

St. Joseph seminarians sent home as a precaution against coronavirus

Thirty-five students are packing up to leave after St. Joseph Seminary decided to send them home, as a precaution against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

“It’s disappointing, but the seminarians would be safer with their families rather than in a community of 40 people,” said Rev. Stephen Hero, rector of St. Joseph Seminary. “We were hoping to be together and to be together to pray for the community around us.”

Seminarians are now taking their courses online through St. Joseph Seminary and Newman Theological College to complete their academic year. The current group of seminarians come from across Western Canada including the dioceses of Prince Albert, St. Paul, Calgary, and Victoria, the archdioceses of Regina, St. Boniface, Grouard-McLennan and Edmonton, as well as the Roman Catholic Military Ordinate. Formators, the teaching priests who also live at the seminary, will remain to complete student assessments and other work.

Father Hero said it’s also a precautionary measure to prevent the COVID-19 virus from entering the seminary and forcing the quarantine of students and formators.

It’s believed to be the first time in the 93-year history of the seminary that students were sent home before the official end of the academic year.

Seminaries across Canada have taken similar steps, Hero said.

The current term had only three weeks of classes left, finishing around Easter and followed by exams. Now those exams will be take-home exams or online. Seminarians got the news on March 20.



Jake Mullin

“It was a lot of shock because, of course, it’s unexpected,” said Jake Mullin, a fourth-year seminarian.

“We kind of thought within the seminary we’re pretty self-contained and isolated, so we thought we wouldn’t be affected by the virus and stuff like that,” Mullin said. “Of course, now things have changed a little bit – just seeing how our world and what we thought of as reality has kind of shifted and changed.”

As of March 22, there were 259 [cases of COVID-19 virus in Alberta](#) and 1,302 across Canada. Nineteen people have died of the virus in Canada, including one Albertan. All Canadians are being urged to restrict their activities and to self-isolate at home if they show symptoms.

The COVID-19 crisis had already forced the cancellation of an eight-day retreat for seminarians, as well as their placements in the community with hospitals and social service agencies.

Mullin’s hometown is just west of Edmonton in Stony Plain, so it’s easy for him to bring his things back home. But for other seminarians who are from out of town it’s more difficult – especially on short notice.

Chris Pugh of Brandon, Man., said the decision by St. Joseph Seminary was not unexpected, “but being told you kind of have a few days to get home is a little quick.

“It’s a little disappointing that we can’t finish the year off here, but they put a lot of things in place that’s really helping us, especially with Newman and the seminary, to help us finish out semester,” said Pugh, who is in his second year at the seminary, studying to be a priest for the Archdiocese of

Winnipeg.

“The transition to online classes has been quite smooth, at least for myself. The hardest thing for those who don’t live in Edmonton is resources from the library.”

Seminarians have had their loans extended, and books can be returned when they are finished.

Pugh said the professors and formators at the seminary are making it “easy in a hard time” to transition to online classes.



Chris Pugh

“The biggest thing right now is that it’s so last minute and unexpected that people are scrambling, professors in particular, to try to get everything organized and try to make accommodations as far as assessments and assignments for the end of the semester to try to get everything done.”

“The virus is obviously something that’s new for us to experience in this lifetime, but I wouldn’t say I’m too worried,” Pugh said. “I give it up to God and pray that he’ll make something positive out of it.”

Seminarians will be adjusting to studying and completing assignments outside of the physical walls of the seminary and they say what they will miss the most is the daily Mass.

“Different guys have expressed concerns about it being more difficult to do work at home, but that’s just the reality that everyone finds themselves in now, right, so kind of live with it and so the best that you can,” Mullin said.

"I've been really privileged in the seminary to receive the sacraments and go to Mass every single day, but because of that, I think it's easy for me to take it for granted. Now being confronted with the reality that that's no longer possible, really makes you be thankful for the times you are able to and look forward to when you go back and receive the sacraments again.

"You've just to hope and pray that things will turn out right."

Father Hero said it's difficult to know the state of the COVID-19 crisis this fall and how it might affect the new academic year.

"Plan A is we hope to be as normal in the fall, but we have to be ready for Plan B which we'll work out with Newman Theological College and others," he said.

There are 35 students at St. Joseph Seminary this year, which is about the same as last year but down from a decade ago when the number of seminarians was as high as 45.