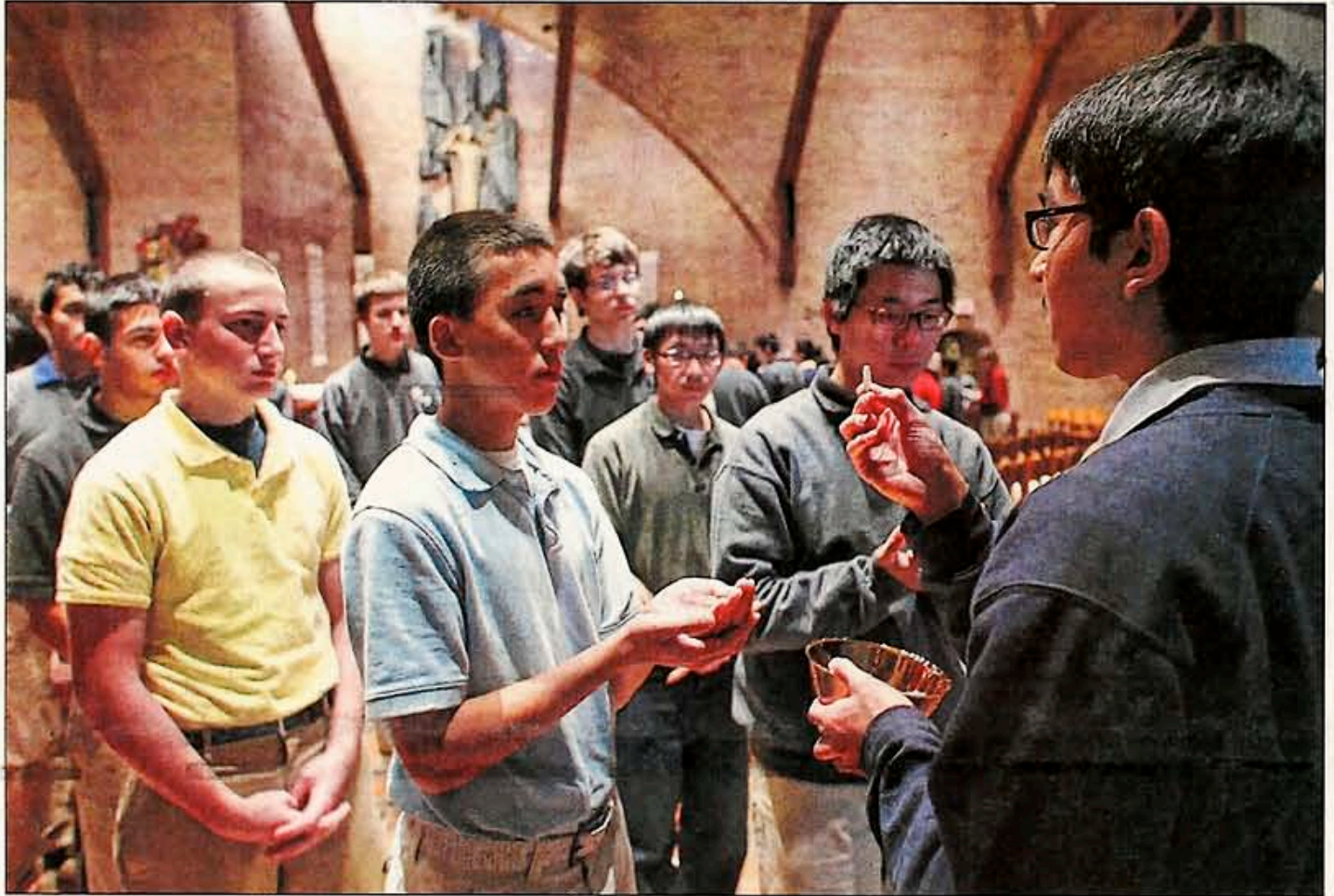


St. Lawrence adapts to times to mold boys  
into men of Catholic tradition

# Transformation



MARK HOFFMAN / MHOFFMAN@JOURNALSENTINEL.COM

Students receive Communion last month at St. Lawrence Seminary High School in Mount Calvary in Fond du Lac County. About 200 students attend the Roman Catholic boarding school for boys, which is the last one of its kind in Wisconsin.

