

FAITH FACT

*First diocesan priests to
be ordained at St. Mark
Seminary Chapel in its
61-year history*

Path to Priesthood

DEACONS KEVIN HOLLAND AND JOE PETRONE
JOYFULLY EMBRACE PRIESTHOOD IN MIDST OF PANDEMIC

PHOTO BY RICK KLEIN

BY MARY
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RICK KLEIN

Kathy Holland of Erie still remembers Joey Petrone, a kindergartener she taught in the Wattsburg Area School District more than two decades ago.

Joey's mom, Cheryl Petrone, fondly recalls the kind-hearted Mrs. Holland. The teacher sometimes asked Joey to read a story to his classmates while she tended to other duties.

"Joe was someone she could trust, and the class would listen," Cheryl Petrone says.

The two women met again this past year, having been brought together by their sons: Joseph A. Petrone, now 29, and Kevin O. Holland, 26. The men were ordained together in 2019 to the transitional diaconate for the Diocese of Erie, preparing for their May 29 ordination as Catholic priests.

The chance of this convergence may have seemed remote many years ago.

Joe Petrone was baptized Methodist and raised in Wesleyville. He attended the Lawrence Park United Methodist Church and graduated from public elementary and high schools.

Kevin Holland was baptized Catholic and raised on Erie's west side. He graduated from Our Lady of Peace School and Cathedral Prep before enrolling at age 18 in St. Mark Seminary and Gannon University in Erie.

"It's all incredible how Kevin and Joe are now classmates. We've come full circle," Kathy Holland says.

That circle of life brought the two young men from disparate backgrounds into the same orbit at Gannon University.

In 2010, Deacon Petrone enrolled at Gannon after spending a year studying aerospace engineering at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida. In 2012, Deacon Holland entered Gannon, majoring in history.

"I knew I wasn't supposed to be an aerospace engineer the rest of my life," Deacon Petrone says. "At Gannon, the first class I took was Introduction to Sacred Scriptures with



Father Jason Glover. That was the first time I got to really experience what the Catholic Church teaches. It fit so much better with my world view."

As a biology major, Deacon Petrone loved Pope St. John Paul II's focus on faith and reason working together. Having been raised as a biblical fundamentalist with a Pentecostal minister as a grandfather, this was all new territory. But it expanded on his faithful upbringing. His mom ran the youth program at the Lawrence Park United Methodist Church, where he had been active for many years. He regularly was selected to give the Sunday youth homilies.

Deacon Petrone became active in campus ministry at Gannon and felt called to seek reception into the Catholic Church. In April 2012, he was confirmed and received first Eucharist. Two years later, he earned his undergraduate degree in biology, and in 2016, a degree in philosophy.



In 2016, Deacon Holland also graduated from Gannon, earning a degree in history. Both men then went on to major seminary: Deacon Petrone to Saint Vincent Seminary in Latrobe, and Deacon Holland to Saint Mary's Seminary & University in Baltimore, Maryland.

In the midst of the current coronavirus pandemic, both completed their master's degrees online and graduated in May. And because of the pandemic, their ordination to the priesthood has been moved to St. Mark Seminary Chapel.

For Deacon Holland, the journey to the Catholic priesthood was more a straight line. Nonetheless, there were difficult and inspiring lessons along the way.

He first remembers thinking about becoming a priest when he was 10. He felt what he calls "a natural pull" to become an altar server at Our Lady of Peace Parish. Then, at age 12, a family crisis helped plant the seeds to serve the

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DEACON
KEVIN HOLLAND

church and its people.

Deacon Holland's older sister Katy underwent a heart transplant at age 14. He was a sixth-grader at the time and was overwhelmed by the generosity of the parishioners.

"I was born into a house where the intention was to cherish life and to cherish Katy's life and make sure she lived as long as possible," Deacon Holland says. "It was impactful to see how OLP and the parishioners backed up our whole family, with dinners appearing at our front door and people picking me up from basketball practice. It made me see just how powerful a parish can be and it made me want to be a part of that type of community."

Katy Holland, now 29, experienced a successful transplant. Today, she is happy to be watching her brother become a priest.

"I am honored that my situation played a role in Kevin's discernment journey, and I'm thrilled that he found the positive out of it," she says.

In high school, Deacon Holland started taking service trips, first to Kentucky with a diocesan youth group led by Father Mike DeMartinis, and then to other places, including the Young People Who Care community in Frenchville in the Diocese of Erie. He also went on mission excursions to Guatemala and to the Mission of Friendship, an outreach coordinated by the Diocese of Erie and the Archdiocese of Yucatán in Mérida, Mexico.

He attended two World Youth Days: in 2013 in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and in 2016 to Kraków, Poland. Last year, he and Joe Petrone — firmly en route to the priesthood — decided to travel to the Mission of Friendship.

