When 19 college guys go to Jamaica for spring break, they usually hit the bar and the beach. Not Nicholas Morrison and his friends. Their trip to Montego Bay this March was far more medieval.

Every morning they rose at 5:30 a.m. and prayed. Then they visited abandoned children with disabilities and dug an irrigation trench to protect the kids' homes from flooding in the coming summer rains. The young men joked as they moved 100 lb. boulders without machinery, naming one rock "Happy Birthday" and another "JP2," a nickname for Pope John Paul II. Their chosen spring-break hashtag? #SemsOnMission.
Morrison and his friends are Catholic seminarians, studying to become priests. Philosophy majors at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., they live and study at the nearby St. John Paul II Seminary, which opened six years ago to meet a growing demand from millennial men who want to join the priesthood. It has reached capacity at 50 students and is already expanding, for the second time. "The four years I have been there have been totally incredible," says Morrison, 22, a 2017 graduate from Maryland who is headed to Rome to continue his studies. "I'm much more confident that this is something that the Lord wants me to continue to pursue."

The precise way that Morrison and his generation choose to pursue their calling is what sets them apart. Products of the 21st century, they use Facebook and Snapchat, and text their friends funny GIFs. Some brew their own beer, protest at Black Lives Matter rallies or go to the shooting range with Marine buddies. Some are comfortable with legalizing recreational pot. They are more likely to wear their clerical attire than jeans in public, faster to share details of their prayer life than to keep them private and keener to give their Friday nights to the homeless than to Netflix. When it comes to politics, they are hard to pin down as liberal or conservative, and not all think preaching antiabortion homilies is a good idea. Instead they speak openly with their supervisors about their struggles with chastity, and some even discuss their struggles with sexual orientation. Perhaps most important, there are more of them now than there were before: 1,900 men under age 30 were enrolled in graduate-level Catholic seminaries in 2016, up from 1,300 in 2005, according to Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). In June the next wave of graduates will finish and pack up to move to churches across the nation.

This shift comes at a time when Pope Francis, who became the Pontiff in 2013, is calling for a new kind of priest to serve in parishes around the world. His predecessor was known as a scholar, but Francis is renowned as a pastor for the people. For the first time in 30 years, the Vatican this past winter revised its global guidelines for educating priests, and modeled it after Pope Francis' example of humility and vision for accessible and genuine leaders. He is open to the idea of studying how some married men can be ordained to be deacons, not priests, to serve in rural areas short on ministers. Next year he will call the world’s bishops to Rome for a summit to discuss youth, faith and vocational discernment. As they prepare, he is asking Catholics "not to yield to discouragement" but to pray for the
new priests to be "living signs of God's merciful love." Millennial priests are the cutting edge of his effort. The Pope makes a point to visit young seminarians when he travels to different countries, as he did in Philadelphia in 2015. "Pope Francis has been a game changer," Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago says. "He's made people rethink their aspirations for the priesthood."

Francis' papacy is just four years old, and the millennial priests are not a homogeneous group, but already they share a mission. Forget the old stereotypes of the priesthood--reserved men, removed and dogmatic, who present themselves at the lectern to guide their congregations. The generation heeding the Francis call looks a lot like Father Chris Seith, the parochial vicar at Our Lady of Mercy in Potomac, Md. Seith, now 28, does CrossFit, rides a bike through the halls of his parish's Catholic school donning a goofy fake mustache and gondolier's hat to greet all the students, and bakes cakes on Catholic feast days to encourage people to celebrate holy days as real parties. Pope Francis' mission of mercy and first major writing, The Joy of the Gospel, guides his purpose. "Joy is contagious, energy is contagious," Seith says. "I just want to be the face of that joy."
To find a Pope Francis--style pastor in Chicago, you need look no further than Father Matt O’Donnell. O’Donnell, 30, was the youngest-known pastor in the archdiocese's history when he got the job to lead St. Columbanus Church four years ago, just months after Francis' election. The parish is mostly African American, and it sits between two of the most violent neighborhoods on the South Side. In February, when an 11-year-old girl was shot and killed blocks away, O’Donnell went to the scene to find her family.

The neighborhood is not Catholic, and neither was the girl. But O’Donnell offered to help her mother with funeral costs, and then he attended the memorial. "I get to be a pastor for a whole lot of people besides those who just come on Sunday morning to mass here," he says. "My hope is that people realize that St. Columbanus is a place that's trying to provide more opportunities for the community around economic development, jobs and food insecurity."

