

Uncertainty

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Among the other sources of stress are the often negative media images of priests and religion; increasing demands from a growing lay population; a sense that the vocation of celibate priesthood is not actively supported by all people; and changing roles within the church that force priests to reevaluate their job descriptions and learn a collaborative style of ministry involving larger staffs and networks of committees and volunteers.

"All of that has caused a lot of anxiety among priests," Father Tormey said. "There hasn't been a lot of affirmation of priesthood as a way of life."

Nor are priests in the diocese alone in facing these sources of stress.

As far back as 1982, the Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released a report entitled "The Priest and Stress." In the report, the committee identified many of the sources of stress noted by area priests. It also noted that as with lay people, stress among priests can lead to depression, lack of energy, decreased ability to work and, in extreme cases, alcohol or drug abuse.

More recently, the Chicago-based National Federation of Priests' Councils surveyed priests across the United States in 1993 as part of Project Future Directions. The results of that survey — released in February, 1994 — indicate that while 91 percent of the priests surveyed were happy in their ministries, they experience several "problem" areas. The four major problems cited in the study are: the way authority is exercised in the church; unrealistic demands and expectations of lay people; too much work; and

the loneliness of priestly life.

Priests responding to the study also cited such issues as celibacy, uncertainty about the future of the church, a lack of clear understanding of what a priest is, and being expected to present church teachings with which they have difficulty.

"Their frustration is not in the work," noted Federation president Father Nick Rice. "By and large, they enjoy the work."

Instead, Father Rice continued, the greatest source of frustration is a sense that the institutional church is not adequately addressing problems and potential solutions — including the issues of mandatory celibacy and the ordination of married men and women. Instead, he said, the church seems to be focusing on increased lay ministry as a way to pick up some of the slack.

"Lay ministry really needed to be developed in the church," Father Rice said. "But they're not a replacement for ordained priesthood. The church is really not facing its leadership needs."

Moreover, increased lay ministry leads to other problems, Father Rice said. He noted, for example, that the Louisville, Ky., parish of which he had been pastor until last year had 56 active committees, and a number of pastoral leaders. In the early 1970s, by contrast, a parish of a similar size would have had only four or five committees and one clear pastoral leader: the pastor. Thus, the development of lay leadership has required priests to view their roles and leadership in different ways.

But priests themselves are sometimes guilty of allowing themselves to be stretched too far, Father Rice added.

"Priests by and large are so generous," Father Rice said. "They have such a high sense of responsibility. But generosity of

leadership can lead to bad pastoral practices."

Father Ring said stress is often rooted in a sense that one has no control over circumstances. Thus, the Diocese of Rochester has been exploring means of helping priests regain a sense of control.

In addition to the Employee Assistance Program offered to all diocesan employees, priests are encouraged to apply for sabbaticals that offer study opportunities as well as occasions for recreation.

Moreover, at the 1994 annual Priests Convocation Bishop Matthew H. Clark asked the gathered priests to consider what being a priest means, what is essential to the priesthood, what they can let go of, what tasks can be delegated to others and to whom to delegate these tasks, Father Ring reported. The diocese also regularly offers workshops and seminars to help address priests' needs and the changing demands of ministry.

One means the diocese encourages to help meet these needs is support groups. Father James Marvin, who retired this week as pastor of Rochester's St. Ambrose Church, has been meeting with a group of fellow priests for 35 years.

"It's been very helpful to all of us," Father Marvin reported. "It helps us to work through the changes in the church, especially after the Vatican Council."

The gathered priests share personal and parish problems to see how others have dealt with them and report on what they have read of the latest theological developments, Father Marvin noted. "It's like doctors taking about patients," he said. "What did you do? How did you treat that?"

Priests also need to seek strength by paying attention to spirituality, Father Tormey noted.

"Everybody has stress in their life, and

one of the ways to deal with that is to tap into the spiritual life," Father Tormey said. "One thing our (Ministry to Priests Program) has continued to try to do is encourage spiritual direction, spiritual formation of priests in order to help them to cope."

Priests need to learn to limit their activities, to pare them down to the essential, Father Rice observed. But priests are not the only ones who need to make some changes.

"(Lay people) have to have realistic expectations of priests," Father Ring remarked. "People have to accept ministry from individuals other than priests."

Thus, for example, parishioners must stop expecting the parish priest to attend every meeting, take part in every wedding rehearsal, make all hospital visits, and even perform all weddings — a function permanent deacons can fulfill.

But getting them to that point will not be easy, Father Barrett observed, noting, "It's that expectation that there is a priest and they want him as long as they've got him. Our pastor is healthy and he's still there ... It's very hard for (the reality) to sink in."

Parishioners can help relieve some of the stress on priests not only by reducing their expectations, but also by taking on more tasks, and providing continued and open support and affirmation of priests in their ministry, Father Ring observed.

"People will have to understand that they have to limit their demands on the time and attention (of priests)," Father Rice said. "There's got to be some good process extended over several years to get people used to a different way of doing things."

And perhaps then their priests can enjoy uninterrupted naps on their well-deserved days off.

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