



---

## LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR A NEW WAY OF LIFE: PROPAEDEUTIC STAGE FORMATION AT MOUNT ANGEL SEMINARY

---

**OVERVIEW:** Mount Angel Seminary developed its new propaedeutic stage formation program in consultation with the bishops and vocation directors of our sending dioceses and with input from a variety of sources in keeping with the requirements of PPF6 “to lay a foundation for a new way of life by developing a life of prayer, study, fraternity and appropriate docility to formation” (PPF6 120). The program focuses on human formation and development of the spiritual life while integrating the intellectual and pastoral dimensions as well. In keeping with Mount Angel’s formation programs in general, it is centered on the Eucharist and communion, integrated by design, accompanied by a team, enriched by the seminary and hilltop community and supported by the prayers and rich ways of the Abbey.

**FORMATION TEAM:** The program is guided by a dedicated team who accompany the seminarians in every aspect of their formational journey. With his previous experience as vocation director and pastor, Fr. Michael Niemczak (Santa Fe) serves as the dedicated formation director for all the seminarians, lives and prays with the propaedeutic community and coordinates the entire program. Fr. William Dillard (San Diego) coordinates the spiritual dimension and serves as the program’s spiritual director for all with his expertise and extensive experience in spiritual formation. Dr. Katie Jo LaRiviere, who teaches literature at the seminary, is the academic dean for the stage who advises all of the seminarians in their intellectual formation and coordinates the academic program, with both the seminarians and other professors, and with her degree and experience in education as well, is able to ensure the classes are propaedeutic in nature, integrate the human and spiritual goals as well as the intellectual and meet the needs of the group and each individual.

**MOVEMENTS:** The program is based on the principle of gradualism and unfolds in four movements over the course of a full calendar year (PPF6 125). During the *first summer*, which has proven to be a key component of the program’s success this year<sup>1</sup>, the men are the only seminarians on the hilltop, with a highly structured horarium and emphasis on group activities, and so are able to bond and build themselves as a distinct cohort with their own personality. With the return of the other seminarians in the *fall*, they learn to be a distinct community within the larger community, joining the Abbey and seminary for some liturgies and activities, starting to build bonds with others and having some added flexibility in their schedules. In the *spring*, the focus shifts to building an internal locus of control as the seminarians have internalized the formational values and activities of the house and now start to include more of them on their own schedule or with the wider community, to prepare them for the stages of formation to come, while still retaining the support and encouragement of the propaedeutic house and group activities. Finally, in the *second summer*, each seminarian works with the program coordinator and his vocation director to develop a personalized 6-week formation plan in his local Church, including liturgy and prayer, personal growth and experiences in the parish setting and with charitable organizations designed to both allow him to get to know the diocese and start to develop that pastoral charity characteristic of priestly life and ministry, all the while accompanied by periodic check-ins and group zoom sessions with the program coordinator.

---

<sup>1</sup> When asked their reaction to learning the program would start in the summer, two months before other seminarians, of the 12 participants in the Seminary’s summer program, 6 responded negatively, 5 positively and 1 ambivalently; however, following the completion of the summer program, 11 of 12 “strongly agreed” and 1 “agreed” that it was a positive experience for them and all 12 “strongly agreed” that new seminarians should begin with the summer in future years.



**COMMUNITY:** While in the program, the seminarians live together on a separate floor in the Anselm dormitory as their own cohort with their own horarium including community Mass and Liturgy of the Hours, Holy Hour, study time and meals together, enabling them to build a strong, focused cohort, while still benefiting from the opportunities and broader interactions of the full seminary community in which they reside as a distinct, but not isolated, cohort. This fraternity of the propaedeutic house is further enriched by the many and varied opportunities for interaction and programs offered by the Library, Guesthouse, Mount Angel Institute and wider hilltop community and supported by the prayers and rich ways of the Abbey, providing a rich environment that is both pastoral and contemplative and so ideal for their personal and spiritual formation and development.

