College, Rome, 157; Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, 131; Immaculate Conception Seminary, South Orange, N.J., 123; Oblate School of Theology/Assumption Seminary, San Antonio, 109; Sacred Heart School of Theology, Hales Corners, Wisc., 108; St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, Denver, Colo., 103; St. Meinrad School of Theology, St. Meinrad, Ind., 95; and Mount Angel Seminary, St. Benedict, Ore., 95.

"This is a wonderful sign of growth for both of us," said Father Ron Rolheiser, OST president. "After many years of drought, with few vocations, we've had a marked and generous increase, which is a positive, hopeful sign for the entire Catholic community in this part of the country."

For the theology school, Father Rolheiser said, the sustained enrollment growth

**Auxiliary Bishop Oscar Cantú, Barbara Spinner and Father Larry Christian, Assumption Seminary rector/president seen at the Assumption Seminary Gala Aug. 14.**

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is a definite sign that a school of this type is needed since San Antonio is the epicenter of the confluence of Anglo and Hispanic cultures and ecclesiologies.

But while in one sense Oblate and Assumption are two different entities, he said, "together we're one project; we're analogous to a body breathing with two lungs."

He said it shouldn't be surprising that the schools have reached this pinnacle of success because both are well-established Catholic teaching centers in a heavily Catholic part of the country.

"We're 105 years old and Assumption is 93 years old. We should have a reputation by now, and we're in a growing Catholic community," Father Rolheiser said. All those factors combined, he said, should work to keep the enrollment growing.

Father Larry Christian, Assumption's rector/president, said being among the 10 largest training centers for priestly ministry in the nation is a significant milestone for both schools. "It adds a lot to our credibility, and it definitely puts San Antonio on the map as an important leader for the Catholic Church in the United States."

Assumption's average enrollment hovered at 44 from 1973-2006. Then, from 2006 to 2007, enrollment jumped from 51 to 76, the largest enrollment in 36 years, and also boasted its largest incoming class in 36 years with 26.

That academic year had hardly started before Father Christian reported eight more candidates preparing to enroll in January and six U.S. bishops who had never sent seminarians to the San Antonio school asking about enrollment for 2007-08.

Catholic University of America sociologist Dean Hoge

said in late 2006 that no other Catholic seminary in the United States was experiencing such a growth trend at the time.

Father Christian attributes the growth trend to the fact that the two sister institutions have been offering a special type of priestly formation with a bilingual, bicultural ambience for so long and that the whole Catholic Church in the United States urgently needs such expertise, thanks to a flood of new immigration from Latin America that is overwhelming dioceses all over the nation.

"The population of San Antonio and South Texas reflects what the rest of the country is going to be like 20 years down the road," Father Christian said.

Another factor is the close personal accompaniment of faculty members of both Oblate and Assumption in the continuing formation process.

"The students really feel it; they experience it every day. Our pastoral formation program is among the strongest in the nation. The ratio of spiritual directors to students is very low, so the students get closer attention," he said.

In addition, Father Christian said many South Texas Catholics have begun to realize that Assumption and Oblate are vitally important resources for the whole community.

It's important, he said, that the two institutions are gaining higher visibility across the community because the future of Catholicism in South Texas depends on their continued success in preparing priests for the growing Catholic community.

"Often people become aware of the two schools because our students spend a year working in parish internships,"

he said. The internships involve living in parishes and gaining practical experience in collaborative ministries with priests, nuns, brothers and lay men and women. This not only raises parishioners' awareness of the seminary and the theology school, but it also plants seeds for future vocations among young men who watch the seminarians do their ministry.

"The young men are coming, but both Oblate and Assumption need the continued support of the Catholic community — meaning financial, moral and spiritual support," Father Christian noted.

One other positive note that has San Antonio Catholic leaders beaming is that Assumption also has one of the best retention rates of newly ordained priests, he said. It's seen fewer graduates leave the priesthood in their first five years after ordination than the vast majority of seminaries.

"We haven't had a single ordinand (newly-ordained priest) leave in the past eight years," Father Christian said. Statistics indicate that more priests leave the priesthood in their first five years after ordination than in later years of their ministry.

"Last year, sociologist Hoge reported that the national rate of departure among priests in the first five years was 1 in 7. Our rate was 1 in 29, which means that our retention was four times better than the norm," Father Christian said.

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