By **ANNYSA JOHNSON** ♦ [anjohanson@journalsentinel.com](mailto:anjohanson@journalsentinel.com)

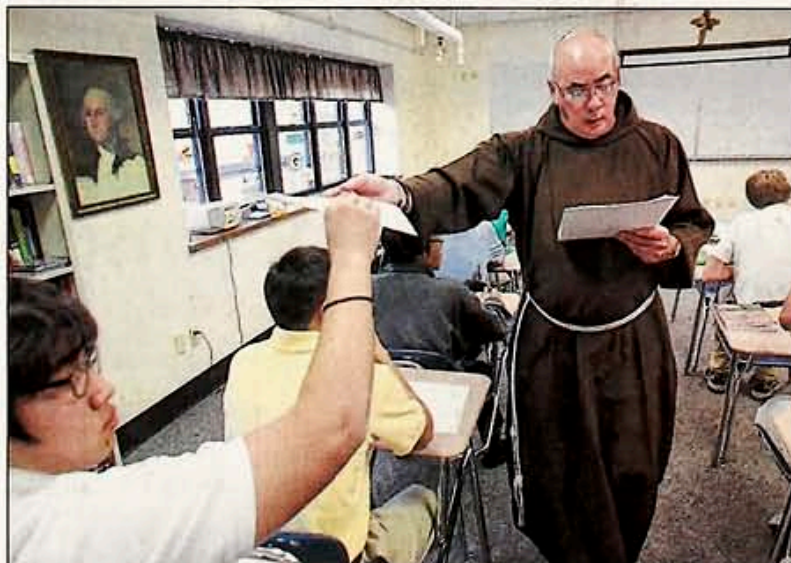
**M**ount Calvary — Today's topic is bullying. And Father Dennis Druggan walks the aisles of this all-boys classroom eliciting his students' thoughts on this: the suicide of a young girl taunted by her classmates for sleeping with her friend's boyfriend.

It's a frank and sobering discussion in which the boys explore issues of human dignity and cruelty, and the tendency to marginalize those who are different.

This could be a contemporary ethics course in any high school in America. But at St. Lawrence Seminary High School, in rural Fond du Lac County, the mission goes beyond education.

Druggan's hope is that at least a few of these boys will follow him into the Catholic priesthood, preferably as a Capuchin friar, and that those who don't will go on to be leaders in the church and their communities.

"Our mission is to help young boys become men in the Catholic tradition," said Druggan, who graduated from St. Lawrence in 1974 and has served as its rector and president for nearly two decades.



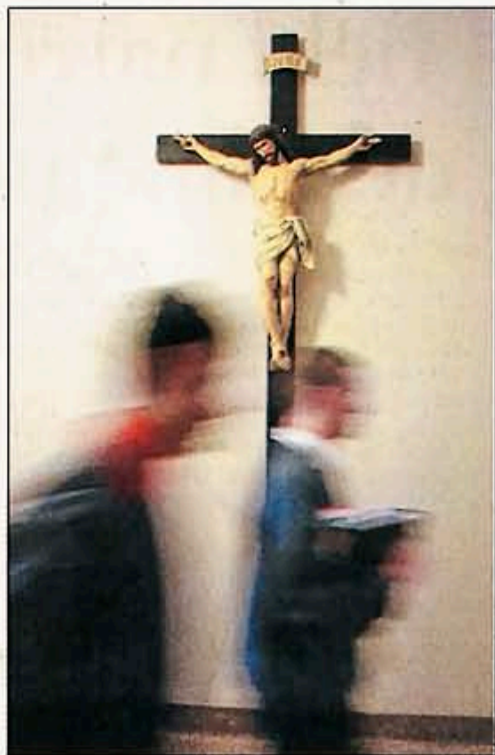
Father Dennis Druggan hands back papers in his morality and ethics class at St. Lawrence Seminary High School. Druggan graduated from the school in 1974.