**HUMAN FORMATION:** Living in a propaedeutic community diverse in age, background, culture and experience reflective of the broader Church and the presbyterate into which they would be ordained and much like a family, and in the context of the even wider seminary and hilltop community, provides a rich environment and broad support for their human formation, which in keeping with the benchmarks for this stage focuses on developing self-knowledge and awareness, including such areas as personal history and family dynamics, relational and social skills, self-discipline, trust and transparency in formation and healthy habits of self-care. The program includes bi-weekly meetings with the formation director, weekly group conferences, regular counseling adapted to individual needs, life and activities in community and healthy habits of rest, exercise, recreation and technology use. The program also includes several outings for recreation and cultural enrichment. A mid-year check-in evaluation occurs with each diocese late in the fall semester to apprise of progress, and a formal evaluation and written report, addressing all the benchmarks of the stage, with specific commendations and recommendations for growth, is conducted at the end of the year for each seminarian in conjunction with the evaluation of other seminarians from their respective diocese at Mount Angel.

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION:** The program is designed to provide an introduction to the spiritual life and help the seminarian develop a solid life of prayer and deep relationship with Jesus Christ centered on the Eucharist through daily Mass, Morning and Evening Prayer and Holy Hour together, as well as Noon Prayer with the monks in the Abbey and time for private prayer, weekly spiritual conferences and small Men of Christ group meetings, biweekly spiritual direction with a dedicated spiritual director, days of recollection and annual retreat with the larger seminary community, time for and appreciation of silence, understanding of the priestly identity and vocation, chastity and other formation using the Augustine Way program. The program begins with two summer classes on prayer and the spiritual life and introduction to the Bible to lay the foundation and includes a class on the Catechism of the Catholic Church in the spring to further inculcate the faith into life and practice.

**INTELLECTUAL FORMATION:** As a stand-alone seminary with our own fully accredited academic program and a dedicated academic dean overseeing the courses in this stage of formation, the classes taken during this time are specifically designed and coordinated to be propaedeutic in nature, cover the appropriate course content and intellectual formation benchmarks of PPF6 and to carefully integrate the goals of human and spiritual formation as well. Our dedicated faculty are committed to meeting the needs of the group and each individual in the program. We are also specially suited to tailor our academic program to the needs of diverse learners and those needing support with English reading and writing. The classes are both pass/no pass and graded to help develop basic habits of study, intellectual curiosity and love of learning – benchmarks of this stage – as well as to ensure transferability of the course credits and prepare for the intellectual formation classes that follow in subsequent stages. They begin slowly, with five credits of spiritual classes in the first summer, then build gradually with 12 credits in the fall and 14 in the spring, anticipating the 16 credits per semester that follow in subsequent years. Besides the spiritual classes already mentioned which provide an understanding of prayer and the spiritual life, Christian doctrine and familiarity and love for the Scriptures, other courses in this program designed to foster human and spiritual formation as well as prepare for the study of philosophy and the liberal arts that follows include academic skills, written and oral communications, psychology of human development, US history and cultures, Latin and our two-semester sequence in Christian humanism that serves as the integrating focus of the whole curriculum, with focus on deep reading and intellectual engagement.



While maintaining emphasis on human and spiritual formation, our propaedeutic curriculum satisfies the requirements for full time status for visa and financial aid considerations, and the credits earned are sufficient that the BA can be obtained here in three more years (four years total) or less with transfer credits, or for those who already have an undergraduate degree, the program prepares them for the two years of philosophy studies that follow in the discipleship stage in either our certificate or MA (philosophy) program as discerned with their respective dioceses.

