



# SSS Grapevine

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## Setting up the Novitiate in Houston, Texas

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It has been several years since our province has had the gift of novices discerning a vocation as a religious of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament (SSS). The Spring 2024 *CARA Report* reported that 85 percent of religious orders **did not** have professions of religious vows last year, the least ever, with 144 [women (68) and men (76)]. We had a combined English-speaking novitiate with the provinces of Australia, Great Britain, and Ireland, ending in 2011. God has blessed us with interest in our community over these past two



(left to right) Father Thomas Smithson SSS, Father John Thomas Lane SSS, Father Christian Christopher SSS, Father Joseph Doan SSS and Father Gnanasekar Paulraj SSS

years, with men discerning and participating in “Come & See” weekends and short residences. Matthew Vlastelica comes to us from our parish in New York City, Saint Jean Baptiste, to discern initial formation with the Congregation.

Many of you met Matthew at the 2023 Eucharistic Congress at the Provincialate for a “Come & See” experience for him. This event helped him discern and lead him to a more serious commitment, eventually entering the Postulancy this past year under the direction of Brother Michael Perez SSS, Richfield, Ohio, and Father John Thomas Lane SSS, Highland Heights, Ohio. After a lengthy live-in experience at Saint Jean’s, Matthew officially and liturgical joined the Postulancy Program on January 1, 2024, the first official phase of initial formation into religious life.

During the Postulancy, one has many experiences to be introduced to religious life. One may continue to work or study, especially preparing for seminary studies such as taking philosophy classes. One lives in our religious communities and participates in the communal life of **study** (*i.e., reading, writing, and instruction*), **prayer** (*i.e., Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharist, prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament*), **social** (*i.e., meals together and gatherings*), **and chores** (*i.e., cleaning, shopping, and dishes!*). At the province center, we share our cars and assist each other in driving to appointments and ministry. Matthew participated in all these activities and took four philosophy classes at Catholic Theological Union/Chicago, but remotely in our home. After discernment, Matthew applied and was accepted for the novitiate.

Beginning August 2, 2023, with initial planning and discernment with the Provincial Council, we presented to the General Council, for their approval, our community and parish in Houston for the novitiate house and Father Paul Gnanasekar SSS (*known as Father Sekar*) as Novice Director. Father Sekar was a Novice Director in his native province of India.

We are an international community and stress this in our formation of our men worldwide – our local SSS community is made up of a Sri Lankan, a Vietnamese, and an American religious with hopes for another religious on loan from another province soon. Plus, the parish we serve, Corpus Christi, is an international faith community reflecting the diversity of Houston with worship and ministries in two primary languages, Spanish and English, and a Catholic school. Furthermore, our parish greatly supports the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament (*Associates*), allowing Matthew to experience the greater participation of the Eymardian Family. Novitiate will be a great immersion experience for Matthew in the coming two years, with Matthew studying religious life, its history, spirituality, and experiences, some ministry in the parish, including participation in the *Order for Christian Initiation of Adults* (OCIA) and gatherings with the Eymardian Family and Associate

formation. Hopefully, our Life in the Eucharist Team (LITE) will also present a retreat or two while Matthew is there and experience this piece of Sacramentinos formation.



Matthew Vlastelica

Father Sekar and the rest of the community of Fathers Thomas Smithson (*Superior and Hospital Chaplain*), Christian Christopher (*Sri Lanka – Hospital Chaplain*), and Joseph Doan (*Vietnam – Post-graduate student*) met On May 9-10 to prepare the house, program, and expectations of Matthew. A great experience of hope, hospitality, healthy fun, and cleaning brought us together to remember our novitiate experiences with prayer and preparation for Matthew. Let us all pray for Matthew’s next step as he begins this second phase of initial formation on moving to Houston, “Space and Oil City,” on August 12.

P.S. If you ask yourself, “What’s the third phase of initial formation?” It is the

Scholasticate, after a religious professes vows in the institute and then goes on to study as a brother candidate or ordained priest candidate. Stay tuned and in prayer with Matthew and his discernment process. Meanwhile, please pray for another interested candidate, Anthony Chloma Akudo (*a Nigerian asylum seeker and hospital chaplain*), who is also seriously interested in our religious community and lives in Houston.