

Priests growing older, scarcer

Bishop Matthew H. Clark

In Along the Way of Jan. 19, I wrote of discussions we have been having in our Presbyteral Council concerning the fact that we priests are growing older and that — relative to the number of Catholic people to be served — we are fewer in number. At the end of that column I raised three questions that were meant to exemplify some of the practical difficulties we face because of these changing circumstances. You have sent some interesting ideas in response to those questions and I will be including those ideas in Along the Way very soon.

This week I want to address this theme again by sharing some data with you:

1. There was one Catholic priest for every 800 Catholics in the Rochester diocese in 1942. In the year 2002, unless something totally unforeseen happens, there will be one Catholic priest for every 3,000 Catholics.

2. The age of that priest who was serving the 800 Catholics in 1942 was 42 years. The age of the priest who will be serving nearly 3,000 Catholics in 2002 will be 62 years.

Both of those items bear strong implications for this diocese's priests and for the people for whose service they were ordained. It's difficult to apply numbers to individual lives and we need to be careful to recognize other circumstances, both positive and negative, which affect pastoral ministry. But I think all will agree that serving 3,000 people is not going to be the same as serving 800.

I think we will agree as well that some significant changes occur in people's lives between ages 42 and 62. We hope that greater years and expanded experience deepen wisdom, help to put things in healthy perspective, give greater patience with human shortcomings and make us more loving. But we're also aware that the passing years can diminish energy, impact our physical health and otherwise affect our capacity to function at levels we maintained at an ear-



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lier age. (Even as I write this, I am aware of being much closer to 62 than 42 and of the ways in which I have experienced the aging process since I became your bishop at 42!)

Let me add a third factor, less measurable by number than the data cited above, which is part of our challenge today. That is the fact that the ordained priest's ministry today is much more demanding than it was 20, 30 or 40 years ago. I do not mean to say that somehow today's priest is better, holier and more ambitious than his counterpart from an earlier time. We were blessed with wonderful priests then and we are now. I mean to say only that such factors as the church's renewed self understanding, an evolving sense of pastoral ministry, the rising education level of Catholic people and other powerful cultural changes come together to demand much more of today's priest than of yesterday's. (If you would like to test out what I am saying, ask one of our great senior

priests if they agree that the priesthood's demands today are greater than they were at the time they were ordained.)

All of this brings us back to the theme of this piece and of the one I wrote on Jan. 19: the realities we are facing with regard to our presbyters call for some serious adjustments both on the part of our priests and on the part of the people they serve. Failure to wrestle with that need for change will create an unhealthy situation for all concerned. We will inevitably damage the health of our priests by placing impossible expectations on them. We will leave our people deeply frustrated because what seems to them to be legitimate expectations will be left unmet.

Let me state the issue in a positive fashion. We are in a position to make some choices that will be of benefit both to our priests and to the people they serve. All of us have something to contribute to and to learn from this kind of experience. We will be better off, if all are willing to participate with the same spirit and dispositions that participants brought to our Synod process. We can do great things when we are willing to share our own experience and ideas, and when we are willing to listen carefully to those of others.

In conclusion, I present a practical situation and some questions for your consideration: Your pastor tells you that he feels heavily pressured by ministry's demands. He knows that he can't continue to do it all and wants the input of parishioners like yourself to help him identify ministry's two or three aspects most beneficial to the faith life of the parish community.

To which areas would you invite him to devote his time and energy? Why?

How do you think he would react to your suggestions? Why?

If your pastor asked six other parishioners the same questions he asked you, how would you guess their responses might differ from your own?

I appreciate your kind attention and would be glad to receive your ideas.

Peace to all.

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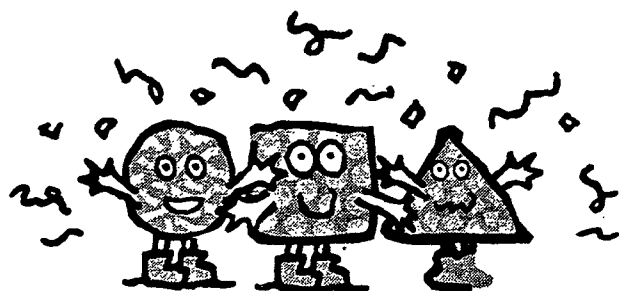


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