

# COLUMNISTS

## Prayer for vocations could be updated

Yesterday morning at Mass there was a prayer for "an increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious life." While I'm obviously in favor of praying, and also for expecting great results, I become impatient with this particular phrase. I think it should be extended to include a whole range of new ministries, and maybe should even be rephrased.

My impression of what is often behind this prayer is our hope that the mission of the church will be fulfilled.

I suppose that by using the phrase "... to the priesthood and religious life," prayers reflect a common experience that has affected many of us over a number of years. This experience represents a reduction in the idea of ministry, a reduction that probably results from a number of factors. One, we came to know ministry as conducted primarily by priests and members of religious communities. Two, we really didn't appreciate baptism as the sacrament of mission.

Several New Testament passages reflect a different, much richer notion of ministry. In Ephesians, for example: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry ..." (4:11) In



the moral life

By Patricia Schoelles, SSJ

1 Corinthians: "And God has appointed ... first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership ..." (12:28)

Throughout the early church, new ministries were defined on the basis of what was needed to get the job done: As churches came to need new and different forms of service to carry out its mission, people were called forth. These people were not only those in vows or those ordained. They were the people whose gifts matched the need at hand - as recognized and called forth by the community. I keep wondering how prayers asking God for the grace to carry out the mission would have been phrased in those earlier times!

Perhaps our prayers for an increase in

just two forms of service reflect our sense that there is a "shortage" of priests and that fewer people are entering the vowed life. But perhaps they stem from our clinging to a notion that these two are the only real forms of minister in the church, even today.

This attitude may be partly the result of a nostalgic consideration of our own histories, since most of us can recall wonderful ways in which priests and religious have served us and our families. Most of us are conscious of the wonderful ways in which they continue to do so today. But this should not overshadow or diminish the wonderful witness and service we receive today from those lay ministers who also carry on the Gospel in our churches.

Years ago when I was a high school student our youth group, known as a sodality, enjoyed and benefited from Fathers Ed Zenkel, George Wiant, Jack Quinn and others. I'm sure that none of us will ever forget their generosity, and none of us can overlook their contribution to our lives. These men continue to be wonderful ministers today, though I suspect the needs of our times keeps them from being so directly involved as "youth ministers."

In the meantime, a few weeks ago I watched a group of younger and older

teens interact with a crew of talented, generous youth ministers from their parish. Some were paid members of a parish staff, some were volunteers; some were single, some were married, none were priests and none were members of religious communities. I couldn't help but think that in 35 years these teens will carry with them happy memories of their early formation in faith, and will express a sense of gratitude for these lay ministers helping them to develop a sense of who they are as Catholics.

I surely understand the need for more priests, and the religious orders are always enriched by new members. But I hope that we also sense the excitement and richness that is brought to church life these days by new forms of lay ministry. Today we are apparently returning to a more diverse, less "centralized" experience of ministry that may have more in common with New Testament times than with more recent history. Our prayers, too, might reflect our new experience as we pray that all the needs of the church will be filled by generous, talented women and men whose gifts are recognized and welcomed by open, caring, lively church communities.

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