## VANISHING WISCONSIN

This story is part of "Vanishing Wisconsin," an occasional series that takes a closer look at traditions, occupations, cultures and icons that make up the fabric of Wisconsin life but are on the verge of disappearing. If you have a story idea, e-mail Mark Hoffman at [mhoffman@journal-sentinel.com](mailto:mhoffman@journal-sentinel.com).

**More photos**  
See a photo gallery of St. Lawrence High at [www.jsonline.com/photos](http://www.jsonline.com/photos).

Please see **ST. LAWRENCE, 6A**



Two students only appear to be heading quickly to class at St. Lawrence Seminary High School, where there are high expectations for behavior and learning.



Students work on a physics problem in a class taught by Gereon Welhouse at St. Lawrence Seminary High School.

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From page 1  
**ST. LAWRENCE**  
**School, boys see change**

"We want them to do some discerning about what God is asking them to do with their lives."

St. Lawrence, with 200 students, is the nation's oldest and largest Catholic boarding school seminary. Founded by the Capuchins in 1860, it's one of just six free-standing seminary schools now operating in the United States — down from more than 100 in the 1960s.

It draws boys from across the nation and the world with a mix of prep school academics, religious studies, and emphases on structure, social skills and discipline.

The school is not for everyone, said Mary Voell, director of public relations who, like many of the people who work here, have family members

who attended St. Lawrence. "Most parents don't realize that we are partnering with them in raising their sons," she said. "We try to model them, shape them, frame for them what it means to be an ethically and spiritually whole person."

**The regimen**

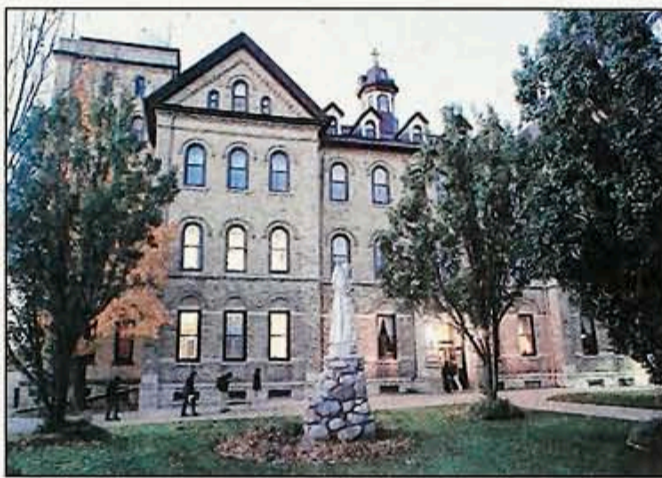
The first thing you notice, as 200 boys file into the cafeteria on this October day, is how quiet they are. They make their way through the line, sit down at prearranged tables for a quick bite, and head out for their afternoon classes.

It's midway through a typical day that begins with 6:30 a.m. breakfast followed by a prayer service or Mass.

Before lights-out (in Spartan dorms even their parents can't enter except on specific days), the boys will have put in a full day that includes school and homework, sports, music, chores, free time and an evening prayer service or Mass.

Every class and activity begins with prayer; and every interaction with an adult is expected to be polite, even solicitous: It's "yes," not "yeah"; make eye contact; hold the door.

It's easy to assume these



Students head to class in the predawn light at St. Lawrence Seminary High School, which is observing its 150th year.

boys are angels, but scratch the surface and they're not much different from their peers at many high schools.

Though they're all Catholic, some are devoutly religious, others barely so. They talk about music and sports and girls. They argue and fight, though physical altercations can be cause for dismissal — as can sexual activity, drugs or alcohol.

They're on YouTube and Facebook. Even the occasional vulgarity can be heard when no adults are in earshot.

