

Convocation '87 examines changes in sacramental practice

Despite some initial resistance to the lengthened format, Convocation '87 — the eighth annual diocesan priests' conference — "brought the most positive responses of all" according to organizer Father James Schwartz.

In addition to being the longest priests' conference conducted in the diocese since Bishop Matthew H. Clark inaugurated the sessions seven years ago, Convocation '87 was also the first gathering to include all of the active priests within the diocese. In previous years, two regional sessions had been arranged, each of which accommodated one half of the priests working within the diocese.

Entitled "The Changed and Changing Sacramental Life of the Church," the convocation drew 255 participants to the Henrietta Marriott April 27-29. Attendance this year ran the gamut from a seminarian and two transitional deacons to 10 retired priests, who pleasantly surprised organizers by attending on a purely voluntary basis. "It was inspiring to see some of those guys who've been through the wars and are still enthusiastic," Father Schwartz noted.

"The feedback is that people very much approved of the expanded format," said Father Schwartz, chairman of the Ministry to Priests Program. He noted that 58 percent of the priests who responded to a post-conference evaluation were so enthusiastic about the 48-hour program that they urged that it be used every year. Another 25 percent suggested that planners alternate the longer program with the old 24-hour format.

"If you took a pulse rate at the beginning and at the end, you'd see a significant upswing," Father Schwartz said, noting that the positive and professional atmosphere of the conference succeeded in turning around the resistance of some who had considered devoting the better part of three days to be an excessive time commitment.

The key to that success, Father Schwartz believes, was a combination of good presenters, such "amenities" as good food and accommodations, and the company of old friends.

Asked to choose his favorite aspect of the event, Father Schwartz observed that "the highlight was the simple fact that all of the active priests of the diocese were brought together. It created a very positive feeling."

Bringing together the entire presbyterate, or body of priests, for the three-day conference also offered presenters — Bishop Clark, Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany and Dr. Mark Searle — an opportunity to tackle the sacramental challenges that will be facing all priests in the years ahead.

During his speech, the last of the three formal presentations, Bishop Clark addressed the topic "Priest as Presider." Taking the concept of presiding beyond the sphere of liturgical celebration, the bishop offered an analysis of priesthood today and in the future.

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Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Changes in the sacramental life of the Church have challenged priests to reassess their roles in determining a candidate's readiness. Sacramental practice was the focus of Convocation '87, the eighth annual diocesan priests' conference.

common responsibility for the well-being of our entire local Church," he observed.

Throughout his presentation, Bishop Clark repeatedly spoke of the need for priests to develop increased sensitivity to the concerns of the laity. The people, he said "need and want to know that we do not stand apart from and above them. . . but somehow that we at least try to lay down our lives for them and that, like them, we are human, we search for truth, we struggle to be faithful, we sin and need

reconciliation, we walk with them in the human journey and are alert to their difficulties and their needs.

"Our call to servant leadership is one which we are meant to experience in union with all of the baptized, and unless we are willing daily to engage in (that union) with them, we stand in danger of losing credibility as servant leaders in the community," he continued. "Our deepest gift to the people in this ministry is our effort, born of our union with Christ, to communi-

cate reverence for who they are, where they are, where they hope to go and the cost of going there. This, I believe, we can do only to the degree that we, too, have found our own humanity broken open and healed in Christ, and are willing in and through our humanity to make Christ available to our people."

The bishop also urged the priests to seek Christ in the people of God. "Presiding requires us not only to offer our gifts, but also calls us to be open to Christ speaking to us in our people. . . . We are transformed in Christ by all of the daily interactions and signs by which Christ in others calls us to service," he said, citing people who present various pastoral challenges as instruments through which priests can hear "the voice of Christ calling us to new life and deeper awareness."

So too, he said, Christ may be found in those "who wish to serve with us and to support us in our ministry. . . . especially sometimes those who recognize and accept and want us to be at home with our humanity. There may be no greater ministry to a minister than that, when so often — by training, disposition or temperament — we can strive for a perfection that's not real or desirable or attainable."

Bishop Clark also offered an overview of the vocations picture, both on the diocesan and national levels. "In 1980, when we first gathered in this kind of an assembly, we numbered 325 active priests and we counted 69 senior (retired) priests. Our seminarians numbered 51. . . . Today, there are 256 active diocesan priests and 86 senior priests. Those considering or preparing for priesthood number 22," he said.

"The net loss is 69 active priests over seven years. That loss is notable in itself and certainly is cause for thought. What makes the number more startling is the projection that. . . by the year 2000, we will have in this nation one-half the number of active diocesan priests that we have today. If that projection applies here in the Diocese of Rochester, we will have 128 (active) priests in the year 2000.

"Another significant factor is the age of this presbyterate," Bishop Clark continued. "At the present time, our median age is 51 for active priests. I don't know what that number will be in the year 2000, but it's a safe bet that we'll probably not only be a smaller group but a grayer group as well, and probably a more tired group in some ways. . . . Think what life will be like then if we don't adjust to these circumstances."

Moreover, he observed, the pastoral agenda to be faced — struggles to attain world peace and economic justice; to eliminate racism and injustice to women; and the questions posed by changes in medical technology, the spiritual needs of homosexuals and the growing numbers of aged people in society — has become more intense and complex in recent years.

"We deal not only with a crowded agenda, which exceeds our capacity to absorb and understand great amounts of data, but with a very sensitive agenda about which there can be sharp disagreement within the communities in which we're trying to serve as agents of unity and peace," Bishop Clark commented.

As a result of this, he asserted, "We need to strive to find better, fresher, more effective ways of sharing the critical task of preparing our communities for the major adjustments we need to make. Change comes easier for some persons than it does for others, and I believe it's the same for communities. But when people understand what is happening and participate in choosing new directions, change can be not only tolerable. . . . but even an enjoyable source of new life.

"Our leadership, in creating a climate in which these challenging questions can be faced, is extremely important; I would say it's the central important factor that we need to have in our local Church," the bishop concluded.

One of the challenges priests face on a regular basis was the subject of three of the conference components. During a panel discussion, priests considered their anxieties over a

Continued on Page 16

Bishop's statement echoes recent column remarks

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total presiders when — in the liturgical assembly and outside of it — we call forth and rejoice in all of the gifts God gives individuals for the common good."

Bishop Clark emphasized that his statement did not stem from any sense of irreverence, disobedience or disrespect for Church teaching, and noted that he offered it as a request, not as a mandate. He further observed that the ministerial duties encompassed by his remarks are "so peripheral to the centrality of our faith, yet so essential to the well-being of so many of our people."

"I see it as affirming what we have been doing here since the parish was founded."

Father Gerald Appelby said, referring to female altar servers, lectors and Eucharistic ministers at his Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford. "I admire greatly (Bishop Clark's) courage in doing that. I think he is absolutely right on target."

On the other hand, Father William Hart of Holy Trinity Parish in Webster considered the position a "discrepancy" from Church policy.

"(The bishop) wrote in his column. . . that he was going to try this out" on us. That sounds like a challenge," Father Hart said. "I'm up to challenges, but I guess I'm waiting to see what happens."

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