

## Ideas reveal true love for church

By Bishop Matthew H. Clark

As promised, I want to offer reader response to some ideas and questions I have raised recently about the implications for our community of our aging and diminishing number of ordained priests.

Although it is not possible to mention every idea sent to me, I do want you to have a sense of what people are thinking. I have tried in the following summary to give you as full a sampling of that thinking as possible. I have tried to gather your ideas into the general categories about which you wrote and have attempted to give you a sense of the range of comment within each category.

1.) The Eucharist: Writers clearly and strongly convey a love for the eucharistic liturgy and a deep sense that it is very much at the heart of Catholic life. "Eucharist is the center of our faith life and to be without it is incomprehensible ..." That statement expresses well a dominant theme in the responses I received. I would go so far as to say that most comments about daily priestly ministry indicate that at its core is the ministry of presiding and preaching at the eucharistic liturgy and the administration of the sacraments.

2.) Preaching: Strong encouragement to priests to take seriously the importance and impact of good preaching was a recommendation of many writers. Although stress was placed on the importance of preaching at the Sunday liturgy, it is clear that people look to their priests for a broader instruction, encouragement and appropriate guidance on a range of issues relating to their faith lives. "What we really care about is holiness, prayer life, knowledge of the Scripture, deeper understanding of the sacraments ..."

3.) Presence: After the ministries of presiding, preaching and teaching the ministry — which those who wrote seem to prize most — is what one called a ministry of presence. "Allowing time and energy simply to be with others is vital. Whatever allows for pastoral visitation and contact in both pastorally sensitive moments as well as the more 'ordinary' ones should be implemented." One



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writer stressed the importance of this kind of ministry to the homebound elderly who "feel hurt after all the years of faithfulness to the church and all the years they supported the church financially ... that the pastor doesn't come to see them."

4.) Personal gifts: There was a rich recognition among correspondents that priests are individuals with distinct personalities and particular gifts, that they should be encouraged to develop and share those gifts for their own growth in holiness and for the good of the community "so priests should minister in areas where they are especially gifted as individuals. If we believe that God gives all of us spiritual gifts for the building up of the church, it would be a terrible waste if a priest were unable to use his gifts in ministry."

Another writes: "The pastor should be invited to devote his time and energy to those areas for which he is best suited and which bring him the greatest satisfaction, thus ultimately bringing the greatest good to his flock."

Included in the correspondence were a number of practical suggestions about ways in which we might offer some constructive responses to the issues at hand:

1.) Very strong support was expressed for the

idea of asking others to take responsibility for areas of parish life that in the past have been the pastor's work. Many recommended, for example, consideration of a parish business manager when and wherever possible. More generally, one person noted, "the Catholic population needs education on what to expect from their pastor. What are the duties that only the priest can do? Then what are the duties which can be done by the laity? ... Reinforcement at the parish level is needed".

2.) Several correspondents made comments about the number of eucharistic liturgies celebrated in our parish communities. They believe that we should do much more scheduling on a community-wide basis, thus avoiding duplication and any appearance of competition among us. One writer put it with some passion when she wrote, "people who can get to Mass are lucky and it makes me do ... a slow burn when I hear them whine over a change in the Mass schedule. All I can think of is how many Catholics past and present, have had to wait weeks, months or even years for a priest."

3.) Vocations to the priesthood and efforts to encourage them drew a variety of comments. They included specific ideas about local efforts (media presentations, more encouragement by priests, recruitment of priests and seminarians from nations with an abundance of vocations); regrets that we can't ordain gifted and interested candidates regardless of their gender or marital status; and the wish that we could enjoy a return to ministry of resigned, married priests who desire to be active again.

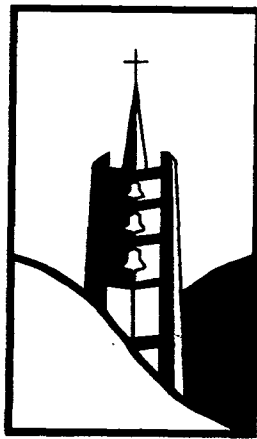
I have written a note of thanks to all who so kindly wrote to express their interest in and suggestions about the ministry of the ordained priest in today's church. I thank them again for their generosity. I invite all of you to continue thinking, praying and conversing about this important aspect of Catholic life.

Next week I'll be taking a winter break from *Along the Way*. I will be with you again in the March 2 issue.

Peace to all.

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