

# Priest-Poor America: New Ways of Running a Parish

Second in a 2-part series  
By Jerry Filtan  
NC News Service

"Part of the thing with the shortage of priests is that people become the Church, they become involved," said Sister Kay Fernholz.

"There is a shortage, it's true. But in the long run it has caused our lay people to be more involved in the running of the parish. I think that's great," said Father Carmen Petrone.

Sister Fernholz, a School Sister of Notre Dame for 25 years, is pastoral administrator of St. Mathias Parish in Wanda, a tiny Minnesota town 60 miles south of New Ulm.

Father Petrone, ordained 10 years ago, is pastor of four parishes, in four different counties, in rural southeastern Indiana.

Amid predictions of drastic declines in the number of U.S. priests, people like Father Petrone and Sister Fernholz see the situation as not just a problem but an opportunity.

"It's made us involve deacons, Religious and lay people more, and that's very good," said Father Phillip Behan, chancellor of pastoral affairs in the Diocese of San Bernardino, Calif.

More and more dioceses across the country are being challenged by the problem-opportunity of the priest shortage, and they are approaching it in a variety of ways.

Especially in vast parts of the South, Midwest and West - "town and country" America where parishes are small and usually served by only one priest - the shortage has begun to mean parishes without a resident pastor.

Between 1978 and 1983 the number of such parishes jumped 34 percent across the nation, from 687 to 919. And the trend is expected to continue, if not accelerate, as dioceses lose more priests.

It is forcing bishops to find new ways to run parishes.

Dr. Lewis Barbatto, a psychiatrist who has been a permanent deacon since 1978, last year became the first permanent deacon to be named administrator of a parish in the Denver Archdiocese.

"Through their professional training and training in the diaconate, that is going to happen more and more," said Father Marcian O'Meara, director of the Denver archdiocesan permanent diaconate program.

In Portland, Ore., last year, Archbishop Cornelius Power sent instructions to his priests on selecting and training lay leaders to celebrate a Liturgy of the Word and Communion service for Sundays when no priest would be available to celebrate Mass. Because of the shortage of priests in the archdiocese, he said, it was happening more frequently that a priest absent from his parish because of illness or vacation could not find another priest available to substitute for him.

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, W. Va., started a formal program in 1981 "to train lay persons and Religious to do full-time pastoral ministry." Linked with the diocese's training for permanent deacons, the four-year program plans to graduate its first class of seven people this year.

Undoubtedly the decreasing number of priests has helped precipitate the growth in many such ministries. Yet a good number of them would have grown anyway if there were no priest shortage. For the theology of lay ministry now is rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which preceded the decline of priests.

James Murray of the Chicago archdiocesan Office for Divine Worship summarized it succinctly when he said, "Ministry flows from the parish community. We shouldn't think of lay ministers as taking chips off the ministry of the priest. The priest is a chip off the community, not the other way around."

The Indianapolis Archdiocese, where Father Petrone lives, last year established a five-year plan to deal with an expected loss of 26 priests over that period. It projected that the average priest in the archdiocese would be serving nearly 1,600

Catholics by 1987, almost 25 percent more than in 1983. Among key provisions in the plan were parish clustering and the possibility of placing a non-ordained "pastoral minister" in some parishes without resident priests.

The Diocese of New Ulm, where Sister Fernholz works, has five parishes headed by nuns. A priest, usually from a neighboring parish, is canonical pastor, but Bishop Raymond Lucker of New Ulm prefers to call him the "sacramental minister." The priest comes in each weekend and possibly once during the week for Mass and other sacramental needs, but the resident pastoral administrator is in charge of the parish council and committees, finances, religious education, bringing Communion to the sick, and other tasks of ministry and leadership usually given to a pastor.

The Diocese of Superior, Wis., which recently announced a parish clustering plan affecting some 80 communities, has a nun as pastoral administrator of one parish and its mission church and nuns as pastoral assistants in three other parishes.