**PASTORAL FORMATION:** In this stage, pastoral formation focuses on developing the dynamic of self-giving through service to both the propaedeutic house and the broader community, both individually and in group settings, developing and demonstrating genuine concern for others and a spirit of generosity that form the beginning of pastoral charity. In addition to the classes taken, the breadth and diversity of the community offers a rich environment to help facilitate awareness and appreciation for the multicultural reality of the Church and begin working toward that cultural competency needed for priestly ministry today. The foundation laid during the year in the seminary is then further amplified in the parish setting back in the diocese during the second summer as described above, serving as a fitting capstone to this stage that prepares our men for a lifetime of formation to follow.

**ENDORSEMENTS:** The propaedeutic program at Mount Angel has been well-received by both seminarians and dioceses. Some comments include:

*“The Seminary has grasped the essence of what the propaedeutic stage is all about and it shows in the men who are about to go into the discipleship stage of their formation. I cannot recommend Mount Angel Seminary highly enough for offering our seminarians this excellent beginning as they follow Christ’s call to the priesthood.”*

– MOST REV. JOHN C. WESTER, ARCHBISHOP OF SANTA FE

*“I am happy to endorse the outstanding formation that Mount Angel provides to our seminarians from the Archdiocese of Las Vegas. The propaedeutic program has provided a solid foundation for our students as they prepare to enter their theological, human, pastoral and spiritual formation at Mount Angel Seminary. For over three decades I have chosen to send students to Mount Angel Seminary because it is a gold standard for seminarian formation in the United States. These years of experience have demonstrated to me that Mount Angel merits the support of Bishops, Vocation Directors, benefactors and friends alike.”*

– MOST REV. GEORGE LEO THOMAS, PHD, ARCHBISHOP OF LAS VEGAS

*“Mount Angel Seminary is a blessing and treasure to the Church! Our student is a bit older than the average candidate, but he has fit into the program well and has been blessed by his experience. The formation and spirituality have made a great difference in his preparation and journey toward priesthood. I am grateful to Mount Angel Seminary and the monastic Community for all that they do.”*

– MOST REV. JEFFREY FLEMING, BISHOP OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

*“The propaedeutic stage has produced a level of fraternity amongst the men that I have never seen in the seminary. This fraternal support, coupled with preparation through communal adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, mandatory study-hall, and intentional mealtimes with the men in the propaedeutic stage, build a solid foundation for the seminarians to build upon during the rest of their years in formation.”*

– REV. PETER JULIA, DIRECTOR OF VOCATIONS, ARCHDIOCESE OF PORTLAND IN OREGON

*“Mount Angel has established an outstanding curriculum with this past year’s Propaedeutic Program. The spiritual formation that our seminarian has received has been outstanding and we look forward to sending more vocations to Mount Angel Seminary.”*

– REV. MIKE GALBRAITH, DIRECTOR OF SEMINARIANS, ARCHDIOCESE OF ANCHORAGE-JUNEAU



## COMMENTS FROM SEMINARIANS IN THE PROPAEDEUTIC PROGRAM:

- *I have grown a deeper love for God and his Church and my relationship with Jesus Christ has become astronomically more intimate this year.*
- *The Propaedeutic Stage at Mount Angel is one of the most spiritually enriching experiences of my life.*
- *This year, I found that I have significantly improved in my self-knowledge.*
- *This transition has taken me from a life that was very limited in self-growth and has opened me up to learning how to walk the narrow path.*
- *It enabled me to build a foundation for the rest of my life and provided a stability of life that allowed me to discern this vocation.*
- *I have developed some of the most deep and healthy friendships I have ever had. I have never felt like I belonged somewhere more, I have never been more joyous to call a place my home.*
- *The teachers and the faculty have also been amazing to me in helping to grow my ability to relate to others in a devoted way.*

---

## CONTACT

---

For more information, please contact

Fr. Michael Niemczak, Program Coordinator, [michael.niemczak@mtangel.edu](mailto:michael.niemczak@mtangel.edu)

Fr. Jeff Eirvin, President-Rector, [jeff.eirvin@mtangel.edu](mailto:jeff.eirvin@mtangel.edu)

---

