

# Facing some dawning realities

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

One of the issues we have been discussing at the monthly meetings of our Priests' Council has been the implications of the fact that we are not realizing vocations to the priesthood sufficient in number to replace our current presbyterate. As a result, we ordained priests are becoming fewer in number, and we are growing older.

Parishes that at one time enjoyed the services of three or four priests or could now use that number have one priest. Some parishes that for years enjoyed the ministry of a resident pastor now share the ministry of one pastor who, together with a pastoral team, serves a cluster of parishes.

One parish now — and others in the future — will have a pastoral administrator, not a priest, who will be the resident pastoral leader. Sacramental ministry will be provided by a priest who is not assigned to the community on a full-time basis.

Obviously, this reality is one that calls all of us to make some serious adjustments. Parishioners have to take responsibility for many duties that previously were taken care of by Father. In such circumstances, parish communities learn that much is to be gained by ever closer collaboration with neighboring parishes that once may have been friendly rivals.

Thanks to the faith and goodness of those involved, such adjustments in our diocese have been made in a peaceful way. There have been moments of tension, of course. But people have been patient and kind, and we have found ways to work through such issues — and with results that are often very pleasing. Duplication of effort is reduced, energies and talents are pooled for greater efficiency, and people's horizons are expanded.

Our priests also must make adjustments. It stands to reason that priests who are aging



## A LONG THE WAY

and diminishing in number cannot do, nor be expected to do, all that they did in the past. Something has to give. Decisions have to be made. And all of us, as best we can, need to contribute to and stand in support of those decisions as they are fashioned. Otherwise we will exhaust our priests, frustrate our parish communities and miss the opportunity for new life that is inevitably present when people of faith join to take on tough issues.

I don't have quick solutions to these questions. No one does. But part of my job is to raise questions. Another is to invite our priests and communities to raise and face their questions. Yet another is to promote opportunities for us together to find respectful and honest ways to deal with the problems and make the most of the opportunities that face us.

When we priests gather for our annual convocation in April, we will try to bring our conversation about these issues to a new level of common understanding. I'll be telling you about that when the time comes and likely will touch upon this theme again before then.

Let me leave you with these questions for your consideration. They are suggestive of some of the areas to which all of us need to give much attention. Please remember that the least helpful response of all is one form or another of: "That's impossible. We've never and/or always done it that way!"

a.) You go to the 7 a.m. Mass next Sunday — you ALWAYS go to the 7 a.m. on Sunday — and the pastor tells you that, because your recently transferred parochial vicar will not be replaced, it would be prudent to drop one Mass from the Sunday schedule. What is your reaction to that statement, and how best do you think the matter should be handled? What factors ought to be considered?

b.) Your parish synod yielded a very strong sentiment for an upgrade in ministry with and for the youth of the parish. The pastor indicates very strong support for that idea, but says that because of health, lack of time or lack of ability, he cannot do it. As things now stand in your parish where would the matter go — or not go — from there? What would you suggest to make the "from there" better than it currently is?

c.) Your pastor has tried desperately to find a replacement for his vacation — I've tried to help him — but it has been just impossible to find someone to fill in. He is very tired and knows that he very much needs the break. But he also has a strong sense of duty and feels guilty about leaving the parish in this way. The pastor comes to you to talk about the matter. How do you hope the conversation might go?

I hope that these questions might serve to stimulate your thoughts about a theme that — sooner rather than later — will become more urgent for us. If you do think about it and would like to share your ideas with me, I would be very pleased to receive them.

Thanks so much for your kind attention. Peace to all!

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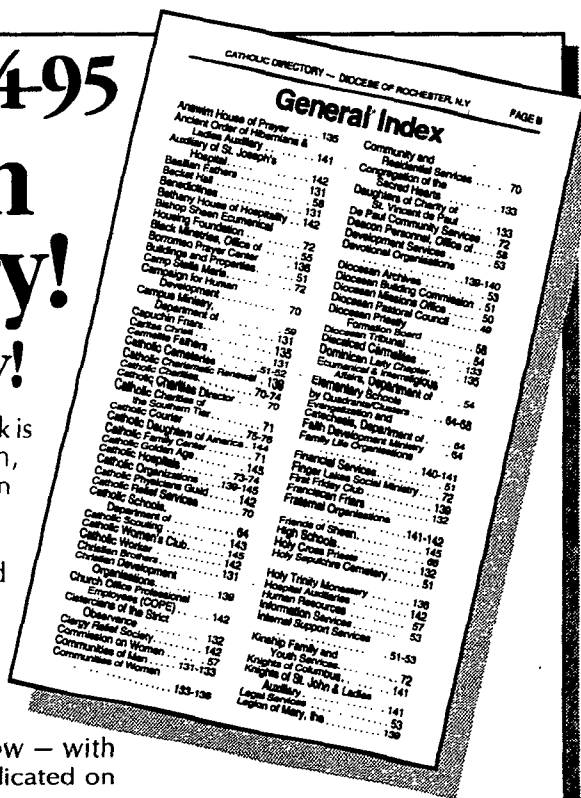
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