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Eucharist

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Mass at parishes other than their own. This enabled parishes to eliminate some Masses and to allow parishioners to be aware of alternatives should they face emergencies in which a parish would be unable to provide a priest to say Mass.

Nonetheless, most diocesan Catholics may not realize that the convenient weekend Mass schedules they have taken for granted for decades are on their way to becoming relics, according to Joan Workmaster, director of the Office of Liturgy. "I think the situation is very much that they don't get it yet," she said. "There's an intellectual understanding that in some places there's a shortage of priests, but 'That's not happening in my area.'"

Yet, barring a sudden upsurge in ordinations, the priest shortage will affect the whole diocese by early next century, several observers said.

A number of parishes may eventually lose some Sunday Masses, and the average diocesan priest may wind up saying Sunday Mass at different parishes on a regular basis, according to Father Daniel J. Condon, pastor of The Catholic Community of Mount Morris and Nunda. The community consists of St. Patrick's Parish in Mount Morris and Holy Angels in Nunda.

Father Condon was president for one year of the diocesan Priests' Council, and ended his term in May. He said the prospect that he may have to shuttle between various parishes to perform sacramental duties rather than focus on min-

istering to one parish solely does not bother him.

"I'll expect that I'll serve multiple communities unless I'm associated with a parish so large that that becomes my exclusive focus," he said. "I don't see anything wrong with what people pejoratively call 'circuit-rider priests,'" he added.

But Msgr. William H. Shannon, professor emeritus of Nazareth College, and chaplain to the Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Pittsford, sees something definitely wrong with the idea of priests serving multiple parishes on a regular basis. He even wrote a 1994 article for *America* magazine headlined "No Circuit-Rider Priests, Please."

"I know a priest, a fine pastor, who said he would rather pump gas than become a 'circuit-rider' pastor ...," Msgr. Shannon wrote. "For a priest presiding over many worshipping communities would easily lose the sense of belonging to any one of them."

In the article, Msgr. Shannon went so far as to suggest that the church look at emergency measures in light of the priest shortage. He noted that the church allows a dying person to be baptized by a lay Catholic as long as no ordained clergyman is available to minister the sacrament. Could not the same logic the church uses to allow a lay Catholic to be a temporary baptismal minister also allow a lay Catholic — temporarily — to be a presider at Mass, he asked.

"(I)s there any reason why a lay person who is a recognized leader in a particular ecclesial community might not be deputized, in a case of necessity, to do what is ordinarily done by the priest, but which cannot be done by a priest because one is not avail-

able?" he wrote. "What would there be to prevent a lay person, in places where the faithful would otherwise be deprived of the Eucharist, to say the prayer that asks God to send the Holy Spirit to effect the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ?"

In an interview with the *Catholic Courier*, the monsignor said that his was "a way-out position that not many people would accept." But, more to his ultimate point, the priest commented, is the fact that the church withholds priestly ordination from all but celibate males, effectively limiting the number of possible solutions to the priest shortage — and hence, threatening the availability of the Eucharist itself.

Msgr. Shannon brought his point home at diocesan Ministry Day, which took place May 14 at DeSales High School in Geneva. Participants discussed in small groups and a general large group how to keep the Eucharist central in the diocese in light of the priest shortage.

Msgr. Shannon called the coming eucharistic availability crisis a "pseudoproblem" engendered by the church's refusal to consider ordaining anyone other than celibate males to the priesthood.

"It is possible that we could take care of all the parishes in the diocese with the ministerial presence right here in this building," he said, referring to the conference participants.

Msgr. Shannon's point was echoed by Dr. Nathan Mitchell, a staff member at the Center for Pastoral Liturgy at Notre Dame University and the keynote speaker at diocesan Ministry Day.

"I would dispute the notion that what we have is a shortage of vocations," he said in a phone interview from his Notre Dame office. "What we have is a shortage of people who are acceptable candidates for ordination."

But suggestions made by Ministry Day participants evidenced a broad range of thought on the eucharistic availability issue that included, but also went beyond, questions of who should be ordained a priest.

One small group called for the diocese to close parishes with small memberships so that priests would not be stretched too thin. Another group called for a five-year commitment by parishes to pray regularly for an increase in priestly vocations.

Another small group suggested that the church consider days other than Sunday on which to hold its weekly obligatory liturgy

for Catholics. Other small groups suggested that neighboring parishes cooperate and coordinate their Mass schedules to allow priests more flexibility to say Mass outside their home parishes. One man said his group wanted the diocese to consider allowing regular Sunday Masses by several parishes on such "neutral territory" as empty shopping malls.

According to Father Condon, the diocese has no plans to establish rigid rules on how parishes must deal with the coming shortage of priests to say Mass. The diocese would prefer that neighboring parishes in various regions work out solutions tailor-made to their specific situations, he said.

Dioceses throughout the United States are using a variety of approaches to the problem of priestless Sundays, from holding Communion services instead of Sunday Masses to celebrating the Liturgy of the Word without the Eucharist. Yet despite the variety of approaches, U.S. church leaders seem united in the belief that the Sunday Mass can't be replaced by regularly scheduled Sunday Communion services.

In fact, Kansas' bishops issued a pastoral letter in July 1995 in which they came out strongly against such a practice. Communion services regularly taking place instead of the Mass blur the distinction between the celebration of the Mass and the reception of Communion, the letter said.

The Kansas bishops' letter gave the eucharistic liturgy the respect it deserves, said Father James P. Moroney, associate director of the Secretariat for the Liturgy for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The priest is slated to speak at a two-day Diocesan Parish Support Ministry leadership conference at Keuka College Aug. 20-21.

Catholics sometimes mistakenly think of the reception of Communion as the sum total of the eucharistic experience, Father Moroney said, a point emphasized by several other observers. Such a view ignores such crucial values as the building of a local parish community through regular Sunday Masses, as well as the fact that the congregation is commemorating Christ's Last Supper, he and other observers said.

"The Sunday celebrations are not simply a convenient way to get Communion," Father Moroney said. "Communion is not something I get like a drive-through in a McDonald's."

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