

The Priest Shortage And Its Challenge

Some priests have excessive feelings of guilt from the gap that exists between expectations placed on priests and where they see themselves.

Ministry to Priests

Continued from Page 1

month. The study group began in January 1979, he said. He has "unreserved praise" for the program, noting that the overnight scheduling makes it possible to "combine relaxation and rest with study."

Father John Firpo, St. Mary Our Mother, Horseheads, associate, is a member of a recreational group. The program usually includes swimming, he noted, but he called especially worthwhile the sharing after dinner which often goes until midnight. He pointed out the advantages the sessions have for him, as a young priest, in getting to know other priests.

Father Robert Kreckel, pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Fairport, belongs to a skiing group, which actually, descended from a group of seven priests who annually take winter vacations to go skiing. Now a group of nine skiers that participates in other sports in the summer. Father Kreckel noted the value in simply "being together," as well as in the additional sharing which the group does now.

The effect of the program extends beyond the one day a month, he said, and the group members' support is welcome in times of sickness and of celebration.

Father Louis Vasile, associate at St. Lawrence, Rochester, said his "prayer support" group is a new one, formed in April, and has about 10 members. Father Vasile values the program because it "once a month, forces us to focus again on what we're called to be, and we're called to be ministers for one another as well as ministers to the people. I don't think we can support people if we don't support one another as priests."

Informal groups also are important, and several priests participate in them as well as the formal meetings. Some groups of priests annually take vacations together, and local weekly get-togethers are common. The annual priest retreats at the end of June also provide opportunities for diocesan priests to meet and discuss their ministry.

Father Firpo is a member of a group which meets weekly for lunch, something which was valuable to him as a new priest in the area, he noted.

NFP Night

An information session on Natural Family Planning will be held Monday, Nov. 3, from 7:30 to 9 p.m. in the Bishop Kearney Education Building at St. Mary's Hospital. These sessions are open to the public at no charge. Registration is not required.



BISHOP HICKEY

Probably the best-known informal gathering place is the Sacred Heart, Auburn, rectory, which for the 21 years of its existence has been the scene of weekly open lunches on Thursdays. As many as 20 priests have attended at one time, Father Raymond Wahl, the parish's current and founding pastor, noted. In addition to a regular group, he explained, visitors to Auburn often stop in.

He has sponsored the lunches all this time, he said, to build support among priests; if you know you have the support of brother priests, he said, "the priesthood will mean more to you."

A group meeting weekly in Elmira consists of retired priests and local pastors. Euphemistically called a "prayer meeting," according to Father Henry Adamski, St. Casimir's pastor, the Friday evening sessions provide an opportunity for priests to sit around the table and talk about their problems and support one another. The table happens to be a card table, but, Father Adamski explained, it is "really the stage setting for the whole thing." He called it a "supportive group," and asked, "Who better than a priest to understand a priest?"

Next Week: A look at the future.

The Shortage Is Nationwide

By Ed Briggs
Religion Today

Washington — The greatest enrollment in institutions turning out the nation's priests hit its peak in 1966, when 8,916 were enrolled in 133 theological schools.

But last year, reflecting a nearly decade-long slide, the number of seminaries and schools of theology were down to 54, and enrollment is down to 4,327. Projections indicate that enrollment may be down 15 percent more in another 20 years.

The alarming item hidden in the figures is that among those students, there is an increase in the number who are not seeking ordination to the priesthood.

The revelation is included in a report of a task force study on the future of Catholic theology schools and formation houses. It was performed by the Washington-based Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) with money from the Lilly

Endowment Fund of Indianapolis.

The report noted that with the decade-long decline in the theological student population "many seminaries have opened their programs for laymen, sisters and women." It says that in 1976, 12 percent of enrollment consisted of non-priesthood candidates. That figure had risen to 16 percent by last year.

The report also includes a recommendation that "planning for future staff and facilities be done on the assumption that total enrollment of candidates for priesthood in this country will not increase," despite the growing Catholic population.

A decline in the number of priests and the number preparing for the priesthood seems to dovetail with a study by Father Andrew Greeley, a Chicago priest-sociologist.

Father Greeley says in his book, "Crisis in the Church," that polls show 46 percent of Catholic parents

would like to see a son become a priest, down from 62 percent in a 1966 poll. There had been no significant change in that figure between 1963 and 1976, Father Greeley said, indicating the old tradition of offering a son to the Church is waning.

The CARA report said that reasons for the decline in vocations seem to go beyond a simple rejection of the Church's restrictive stance on the clergy, such as required celibacy.

The CARA report comments that the decline in the number of priesthood candidates has been influenced by the impact of college education on American Catholics. The report noted that during the past quarter century, American Catholics have striven to attend college in greater relative numbers than Western European Catholics.

Quoting Gallup Opinion Index studies on religion in America, the study notes that 28 percent of Catholics attended college in 1976, a

considerable jump from 17 percent in 1966.

It is the trend in the increase in Catholics trained for secular endeavors, the decrease in numbers seeking priesthood, and the loosening up by theological schools by admitting others that led the task force to examine its major recommendation not to plan on increases of priesthood candidates.

In what appears to be a preparation for a bleak future, the CARA report offered a series of recommendations, including that no new seminaries be started and that dioceses and religious orders continue to make recruitment for vocations a top priority.

They also recommended discussion of regionalization of dioceses and provinces for financial support of seminaries; that bishops and religious order leaders study the possibility of merging seminaries and formation houses; that bishops and leaders should develop contingency funds for extraordinary programs, and ministerial centers for the laity should be developed.


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