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## Kneelers travel parish to parish, gather prayers for new priests

Published: 28 July 2021

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**Father Juan Miguel Sanchez blesses his mother, who is using the kneeler given to him by Mary's Sons to offer his first priestly blessings after his June 19 ordination.**

HUNTERSVILLE — Two hand-crafted wooden kneelers stood in the early afternoon sunlight shining through the windows of St. Mark Church after the ordination of Father Juan Miguel Sanchez and Father Joseph Wasswa.

The kneelers had reached the end of a seven-month "pilgrimage" of hundreds of miles visiting parishes across the Diocese of Charlotte. In each location, the faithful prayed on the kneelers for the two men preparing to become priests. An engraved plaque expressed in words what could not be seen: "With our prayers for a joyful priesthood."

Now, as the newly-ordained priests begin their ministry, they say they are grateful for the special gift of the kneelers – a reminder of their vocation and the people they have been called to serve.

"I very much appreciate having a tangible representation of the care and love I receive from the people," said Father Sanchez, parochial vicar of St. Matthew Church in Charlotte and assistant chaplain at Charlotte Catholic High School.

"I know that whenever I use the kneeler, I will experience a particular connection with those who knelt on it, those who had the desire and couldn't, and those who also are kneeling around the diocese to pray to God," he said. "I want to use this kneeler in my room to pray to God for all those entrusted to me."

The kneelers are gifts from Mary's Sons, a lay apostolate dedicated to praying for priests. The apostolate also gave each

priest a beautiful hand-sewn confessional stole and a leather journal containing written messages from people who had prayed on the kneelers.

"These things mean a lot to me," said Father Wasswa, parochial vicar of Our Lady of Grace Church in Greensboro. "It is really spiritually edifying to receive all of these wonderful well-wishes and prayers from the people across the diocese."

"I think the kneeler is particularly a great gift and reminder that holiness is cultivated on our knees," he said. He plans to use the kneeler for his personal Holy Hour.

Since 2013, Mary's Sons has given 19 kneelers to the diocese's new priests, according to Director Robyn Magyar. The apostolate started the Kneelers for Priests Pilgrimage program to give people across the diocese the opportunity to pray for priests in a personal way, she said.

"The kneelers symbolize God's call to the laity to take these new priests into our hearts and to pray for them without ceasing," Magyar said. "Our hope is that the kneelers provide a wonderful way to further connect the faithful to our new priests and, through the many prayers offered on these kneelers, our priests will be strengthened in their journey to ordination and sustained in their holy priesthood."

Each year, the kneelers typically go to about 40 churches around the diocese, spending a week at each. Stops include each priest's home parish and parishes where they served as seminarians.

Father Wasswa's home parish of Sacred Heart Church in Salisbury and Father Sanchez's parish of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Lenoir both hosted the kneelers in May.



**Father John Eckert receives a priestly blessing from newly-ordained Father Joseph Wasswa on the kneeler provided by Mary's Sons following the June 19 ordination Mass at St. Mark Church in Huntersville.**

Father John Eckert, Sacred Heart's pastor, said it is important to pray for spiritual help for priests.

"Obviously, the devil doesn't want there to be good and holy priests," he said. "To support these men with your prayers is so powerful, especially as they get ready to lay down their lives to be a priest of Jesus Christ."

Father Stephen Hoyt, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Church, said his parishioners were happy to have the opportunity to pray on the kneelers.

"To see the kneelers in church is very encouraging," Father Hoyt said. "They remind us that men are still coming forward to serve as priests, and that is something that is certainly needed."

"The kneelers, I think, can also be a powerful symbol to someone who might be called to the priesthood and inspire them to take the time to pray and to discern if that is their vocation," he added.

The next kneeler pilgrimage will begin this September in anticipation of the ordination to the priesthood of Deacons Darren Balkey and Aaron Huber next year.

— Dina DeFabo Wilson, Correspondent

## Get more info

At [www.maryssons.org](http://www.maryssons.org): Learn more about Mary's Sons and its kneelers for new priests

