

o 'hurting families'



way. This program is not just an example of personal kindness by staff members, as important as that is in the church. It also represents an attempt to realize a goal the bishops of the United States established several years ago in their "Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry." They said that assisting "hurting families" should be a goal of the U.S. church.

Trying to ease the pain of these couples' hurts is part of my work as a priest. My conscience requires that I respond to them as sensitively as my own limitations permit.

But as a priest I do not work only out of my own conscience, basic as that is. I also have a public role in the church, and in this program I put that to best use.

First, I was teaching, correcting the misapprehensions of people who are members of the church because they are baptized. That baptism is enduring regardless of the canonical quality of their marriages.

I was also trying to implement a goal of the bishops and our own diocese — developing a sense of

reconciliation with couples who feel estranged from the church.

And for couples who can and do choose to make use of it I was explaining the procedures of church marriage tribunals, a service used by approximately 50,000 U.S. couples each year.

My ministry comes from a combination of personal strengths and idealism, institutional roles and expectations, community support and public need. It is impeded by failings, single and collective, public and private.

But in a world as needy as ours we have to go beyond those failures to be as effective as we can.

(Father O'Rourke is associate director of the Family Life Office in the Diocese of Oakland, Calif.)

FOOD...

...for thought

"I personally feel priests should start telling the stories of their ministry," Father Eugene Hemrick was saying in a recent interview. He meant that there is a need for accounts to be heard of the work priests carry out and the value they see in their lives.

Personal stories about what the priesthood means in action will help to bring into view the operative forces within the priesthood, Father Hemrick feels. Won't this foster understanding of the driving forces in the lives of priests? he asked.

In fact, that word "understanding" is basic to what Father Hemrick has in mind. As he explains it, a priest can state that he sees his priesthood as something "good." But storytelling about the priesthood in action enables others to see what the word "good" means in this case.

Much is written in today's church about the value of storytelling among the church's people.

—This is a way for Christians to reveal the significance they see in the events and developments of their own lives.

—It is way of pointing to the concrete action of God in one's life; it helps bring to life the Christian's many references to

God's presence in the world.

—And it is a way to discuss faith in the context of life's actual events without depending on abstractions or difficult definitions.

When a priest tells the stories of his ministry and life, Father Hemrick suggests, he allows others to see the priesthood as he sees it. Father Hemrick is the U.S. Catholic Conference research director.

Father Hemrick thinks that a negative picture of the priesthood has developed for many people. But there is a side of a priest's story that isn't being heard much, he believes. And most priests he knows do find value in their lives as priests.

"If you get to the core of what they're doing, there's a real value — and that value isn't surfacing," he observed.

The kind of storytelling he has in mind fosters a more meaningful relationship between priests and the people they serve, Father Hemrick believes. It could help others to identify more closely with priests. It could help others really to know priests, Father Hemrick said — to be able to say "I can identify better with you now because I know where you're coming from."

tion or stereotype?

ture what is in the deep recesses of their hearts," Father Solle says.

"They want you to feel what they feel and to know what they're thinking but have never expressed, and put it, reverently, in the language of the day. All in 25 words or less," he adds.

"But the heart of the priesthood is in celebrating the Eucharist, preaching the word and forgiving sins," responds Father Dover. "All the rest is really non-essential."

"My experience is that if Mass, preaching and forgiving are not related to human lives, they miss hitting the human struggle and fall on deaf ears," Father Solle counters. "That's why God became human — to redeem us by participating in our struggles, loneliness and triumphs."

"A priest has certain responsibilities because he is ordained," says Father Dover. "Priesthood does make us different, Miguel."

"But only in our role in the faith community, Jerry," Father Solle reflects. "We are brothers to all people. All people are called by God to be holy and true to their vocations. We are no holier than anyone else."

"But people expect us to be authentic leaders in holiness. If we're not that, well, anyone could

do what we do," says Father Dover.

"Aren't you reducing a vocation to a stereotype again, Jerry?" asks Father Solle.

"Maybe, Miguel. But I don't see it that way. I like to think I'm nailing down my own identity," his friend answers.

(Father Sherry is director of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation.)



...for discussion

1. There are as many stories about vocations as there are people who tell them, says Father Robert Sherry in an interview this week with Katharine Bird. What does he mean?

2. Do you think it is important for lay people and priests to share the stories of their vocations with each other? Why?

3. How does anyone discover what his or her vocation is? Does the message come like a thunderbolt — suddenly and in an absolutely clear way?

4. Every vocation seems to require some kind of commitment. Do you think it is hard to make a genuine commitment? Why? Why not?

SECOND HELPINGS

Twelve priests tell stories of their lives in the 31-page booklet titled "Diocesan Priest." It is "designed to share some reflections on and some personal experiences of the call, the lifestyle and the ministry" of diocesan priests. Father George Rueger, a Massachusetts priest, writes: "I was ordained at a time when our success as a priest depended so much on work, results and dedication to duty. Today our ability to relate with others and to call forth their talents is the most important task. What does it mean to be Father of the parish family?" He states: "Each priest is surrounded, not simply by the divine mysteries which he celebrates, but the mystery of his own call; the silent workings of God in his own life and even the failures bring him new growth." (National Catholic Vocation Council, 1307 S. Wabash, Suite 350, Chicago, Ill. 60605. \$1.75.)