

Lack of support, societal pressures blamed for discouraging vocations

By Teresa A. Parsons

It's known as the "Oh my God" phenomenon. Year after year, statistics show that as a Eucharistic people, Catholics are headed for a critical shortage of priests.

Nationwide, the average age of priests in the United States is now 55. If present rates continue, we can count on between 13,000-19,000 active priests in the year 2,000 compared to 35,000 today. One priest per every 4,000 families will be the average ratio according to estimates from the U.S. Catholic Conference Office of Research.

The magnitude of those numbers can be a little numbing. On a more meaningful level, no one entered the seminary this year in the Diocese of Rochester. Between now and 1990, diocesan projections indicate that 25 priests will retire and another 15 will either die or leave while only 12 men will be ordained.

Meanwhile, suggested answers to the vocation crisis seem to be as numerous as vocations are not.

The fact that no one entered the seminary should make Catholics "sit up and take notice, check out their own attitudes," said Father Thomas Valenti, diocesan director of the Office of Vocations.

"I wonder if people understand it's a real problem. I think they think there's a reservoir somewhere of priests waiting to be assigned," he added.

Father Valenti believes that to attract more people to the priesthood or religious life, we must, above all, ask more.

"Why not raise the idea with people who seem qualified?" he said. "Everybody is a vocation director."

When he interviews men who believe they may have a vocation, Father Valenti said he often encounters fear on all sides. The men have either received or anticipate negative reactions from parents and friends — comments like "Don't waste yourself, you have too much to offer," and "Anything but the priesthood, anybody but my son."

"Where is our belief that God will supply the strength for that kind of life?" Father Valenti asked. "What am I saying if I respond, 'Why don't you become a social worker instead?' Am I supporting God's call?"

Others are afraid that if people find out, they will be prematurely locked into the priestly role and unable to withdraw without feeling they've failed.

Societal changes are what Father Jim Schwartz, director of a diocesan discernment program at Becket Hall, believes are behind the lack of vocations.

"Clearly to me the reason is celibacy," said Father Schwartz, citing that as the overwhelming reason men give for leaving the discernment program. "It's increasingly difficult to make any kind of commitment. The idea of making a lifelong commitment is mbrre awesome today."

Intimacy, moreover, is less and less distinct from sexuality in our world. As priests feel free to engage in relationships with people — to go out to dinner with a female friend, for instance — they have no role models for how to be intimate, to gauge another person's expectations in a relationship, to express love in a celibate way.

"I think we need to give a healthier witness to society of sexuality," Father Schwartz

said. "The media at every possible level glamorizes it. And sex becomes a big problem when there's no intimacy in a person's life. The physical side of it becomes more and more important."

"The pinch is going to be felt more acutely when we begin to celebrate Eucharist less frequently," Father Schwartz predicted. "At some point, I think we are going to have to ask ourselves 'what is more important, the sacrament of Eucharist or celibacy?'"

One key to promoting vocations, Father Schwartz suggested, is for the Church to pay more attention to the vocations it has already been granted. If parents don't encourage their children to become priests, he said, perhaps it is because the priests they know don't appear to experience joy or fulfillment in their vocation.

"If the image of a tired, joyless celibate is the one reflected in society at large, it's not surprising," he said.

Perhaps the clearest insights on vocations to the priesthood come from men who are seeking to discern one in themselves. At Becket Hall, the site for a residential discernment program, men live in a home-like setting, study, do apostolic work in the community and find counseling, support and direction with one another and from Father Schwartz.

Although most of the men interviewed agreed that parental and peer support has been important, the lack of it was not seen as a deathblow for a vocation. "Friends and parents can influence your ideas, but you're the one who has to live it," said Joe Ringholz, a second-year Becket resident. "You have to find for yourself where your happiness lies."

A more recent arrival, Edwin Garcia, said he has encountered strong parental and peer opposition to his aspiration. His father objects to his becoming a priest partly because of his cultural background. As the oldest son of a Puerto Rican family, Garcia explained, he is expected to marry, have children and pass on the family name.