"We allow them to be boys, but boys test the limits," said Father Gary Wegner, who as dean of students handles disciplinary matters and devised a system of rotating fraternities to encourage friendships, cooperation and healthy competition.

"You have to find that balance between structure and letting them have some fun," he said.

The expectations can make for a tough adjustment for some students.

"I got into a little bit of trouble when I first got here," said senior Josh Perez of Chicago, who earned detentions for having a racier-than-allowed music CD and calling one of the friars "dad" during class. As in (attitude inflection here) "OK dad."

But most adjust, and many come to regard their classmates as a kind of family, said boys gathered around tables carving pumpkins later in the day.

"After you've been home for a while, there are fewer things you don't like about school," said Luke Weldon, 18, of Winamac, Ind. "By the end of summer, you're ready to come back."

Few of the boys actually go on to be priests, though they are strongly encouraged to consider it. And some are swayed by their experiences there.

"I'm very open," said senior John Khong of New Orleans, who plans to study biology at Creighton University and sign on to a program to explore life as a Capuchin. "I never would have

thought about being a priest before," he said. "I always thought that I'd get married."

**On top of the hill**

Set on 80 acres atop a wooded hill, St. Lawrence is a vestige of an earlier time, when Catholic families and the Church groomed boys for the priesthood in adolescence.

As recently as the 1960s, nearly 122,000 boys attended at least 122 high school seminaries across the country, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. Today enrollment hovers around 500.

Seminaries closed over the next decades as a variety of factors in society — from declining interest in the priesthood to greater understandings about the psychosexual development of boys — affected enrollments and finances.

St. Lawrence survived, with the help of a healthy endowment, by changing its emphasis from strictly priestly formation to leadership development in a college prep, boarding school setting.

"They refocused the whole operation," said alumnus Bill Thorn, associate professor of journalism at Marquette University, who sent his sons there and has written about the school's evolution.

"They changed the internal structure, the way the boys related to each other ... they adopted a leadership training program."

Like a number of Catholic boarding schools, St. Lawrence was stung by a sexual abuse scandal, in the 1990s, when two dozen men came forward to allege they'd been molested at the school over a period of decades. St. Lawrence became the subject of a failed civil racketeering lawsuit, and an investigation sponsored by the Capuchins found 14 allegations of sexual abuse involving six friars between 1968 and 1986, according to news reports at the time.

The school says it's had no incidents since then, and that it's open with parents about its history and has taken extensive steps to safeguard its students.

Victim advocates, including Peter Isely of the group

Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, who says he was abused at the school in the 1970s, remain critical of the Capuchins, saying the order was slow to respond to complaints and never fully and publicly divulged the extent of the problems.

**Adapting to times**

Today's St. Lawrence, which is celebrating its 150th year, looks much different from the institution of Druggan's day. It's smaller, by about 100 students. It's more ethnically diverse with enrollment split roughly in thirds among Anglos, Latinos and Asians — a reflection of the emerging face of the Catholic Church, says Druggan.

It's more academically rigorous, and most of the instructors are now lay teachers, both women and men, rather than friars.

Tuition, at \$10,000, is comparable to many Catholic high schools, but no one is turned away because of inability to pay, according to Druggan.

"We have children whose parents are multimillionaires, and others whose parents have been homeless," he said.

Central to the St. Lawrence experience for each of the boys is their spiritual development, nurtured not just by daily prayer but an obligation to live their faith in their communities.

In keeping with the Capuchin charism of serving the poor and vulnerable, they work with disabled students through Special Olympics, volunteer at meal programs, including St. Benedict the Moor's in Milwaukee; and build and rehab central city housing.

"It really opens their world view," said Rick Voell, who is Mary Voell's brother and a St. Lawrence alum who teaches religion and psychology and coordinates the service ministry projects.

Voell, who sent his two sons to the school, said the experience has a profound effect on the boys.

"I really see a transformation in how their hearts are touched by those they serve," he said. "Their sense of compassion, their sense of the dignity of the poor, is incredible."

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