"We wanted to experience the mission together," Deacon Holland says. †



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DEACON
JOSEPH PETRONE



DEACONS JOE PETRONE, LEFT, AND KEVIN HOLLAND VISITED THE MISSION OF FRIENDSHIP IN MEXICO AND HAD A CHANCE TO TAKE IN THE SITES, TOO. HERE, THEY ARE PICTURED AT THE CHICHÉN ITZÁ RUINS.

Q&A

See next page
for Q & A with
the new priests.



with JOE PETRONE and KEVIN HOLLAND

FAITH: What is the greatest spiritual lesson we can learn from the coronavirus pandemic?

Joe Petrone: I'd say the biggest spiritual lesson we could learn is that there is always a silver lining. I have four immediate family members who are at high risk for developing a severe illness from COVID-19. That worries me more than I can say. But when I talk to them, we always end up talking about the good: parents who were able to be home to watch their children's first steps, neighbors who check in on other neighbors to make sure everyone is taken care of, the thousands of people who now take the time to call and check in on people. It shows that there is still a lot of good in humanity — and in all circumstances, we have many reasons to thank God.



Kevin Holland: The greatest spiritual lesson that I learned is how God can make the most of any trial. Even amidst this pandemic, I can see God's hand at work. I have been inspired to see the many parishioners in Meadville [his parish assignment] go out of their way to visit the church. While we are not at fault for the pandemic, we do have a choice in how we respond. I believe that the coronavirus can provide a spiritual awakening as it provides an opportunity for all of us to see the communal power of prayer as we all quarantine in our homes.

FAITH: Pope Francis recently decided that every Catholic priest preparing for service in the Vatican diplomatic corps must spend a year in ministry as a missionary. What do you think of that decision?

Joe: Pope Francis always says that priests must have the "smell of sheep." In order to serve people, you have to know them. The more you know them, the easier it is to make God known to them.



Kevin: Every time I've gone on a service trip, I've come back with a better perspective of myself and the community in which I currently live. Some people may ask, "Why do you need to go somewhere else? Aren't there people to serve here?" But sometimes when



you return you have a new lens through which you can see. So, the lens can help us to see where we are being successful and where we can still continue to grow.

FAITH: What do you bring to the priesthood?

Joe: First and foremost, I have a love for the Lord and a desire to share him with others. When we go out to people, we must bring the Lord to them. It's not an us-versus-them type of deal, where we just say, "Jesus loves you, but you can't do this or that." People my age are used to hearing from the church what they can't do, so I don't think they feel that God loves them. I want to share the personal love of the Lord with everyone.



Kevin: I bring a sense of openness and a different perspective because of the variety of service experiences I have had. There are a lot of people who have shaped me and molded me into who I am. I try not to forget the many lessons they have taught me. I pray that what I have learned will be evident in the advice I may give and in shared experiences. I hope I am able to help remind people that they're never alone in their trials, that people in the church are always willing to listen to whatever pains or joys they are going through.

FAITH: During your seminary years, the sex abuse scandal erupted in the Catholic Church. Did it ever make you second-guess your decision to become a priest?

Joe: Father Michael Kesicki [St. Mark Seminary rector] and Father Nicholas Rouch [vice rector] did a fantastic job in how they handled all the news that was coming out and keeping us in the loop. They were very concerned about how we would react to the news. There was never a moment that gave me pause toward becoming a priest. I have been associated with a lot of the good priests of the Diocese of Erie who were not on the list [of credibly accused clergy] and who were willing to stand up and wear the collar in public and not be afraid. If good men are willing to take that step and say, "Yes, I can do this, even if people might think bad things about me," then the priesthood will only get better.



Kevin: When I initially heard all of the news, I honestly had a sense of pause. That was probably natural. But my nerves calmed down and I got a better perspective that many of these situations occurred in the past. There was one interview I heard with Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Washington, D.C., who said he would never leave the

priesthood because of two priests who showed him the love of God when he was becoming a Catholic. He said he would remain in the priesthood so that those men did not die in vain. As for me, I know I wouldn't be here without the sacrifice and model of many good priests around me. That's the priesthood that I pray that I will emulate, the one that is sacrificial and showing the love of God to others. Yes, there are plenty of priests who have fallen before, but there are plenty who have made the church better. I pray that I may be one of those.

FAITH: What do you think of the Catholic Church today?

Joe: I think the Catholic Church needs people to be lit on fire with the Spirit. We need to teach people how to pray again. Prayer really has been



neglected. You can see that when people only come for an hour to Mass on a Sunday, and then not pray again until they come the next week. Church history is full of people converted because they were willing to put themselves out there. So, I think priests have to lead on this. How can we expect others to risk themselves for Christ if the priest isn't also willing to do it?

Kevin: The early church grew because it cared for the poor and it cared for the dying. If we focus on those neglected, then the love we show to them cannot help but be contagious to everyone else. I am hopeful, too, in that I have friends everywhere who are proudly Catholic and all that that means in our society. They are willing to be visible witnesses of their faith and make sacrifices in the workplace and everywhere. †