



CATHOLIC COURIER

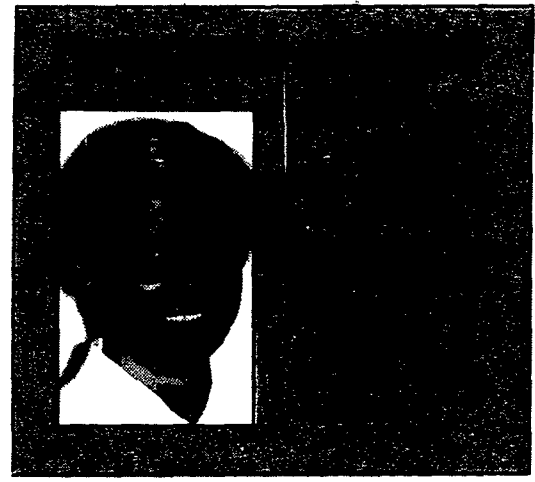
DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NY

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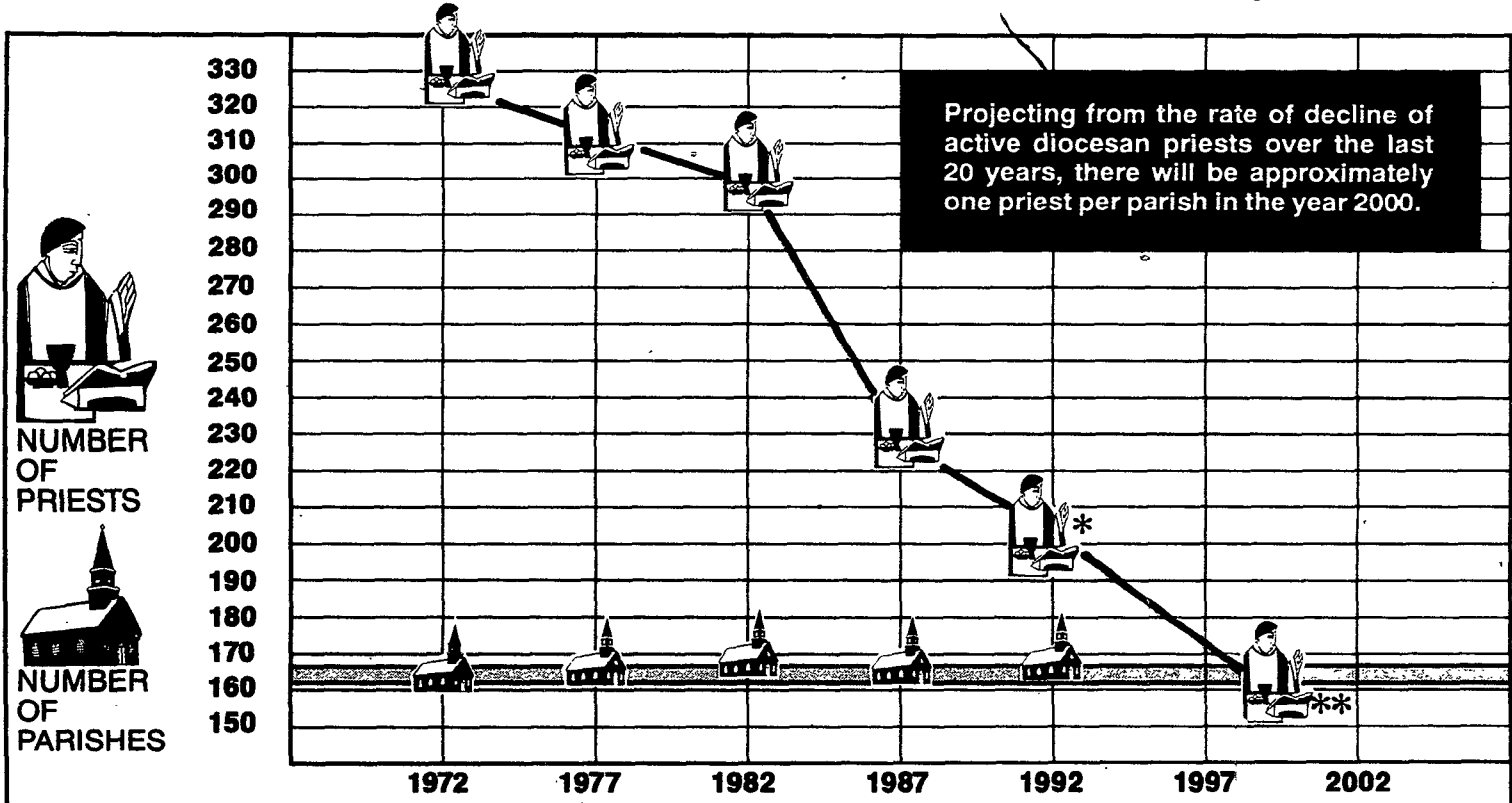
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Clusters grow as priest availability falls