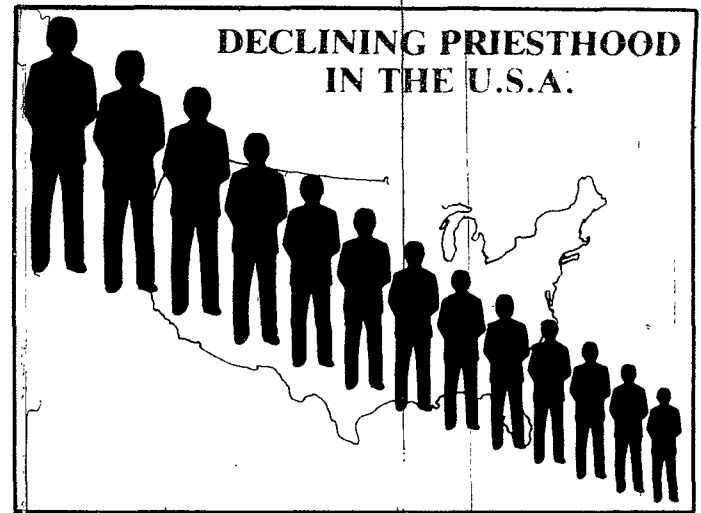
Bishop Michael McAuliffe of Jefferson City, Mo., has two nuns - Daughter of the Precious Blood Sister Kristin Roth and Dominican Sister Carol Kopf - in their second year as pastoral administrators of parishes.

Another two parishes in his diocese without resident priests have or have had lay persons as pastoral ministers, he said. The difference is that a pastoral administrator is in charge of the parish, while a pastoral minister is an assistant to the pastor.

The priest shortage in his diocese is not yet so severe that people do not have a priest for Mass on Sunday, although "we'll see that down the road for sure," said Bishop McAuliffe.

"But it's not just a Sunday situation, it's (a question of what happens) when people are left without leadership."

He said a diocesan program of adult education and renewal called Our Journey in Faith has brought "tremendous numbers of lay people who are really involved in the Church." The program emerged from a study in the diocese which showed that the three main things people were looking for in the Church were spiritual renewal, shared responsibility and



adult education, he said.

Twinning two parishes under one priest-pastor, with a lay pastoral administrator ministering to most of the needs of the second parish, is a way of handling matters when one goes from two priests to one.

"Parish clustering" or "area ministry" seems to be an increasingly popular way of going from three priests to two or from four to three in larger towns.

Bishop Thomas Murphy of Great Falls-Billings, Mont., announced such plans this year for both the large towns in his diocese.

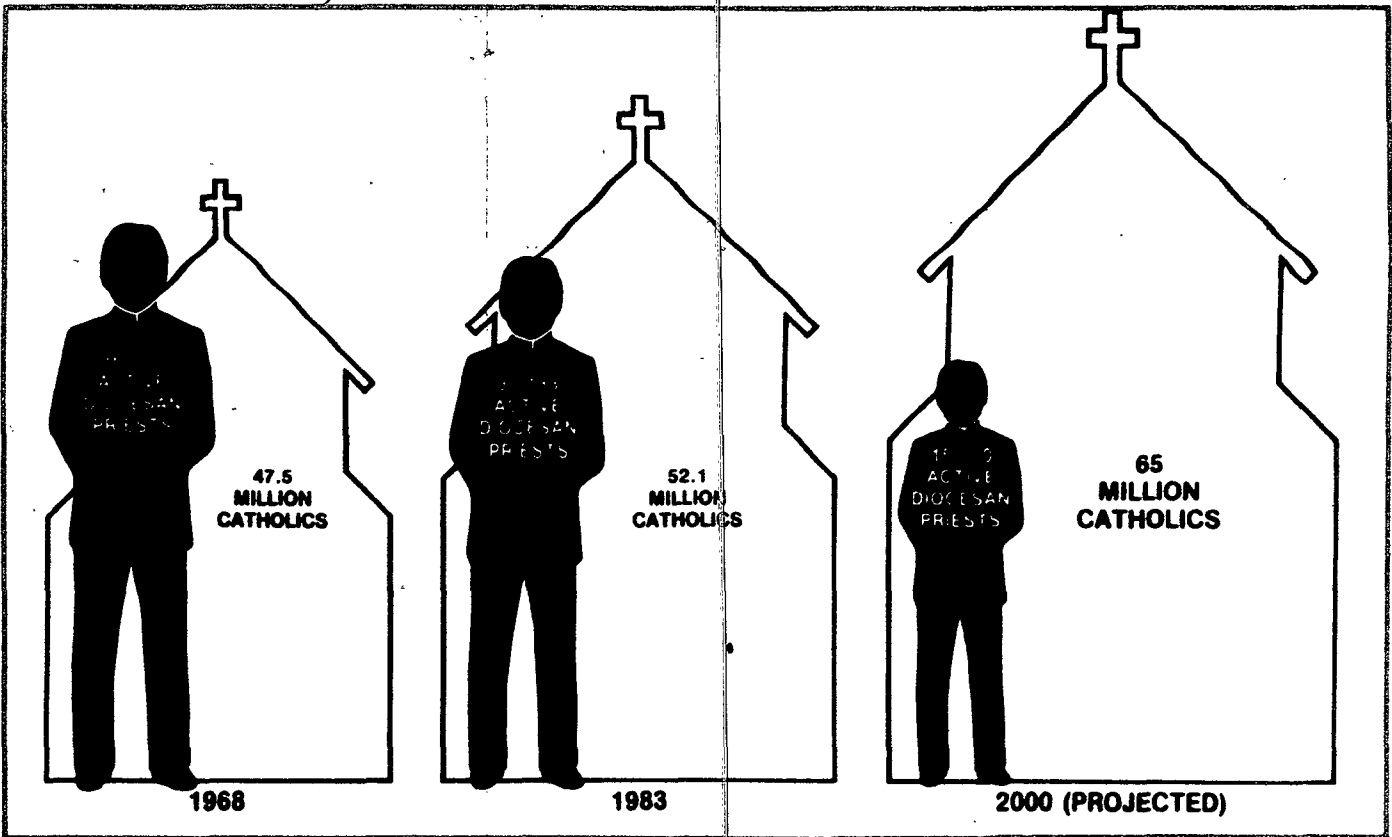
In the Great Falls area, he said the 15 parishes and one campus ministry will be combined into three "clusters" which will share their pastoral resources. In the Billings area, the 11 parishes will continue to exist but will be grouped into four "pastoral communities" which work together to share resources and plan together to meet expected growth in the area.