Garcia said he accepts that pressure and expects it to continue until the day he is ordained, if he makes it that far, and after.

"People neglect the fact that being a Christian, you are expected to take up your cross and carry it every day," he explained. "No one ever said it was supposed to be easy."

At least at Becket Hall, his case seems to be the exception. Most others interviewed have received family approval, even when the adjustment was initially difficult.

Brian Jeffers remembered that his parents were accustomed to the idea that he would be an engineer. So when he told them engineering "wasn't his bit" and priesthood might be, they were not so much opposed as surprised.

Jeffers doesn't believe that parents resist a son seeking ordination strictly out of selfishness, but rather from a protective instinct.

"It goes back to the American way — that you want the best for your kids," he said. "A car, a family, a good job. Those are the best things, the way society sees it now."

Garcia agreed, pointing out that someone who thinks about a vocation is perceived as strange. "They're going against the grain of



Jeff Goulding / Courier-Journal

Joe Ringholz is in his second year at Nazareth College, majoring in religious studies. Along with his counterparts, he wonders how the priest shortage will have affected parishes if and when he is ordained.

society," he said. "The cross of Christ just doesn't fit into this world."

Comments like "don't waste yourself" tend to confirm Garcia's belief, revealing an attitude that the priesthood is for people who can't make it in the "real world."

But increasingly, the men who come to Becket Hall or enter the priesthood from other directions are already successful. It's a phenomenon known as "second-career vocations," and as Father Schwartz pointed out, life experience can only be counted a plus.

Greg Haehl considered himself successful before he came to Becket. He was part owner with his brother of a Brockport company that distributes machine tools.

"I was dead set against it (the priesthood) in high school," he said. "In fact, it never entered my mind. Then I thought it would never be part of my personality to be that giving." Gradually the idea began to seem more and more plausible, until he realized he was asking himself, "Why not?"

Haehl pointed out that if the alternative Becket offers for discernment had not been open to him, he might never have answered the call. Another influence in his choice was a close friend who happened to be a priest.

"It is critical to be shown a proper example of what a priest is, that he is a normal human being," Haehl said. "People need to help priests step down off the pedestal."

A primary consideration that Haehl, Jeffers and each of the others have struggled and continue to struggle with is whether they can and should be expected to live as celibates.

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Four men living at Becket Hall to discern whether they are called to the priesthood agree that the support of others and the example and friendship of priests have been strong influences for them. From left to right, they are Greg Haehl, Brian Jeffers, Edwin Garcia and Joe Ringholz.

My dear friends:

Church Vocation Awareness week (October 13-20) presents us with an opportunity to reflect and to pray about Church vocations.

I am convinced that many are being called by God to serve the Church and that certainly a number of them are called to ministry in the priesthood and religious life.

We need to pray each day especially during this week that this vision becomes a reality for the good of our Church, in order for the Church to continue the mission of Jesus Christ.

Each of us has a part to play in the area of vocation education and vocation awareness. I realize more and more the important role parents play when a member of the family may be considering a vocation to religious life and the priesthood. If God is calling, we can either be instrumental in allowing that person to better hear the call or, unfortunately in some cases, encourage him or her to turn a deaf ear to God's voice.

With this in mind, I am asking each person to reflect on his or her own attitudes and the many opportunities he or she might have to foster vocations in the Church, especially in this age when we are experiencing such a decline in the number of vocations to the religious life and the priesthood.

With my prayers and every good wish, I remain,

Your brother in Christ,

Matthew H. Clark

+ Matthew H. Clark
Bishop of Rochester

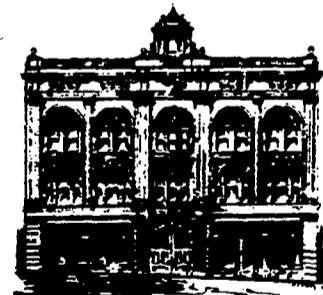
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