“Will the priest be available?” was the big question. People are very used to call the rectory and Father will come.”



* 196 active priests for 162 parishes in June of 1993.

** At estimated rate, 162 priests on Jan. 1, 2000.

Earlier this spring, parishioners in the Elmira area opened their Sunday bulletins to find flyers offering news on a growing — and necessary — trend.

The bulletin insert was signed by all nine pastors in the Chemung-Schuyler region as well as Father Peter C. Clifford, diocesan director of Parish Support Ministry. It announced plans for the formation of two clusters — gatherings of two or more parishes under a common pastor and staff.

The cluster plans call for the merger of staffs at St. Casimir in Elmira and St. Charles Borromeo in Elmira Heights beginning next June. In addition, St. Anthony and Patrick, both in Elmira, are slated to undergo clustering at some point after St. Casimir and St. Charles Borromeo combine.

Likewise in Rochester, three parishes on the city's northeast side will merge at the end of this month: St. Michael's, Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier.

The primary impetus for these events is the steadily declining number of active priests within the diocese.

When the annual round of ordinations, reassignments and retirements concludes later this month, the diocese will be left with 196 active priests for its 162 parishes.

According to figures provided by the diocesan Office of Priest Personnel, the diocese now has 130 fewer active priests than in 1973 — a decrease of nearly 40 percent.

Further compounding this dilemma is an increase in the total Roman Catholic population within the diocese. There were 318,430 diocesan Catholics listed in 1973, compared to 389,523 today.

Thus, in just two decades, the ratio of active priests to Catholics has more than doubled in the Rochester diocese — from one priest for every 977 Catholics 20 years ago, to one for every 1,987 in 1993.

With the number of available priests dwindling at a

Story by Mike Latona
Staff writer

rate of six or seven per year, parishes might well outnumber active priests by the year 2000.

Already, 15 diocesan parishes, or 9.2 percent of the total, have operated without a resident pastor for the first six months of this year. Masses at these parishes are usually conducted by visiting priests from religious orders, temporary administrators or retired priests living in the area.

The 9.2-percent figure is slightly lower than the national ratio; according to Catholic News Service, approximately 2,050 of the nearly 20,000 U.S. parishes — or 10.2 percent — went without a resident pastor in 1992. This represented a jump from 843 pastorless parishes in 1992 — a rise of 143 percent within a single decade.

These factors have made clustering an essential alternative. The Rochester diocese, which began the process in 1984, currently includes several two-parish clusters; while the impending cluster in northeast Rochester will become the seventh diocesan configuration with at least three member parishes.

Smaller clusters operate with a single priest. Others, such as the three-priest/four-parish Corning-Painted Post Roman Catholic Community, have a team of priests.

According to Father Clifford, various circumstances can serve as catalysts for clustering.

He noted that the four-parish Cayuga Team Ministry Cluster in Cayuga County was formed after two priests

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Father Richard Belgott, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo Church in Elmira Heights, which is slated for clustering next year.