



Catholic Courier

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Uncertainty, extra demands create increasing stress for parish priests

STORY BY
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The afternoon of Thursday, June 22, Father William Barrett was enjoying his day off, taking a nap to rest up for a later round of golf and dinner with a friend. His relaxation was interrupted by the ringing of a telephone in his parish rectory at St. Michael's Church in Lyons.

The phone call could have been from a parishioner seeking counseling, a hospital needing a priest to respond to an accident, or perhaps a parish committee member asking whether the pastor would be available for the next meeting.

Instead, it was the *Catholic Courier* looking for comments about stress among priests.

Father Barrett — with good humor — was quick to point out the irony of receiving such a telephone call on his day off.

"I'm home," he observed, "but my business is my home."

While most people go home at night, leaving business concerns at the office, priests cannot so easily escape work pressures at home because "they live above the shop," he remarked.

And on their days off, Father Barrett added, priests frequently use the time to catch up on all t h e

sleep they've lost over the past week while attending to the vast array of duties priests are called upon to perform these days.

Parish priests face many of the tasks of business managers: supervising staff; overseeing payroll and equipment purchases; paying bills; keeping up with the latest developments in the "industry;" giving presentations.

But added to those tasks are such responsibilities as evening meetings, counseling, training sessions, middle-of-the-night hospital calls, weddings and wedding rehearsals, funerals, and so on.

"Priests are being stretched," acknowledged Father Daniel Tormey, pastor of Scottsville's St. Mary's Church, and the outgoing director of the diocese's Office of Ministry to Priests.

And looking into the future, Father Tormey continued, priests foresee becoming even more stretched.

"I think most priests are happy and healthy, but it's the uncertainty of the future" that can cause stress, Father Tormey observed. "The fear is as great as the reality — the anticipation of what's going to happen in the next few years."

Little uncertainty exists about the declining numbers of active priests in the Diocese of Rochester as a result of dwindling numbers of new priests being ordained — only one this year — and more priests retiring, becoming ill or dying.

The diocese currently estimates that the number of priests in active ministry will drop below the number of diocesan parishes by approximately the year 2,000. And by 2010, the number of priests in active and special ministry in the diocese is projected to fall to 98.

These figures are one of the major sources of stress among the priests of the diocese, acknowledged Father Robert Ring, director of the Department of Priests' Personnel.

"The major potential source of stress is the uncertainty of what expectations might be in the next five, 10 years in order to meet the sacramental needs of the people of the diocese," Father Ring remarked.

During the past year the diocese — and the presbyterate — also has suffered the sudden deaths of several younger priests who would have been expected to serve for many more years. Their deaths not only have further depleted the priestly ranks, but have also meant many priests have lost friends and co-workers.

Deaths of young colleagues cause shock, observed Father George Wiant, pastor of Victor's St. Patrick's Church, as happens whenever a younger person dies unexpectedly. But, "It's more of a longer-range thing," he said. "You wonder who's there to replace you in the ministry. You know you're stretched now."

Anticipating more work from fewer workers is only one source of stress, Fathers Tormey and Ring observed.

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Photo illustration by S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer