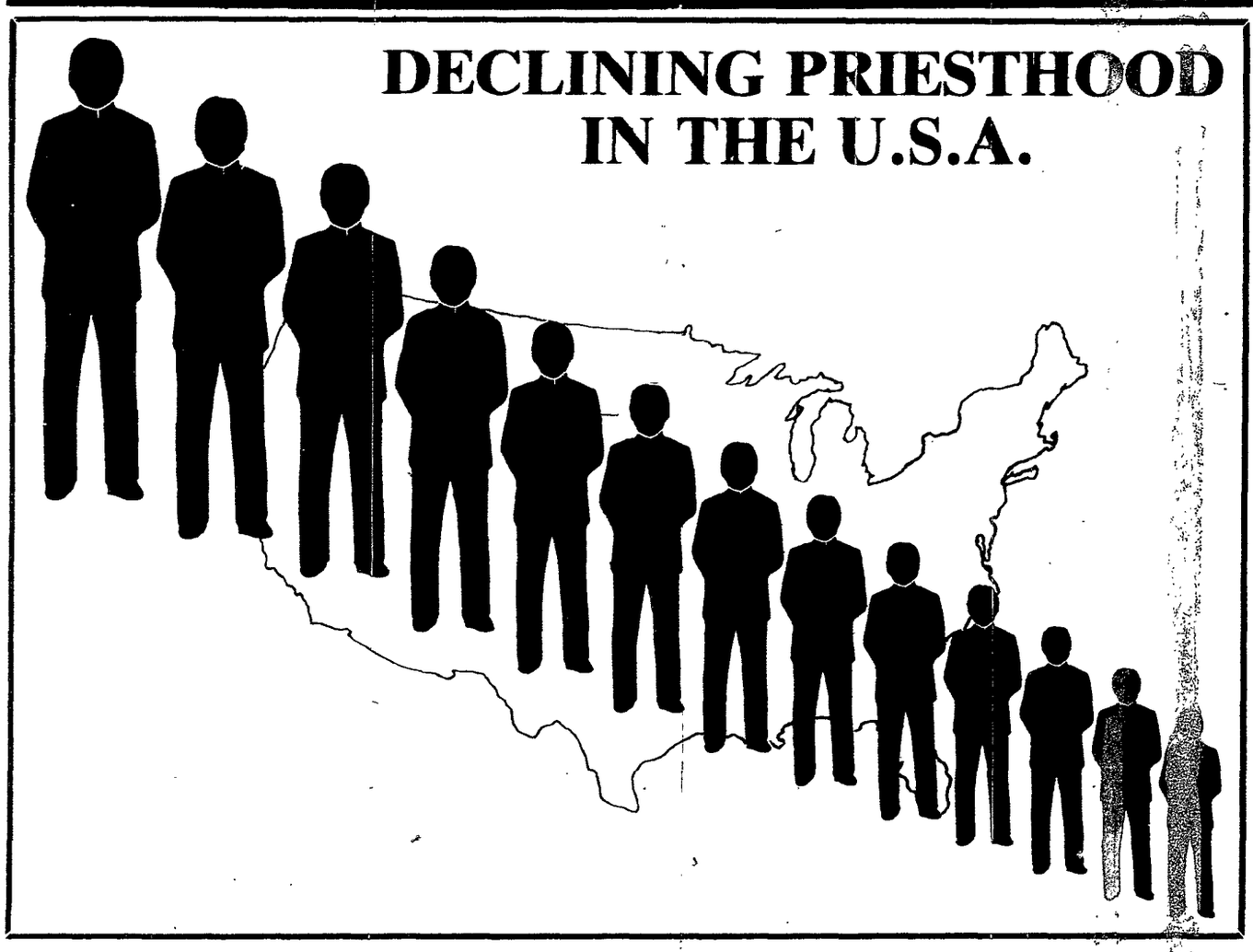

'Priestless Sundays' Enters Jargon

First in a 3-Part Series
By Jerry Filtau
NC News Service

A new phrase, "priestless Sundays," is rapidly making its way into U.S. Catholic vocabulary.

"Parish cluster," "lay administrator" and "ministry team" are also taking on new relevance. Such terms could soon be as familiar to Catholics as "ember days" and "high Mass" used to be.

The reason is simple -- fewer and fewer priests across the nation.