The rise of millennial leaders like O’Donnell comes at a critical moment for the Catholic Church in the U.S., where congregants are declining as a share of the population. Even among millennials who are Catholic, only about a quarter attend church weekly, and three-quarters of younger millennial Catholics support same-sex marriage in defiance of church teaching, according to a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center.
The church also faces an overall priest shortage in the U.S. The number of priests in the country has dropped from 58,600 to 37,200 over the past 50 years, and a whopping 3,500 parishes did not have their own pastor in 2016, according to CARA. That means that while young priests like O'Donnell might in the past have worked for a decade or two as an assistant before leading their own congregation, young priests now must take on more responsibility sooner and with fewer resources. No generation may ever be able to repeat the post--World War II priest boom, when droves of men were ordained at the average age of 28 and fewer laypeople could serve in leadership roles. But the share of men under age 29 who enter Catholic seminary has risen 15% in the past 15 years, according to CARA, and the average ordination age has fallen from 37 to 34.

The new priests represent a cultural change in the church. For the first time, the next generation of Latino Catholics in the U.S. is larger than that of white Catholics. Only seven in 10 of the newest priests in the U.S. are white, compared with more than 9 in 10 U.S. priests overall, according to CARA. In Chicago, where 44% of Catholics but only 14% of priests are Latino, church leadership is recruiting young priests with brochures that read, Sé un líder. Sé un héroe. ¡Sé un sacerdote! (Be a leader. Be a hero. Be a priest!) As part of their studies, seminarians often learn Spanish. In Silver Spring, Md., Father Mario Majano, 30, says many immigrants question the choice to become a priest because of expectations that the next generation should help the family advance economically. "How can I be a source of stability for my family in a different, good way?" Majano recalls thinking about his decision to become a priest. "I wish we had more young Hispanics."

All this leaves bishops looking to millennials for new leadership. Bishop Timothy Senior, who leads St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, near Philadelphia, says, "The style of the priesthood absolutely has to change" to elevate "servant leadership." In Chicago, Cupich, 68, invited O'Donnell and Father James Wallace, 31, to be on the steering committee for the archdiocese's strategic outlook plan, called Renew My Church, to explore how parishes should function in the future. They hosted a dinner in February for the archdiocese's other young priests to discuss how to make the church more vibrant in their city. "The demands on their leadership are going to be altogether different from their predecessors'," Cupich explains. "What distresses them the most is that there might be a leadership sometimes that says, We're just going to kick the cans down the road and not deal with them. We're not going to worry about buildings that have huge capital needs or shrinking
Pope Francis has encouraged the shift. He tells church leaders to put their community first, avoid clerical bureaucracy and, above all, evangelize with kindness. In November he elevated two key American archbishops to cardinals: Cupich, who is responsible for the largest Catholic seminary in the country, Mundelein Seminary at the University of St. Mary of the Lake; and Joseph Tobin of Newark, N.J., who leads the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' committee that is responsible for new priests. Both are important players for ensuring that the Francis vision takes root.

For young priests in Cupich’s Chicago, that vision already comes naturally. St. Columbanus, for example, is named for a 6th century Irish saint, but recently O'Donnell decided to rebrand to better serve his neighborhood. He put up new mosaics that imagine the church's namesake with a black and brown face. Now he keeps the church baptismal font heated and full of water, ready for converts at any moment. "Pope Francis, he has made me excited again about becoming a priest," O'Donnell says. "He models to me what I want to be as a priest, the ability to be creative, imaginative and not get stuck in what 'has to be.'"

Parochial vicar of Our Lady of Mercy Church in Potomac, Md., Father Chris Seith, 28, admires the simple life that Pope Francis praises. Ryan Pfluger for TIME

For many of the new generation, Pope Francis is just one of several key role models. It
takes at least five years to be ordained, so most of the millennial priests of today chose
their path before Francis was elected, and they owe a lot to the Popes of their youth,
including John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Students at a recent Mundelein Seminary
roundtable praised Pope Francis' simplicity, calling his spirituality raw, hands-on and
organic, a sentiment they say fellow millennials appreciate. But when they named their
biggest spiritual influences, they did not name Popes or Vatican officials. Instead, they
talked of pastors back home, mothers, friends and women like St. Teresa of Calcutta and
St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

The newest priests see the priesthood as a rebellion, if an unusual one. Seminary
programs often offer a technology fast, for a week or a year, and young men are quick to
say how much they enjoy it. Like Pope Francis, many will take a selfie, but they caution
against friendships that exist mainly on social media. The priesthood has largely resisted
cultural change brought on by new family structures and a changing sense of community-
most millennial seminarians have been Catholic since birth, have parents who are still
married and celebrate the Eucharist every day. "They know they are going countercultural,
but it is not out of ignorance," Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, who founded the St.
John Paul II Seminary, says. "There has to be some vision, some purpose, some goal."

The next priesthood is bound by this strong sense of mission. Some seminarians may
trade knowledge of bishops like baseball cards, but by the time they are in churches, they
are more focused on outreach. Father Dominic Clemente, 27, of Chicago, started his
church's first ever youth program, filmed videos for the church's website and hopes to
develop a new relationship with the Muslim Community Center down the street.