Bishop George A. Hammes of Superior announced a clustering plan this year that will affect some 80 communities and 30 to 50 priests in his diocese. Already 45 pastors serve more than one parish in the diocese, he said.

Bishop Lucker said the New Ulm Diocese has one cluster, which he prefers to call an "area ministry."

But he warned that clustering is "very difficult" and requires "priests and staff who can be very tolerant of a lot of differences."

Next: Challenging church thinking on priesthood.



Fr. Paul J. Cuddy  
On the Right Side

### A Letter To Bishop Hickey

To Bishop Dennis W. Hickey:

Minister-O-Media, the outfit in Maryland which manufactures and distributes the Sheen and Basset tapes, has just come out with a cassette album, "A Weekend with Sir Thomas More." The talks were given by Father Bernard Basset, the English Jesuit whose presentations I like so much, as he combines spirituality, doctrine, history and humor. It is a retreat given to Thomas More lovers at the Jesuit Retreat House near Port Tobacco, Md. It has four cassettes with eight talks, 30 minutes

More." Why? One wonders. As one also wonders why the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle captioned on the front page of the Sunday, April 1 edition, an innuendo and absolutely false smear against Mother Teresa of Calcutta. This smear business seems to be quite a profession. Have you read "The Spike" and "Morimba" by Arnaud DeBorchgrave? These books unfold the smear and disinformation techniques of the Russian KGB and its Cuban counterpart in the United States. I do not honor the silence which the peace movement people keep regarding the KGB activities. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and others like him keep reminding us of Gulags, leftist subversion, and the drug imports into the states by KGB and others to demoralize Americans by making them into drug addicts. Several times, Father Basset points out Ridley's smears against Thomas More.

Since you are the rector of St. Thomas More parish, I am sending you a gift

### Holy Trinity Dedicates New Rooms

Webster - Father William Hart, pastor, recently dedicated two rooms in Holy Trinity Church, one for meetings, the other as a library.

New crucifixes were hung in each room, the meeting room dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the library to St. Thomas Aquinas.

The service was followed by refreshments served in the school hall and provided by the school's education committee, chaired by Mary Quinn.

According to Nancy Lattanzio, "This ceremony was the culmination of many months of work which resulted in the conversion of two storage rooms in the library and parish meeting room. An existing meeting room was converted to a kindergarten classroom. Many volunteers from the school and parish worked evenings and weekends to make the rooms a reality."