Analysts are predicting that the number of active U.S. priests will be down 50 percent by the year 2000 unless trends change. But in many dioceses the problem is here and now, not just in the abstract future.

A young priest in Indianapolis summarized the problem in many smaller dioceses. He used to worry about *becoming a pastor only three years after ordination*, he said, but what worries him now is how many parishes he will be pastor of at the same time.

Consider a few recent examples of the trend:

● Page-one "Priestless Sundays" headlines glared out at readers of The Guardian, diocesan newspaper of Little Rock, Ark., for six straight weeks this year as the bishop tried to prepare his people for the need for two or more communities to share one priest.

● "Dozen Parishes in Archdiocese Will Lose Associate Pastors" was the headline Feb. 16 in The Record, archdiocesan newspaper of Louisville, Ky. This spring's losses topped last year's, when 10 other parishes in the archdiocese lost their associate pastors.

● This March, Catholics in Erie, Pa., learned they will probably have 26 fewer priests, a 12 percent drop, within the next six years.

● Milwaukee has lost 55 priests, or 10 percent of its total, from its active roster since 1981. It has one retired priest for every five in active ministry.

● The Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, Mont., on Feb. 12 announced clustering of 16 churches in the Great Falls area and formation of new "pastoral communities" out of existing parishes in Billings, to offset "a severe reduction of priest personnel" in the diocese's rural areas in recent years.

● Under a clustering plan announced in Superior, Wis., in January, 16 parishes will be required to give up regular weekend liturgies and other services normally provided by priests.

● The Diocese of New Ulm, Minn., had resident pastors in all 93 parishes a decade ago. Now 35 of those parishes are served by a total of 17 priests. Five parishes are administered by nuns.

The stories could go on: two nuns founding and running a rural parish in the Diocese of Richmond, Va., two years ago; two sisters -- by blood, not nuns -- named coadministrators of a priestless parish in Bristow, Okla., last year; a nun administering a parish and a mission in the Superior Diocese; a permanent deacon administering a parish in the city of Denver.

Nationally, the total number of diocesan priests has declined about 2,000 in the past 15 years -- from 37,453 in 1968 to 35,356 in 1983.

But while the number of priests went down 5.3 percent in that period, the number of Catholics they served rose from 47.5 million to 52.1 million. Combined, those figures mean that there are 16 percent more Catholics per priest in 1983 than in 1968.

Nor does that tell the whole story. Until 1966, when Pope Paul VI set a retirement age of 75 for priests, they normally retired only through death or severely failing health.

In 1968, as U.S. dioceses were just beginning to set up retirement rules, there were just over 700 diocesan priests in the whole country who were listed as "inactive" because of retirement, ill health or other form of absence from ministry. By 1983 diocesan reports in the annual Official Catholic Directory listed 5,223 as inactive, the vast majority of them because of retirement.

The fact that now roughly one out of seven priests is retired means that the active diocesan priest, on the average, serves 33 percent more Catholics today than he did in 1968.

Aside from those who are physically incapacitated, most retired priests continue to provide valuable spiritual and ministerial services to Catholics. Many help out in parishes on weekends or in hospitals, convents and other institutions as part-time chaplains, confessors, spiritual advisers and counselors.

In some places the increase in retired priests is a boon. The dioceses of San Diego and San Bernardino, Calif., for example, had 345 active diocesan priests serving 345,000 Catholics in 1968. Now they have 290 serving 615,000 Catholics. But priests who have moved to the area for age or health reasons, because of the climate, help reduce the impact of the shortage, diocesan officials said.

In most dioceses, however, retirement of priests means that a bishop has a significantly smaller corps of ordained men to fill parish and diocesan posts.

It is the aging of the corps of U.S. priests that is behind the dire predictions of 50 percent fewer priests by the year 2000.

Priests leaving the ministry and drastic declines in new vocations were the main source of losses in the late 1960s and well into the '70s, but losses from active ministry through retirement and death are the major concern now.

Those ordained at the start of World War II are reaching that age now, and the next two decades will see massive losses of those who were ordained in the post-war vocations boom that lasted into the 1960s.

In the meantime, U.S. seminary enrollments that plummeted in the 1970s have largely stabilized, but at a much lower level than before -- about 12,000 now compared with 47,000 two decades ago -- and far below the level needed to replace priests who will die or retire in the next two decades.

And figures from the peak ordination years of the late 1950s and the 1960s are misleading by themselves, says Msgr. Colin MacDonald, director of the bishops' national Secretariat for Priestly Life and Ministry.