Wallace, the 31-year-old on the Renew My Church team, calls himself socially progressive,
but for him that means he's not afraid to play dodgeball with the kids, do a shot of
Jameson with off-duty cops at a St. Patrick's Day party or sit on the front lawn with a cigar
and an extra lawn chair so people will come and talk. "The big talk is evangelization ...
How do we go out and get people to fall in love with Christ?" says Wallace, of Edison Park
in Chicago. "For a certain generation of priests, they weren't trained with that concept, so
evangelization is just totally foreign to them. It's not that they are opposed to it; it's just
not on their radar." Wuerl, 76, says the young generation is far more open about their
prayer life and their encounters with God than he was at their age. "If you define humility
as simply recognizing the truth, they are very humble people, because they have no problem talking about their own failures and their own accomplishments,” he says.

Sexuality, and their willingness to wrestle with it openly, also sets millennial priests apart from their predecessors. Pope Francis has reiterated that marriage is not an option for priests, and seminarians are required to refrain from sexual activity. But seminary leaders say young men are not afraid to confess struggles with pornography, and they discuss how their sexuality fits with their pledge of abstinence. "I think they've embraced that sense of, 'I'm here to live a chaste life, whatever my sexual orientation might be,'” Father John Kartje, president of Mundelein Seminary, says. "That conversation doesn't have an asterisk on it for one person as opposed to another.” Adds Father Jeffrey Eickhoff, who leads St. Gregory the Great Seminary near Lincoln, Neb.: "In some sense, scandal has happened, priests have failed. There's not so much stigma that priests are perfect anymore.”

The child sex-abuse scandal defined the church of their parents, and young men are eager to turn the page. Seith, the Maryland CrossFitter, was a young teenager in 2002 when the scandal broke. When he applied to seminary, his program required that applicants complete a background check and a comprehensive psychological evaluation, and curriculums trained seminarians on how to report abuse. He says his classmates from dioceses like Boston, where the abuse numbers were particularly high, confronted more of a stigma than he did. But he also personally knew an abuse victim, and that makes him want to set the best example of a priest that he can, especially in his work at his local Catholic school. "We talked about, How do we make sure we are approachable and people can trust us?” he says of his training. "We want to make sure the kids know they are really loved.”

Even in a new era of openness, millennial priests have limits. They believe what the culture does not, that sex outside of heterosexual marriage is sinful and that Jesus rose from the dead. Young priests embrace institutions and rituals their millennial peers eschew. "People say, 'Well, I can worship God in my bedroom, I can worship God from the bar, I can worship while I'm lying down watching Netflix,”’ Father Michael Trail, 27, of Oak Forest, Ill., says. "But taking that solid time out of your week just to thank God for the way that he's come in your life, that only happens with structure."
Many young priests even take this conservatism to a new level. For some, the old mass of their grandparents is now hip and exotic. Students at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary host outreach events that replace Christian rock music with a very solemn, high mass, complete with incense. Many choose to wear their collar even on their off-days or when out at a bar to stand out, while their rector, Bishop Senior, says his seminary classmates 30 years ago would wear jackets and ties to fit in. In a speech to Polish Jesuits, Pope Francis even encouraged young seminarians to be less rigid, to avoid narcissism and to discern "shades of gray."

Wallace says that unlike older priests, his peers are less willing to identify with a political party. Eickhoff, whose seminary draws from mostly red states, says young men are conservative on moral issues like marriage and abortion but push back against President Trump on immigration. And while pockets of church leaders may hope Rome's pendulum will swing right after Pope Francis, these young men are more politically independent. "I don't think we are in an age here in the United States where the young men are going archconservative," says Father Robert Panke, rector of St. John Paul II Seminary.

In the months ahead, Pope Francis plans to spotlight this next generation. He has dedicated the next triennial bishops' synod at the Vatican in October 2018 to discuss youth and vocation, which will cover both calls to the priesthood and to marriage. He has asked bishops worldwide to survey young people in advance, and the Vatican is planning a website for youth to submit reflections for the event. After the synod comes the 2019 World Youth Day in Panama, which he hopes will cement the synod's reforms. At age 80, Francis knows that the future of the church depends on the direction millennial Catholics choose. "The church and society need you," he told young people in a recent video message. "With your dreams and ideals, walls of stagnation fall and roads open up."

For now, church leaders in the U.S. are hopeful that the Pope's efforts will stick. "I say to the priests here, Anytime you've had a bad day, just go up to the seminary and see this next generation coming along," Cardinal Wuerl says. The millennial priesthood is ready for the spotlight. "If we can keep those doors open for at least 100 years, we will be good," Clemente says. "Hopefully the next guys behind us will use those open doors to continue welcoming people in."