"We lost a tremendous amount of those people" during the 1970s when many young priests were leaving active ministry, he said.

Most of those who left had been ordained about five to 15 years, he said, significantly reducing the population of "what would have been our middle-aged clergy now."

Evidence gathered from around the country indicates a number of trends:

● The crunch is most visible today in "town and country" America. Dioceses which traditionally have had a large number of single-priest parishes now are reaching the point where they must place two or more parishes under a single priest. Largely urban dioceses, which tend to have much larger parishes staffed by several priests, are experiencing similar declines in priests. But it is harder to see the shortage when a parish drops from three to two priests than when it loses its only resident priest.

● Priests pulled out of full-time teaching have filled up many of the gaps for parish posts, but that source is starting to dry up. In 1968 U.S. dioceses listed just under 12,000 priests engaged in full-time teaching. Now they list about 4,700. Bishop Maurice Dingman of Des Moines, Iowa, says he had about 15 diocesan priests teaching non-religious subjects in Catholic high schools five years ago, and now he has none.

● Almost all of the growing corps of non-ordained parish administrators and pastoral associates in parishes are women, most of them nuns.

NEXT: New ways of running parishes.

Vatican Indirectly Gave Nuns Roles As Parish Heads

It was an official questionnaire from the Vatican that got him started on putting nuns at the head of parishes, says Bishop Raymond Lucker of New Ulm, Minn.

Since 1978, he has named nuns to head five of his 93 parishes, and two others are heading in that direction.

Bishop Lucker is not the only U.S. bishop to have non-ordained "pastoral administrators" heading parishes. But he seems to have more of them, proportionately at least, than any other diocese in the country.

And he sharply questions a supposition that they are just filling a gap left by a priest shortage.

"It's also a question of recognizing people called and gifted by the Spirit," he said in a telephone interview. "Every member of the church is gifted and called to ministry in some way.

"We also have a shortage of priests, but to some extent that is relative. There are fewer now than there were a few years ago," but the U.S. situation cannot be compared with the "absolute shortage" in places like Africa and Latin America, he said.

Bishop Lucker said that two things "triggered" his decision to begin appointing nuns to head parishes.

The first was the questionnaire he received from the Holy See "for my quinquennial report six years ago." The quinquennial (five-year) report is the official report on the state of his diocese that a bishop submits to Vatican agencies when he makes his required visit to Rome every five years.

One part of the questionnaire asked bishops to report how many parishes had resident pastors, how many were administered by women Religious and how many were administered by lay persons.

"I thought, if the Vatican is asking that question in an official report, why can't we do it?" Bishop Lucker said.

A visit the following year to Guatemala, where the New Ulm Diocese sponsors a parish and has two priests serving as missionaries, was the other factor, the bishop said.

The two priests in Guatemala have a parish of 20,000 people, he said, and nuns and other lay helpers play a substantial role as pastoral leaders.

Ten years ago New Ulm did not have a parish without a resident pastor, he said. He ordained one priest in 1975, one in 1976 and one in 1977, "then I didn't ordain again until 1983. Ordinarily we should have had two or three a year."

Bishop Lucker described the reasoning and process behind placing the administration of a parish in the hands of a non-ordained person and "yoking" it with another parish under the sacramental ministry of one priest.

"First of all, we consider both parishes as parishes," he said. "We want to maintain both those parishes as communities."

The bishop said, "The priest is the sacramental minister, and of course still canonically the pastor" of the second parish. In that parish, the Sister "leads the Liturgy of the Word, visits the sick, instructs the young people...She really becomes the leadership focus of that community. Only then do I name her pastoral administrator of that parish."

School Sister of Notre Dame Kay Fernholz, pastoral administrator in the small town of Wanda, 60 miles south of New Ulm, was one of the first to be appointed to such a post.

Born on a farm near New Ulm, the 45-year-old nun became a pastoral associate of St. Mathias parish in Wanda in 1978 and was appointed pastoral administrator three years later. Last year she celebrated her 25th jubilee as a nun.

Because of a series of unrelated circumstances, she said, after losing its resident pastor the parish had a succession of different priests serving it in the next three or four years. So she became more naturally the focus of stability and leadership.

Now when parishioners introduce her to someone, she said, "they usually say, 'This is Kay -- she's our boss' or 'She's our pastor.'" -- **Filteau.**