

## AIDS series stirs church criticism

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (CNS) — A three-day series on Catholic priests with AIDS by *The Kansas City Star* has sparked wide controversy and criticism.

The series, begun Jan. 30, ended Feb. 1 with a long story revealing that AIDS was the cause of death last year of a prominent local Jesuit, Father Thom Savage, president of Rockhurst College in Kansas City.

The *Catholic Key*, Kansas City-St. Joseph diocesan newspaper, said that was "a fact known only to Father Savage's family until the *Star* report."

Priests contacted by *The Catholic Key* questioned several aspects of the series, which said that priests' deaths from AIDS are at least four times the rate of the general populace.

The series called into question "church

doctrine" on homosexuality, AIDS and the celibate priesthood. In a sidebar commentary, *Star* editor and vice president Mark Zieman described AIDS in the priesthood as "a question that strikes straight at the heart of church doctrine."

"He's just dead wrong about that," said Father Paul Turner, pastor of St. John Francis Regis Parish in Kansas City. "The central doctrines are that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is present in the Eucharist and so on. These are the things we hold most dear in our church. I hope the media are aware of that."

Jesuit Father Thomas Reese, editor of *America* magazine in New York, said the reference to priests having AIDS at four times the rate of the general population — a figure widely picked up by wire ser-

vices and other media — "is skewed" since priests are all adult males.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the incidence of AIDS among adult males is roughly five times that among adult women. Father Reese said the series used the comparison with the general populace four times and only once compared priests' deaths from AIDS with those of other adult males.

On the whole, however, Father Reese said the treatment of statistics in the series seemed "pretty even-handed."

Father Patrick Rush, Kansas City-St. Joseph diocesan vicar general, deplored the "inferential reporting" in the series.

"Quite simply, HIV-AIDS affects us all and poses a health crisis nationally and internationally," he stated.



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## Diocese takes action to address shortage

*EDITORS' NOTE: This is the first in an occasional series focusing on the effects of a declining number of priests and related vocations issues.*

Dwindling Mass schedules. Multiple job responsibilities for priests, even those approaching retirement age. One person ministering to four or more churches at a time. Non-priests assuming administrative duties traditionally earmarked for priests.

These factors all stem from an increasingly familiar problem: priest shortage. According to diocesan officials, the shortage has never been more acute — and immediate action is required.

Thirteen priests serving the diocese have died in the past year, including five since November. Two of them were young men — Father David Faraone was only 43 years old and Father Francis Blighton was 54. Also since November, two priests have stepped down from their pastorates unexpectedly: Father Albert Delmonte is currently on administrative leave, and Father Bruce Ammering retired as of Feb. 1 (see story on Page 3.)

"I can't remember a year we've lost that many," said Sandy Grocki, diocesan coordinator of clergy services. Grocki added that an unusually large number of priests have been sidelined recently due to surgery, illness and other health difficulties.

At this point, Grocki said, there are approximately 158 full-time diocesan priests, with a median age in the 50s. That would break down to approximately one priest per church building in the diocese. But that figure does not take into account those who are unable to serve due to health problems or vacations.

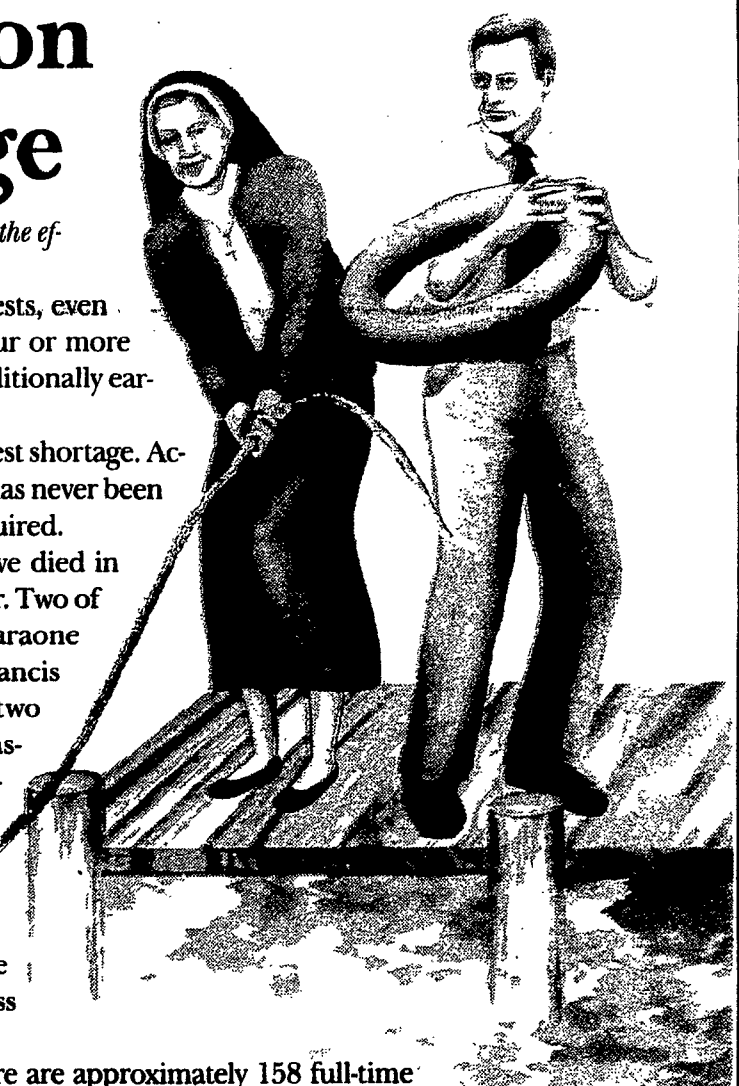
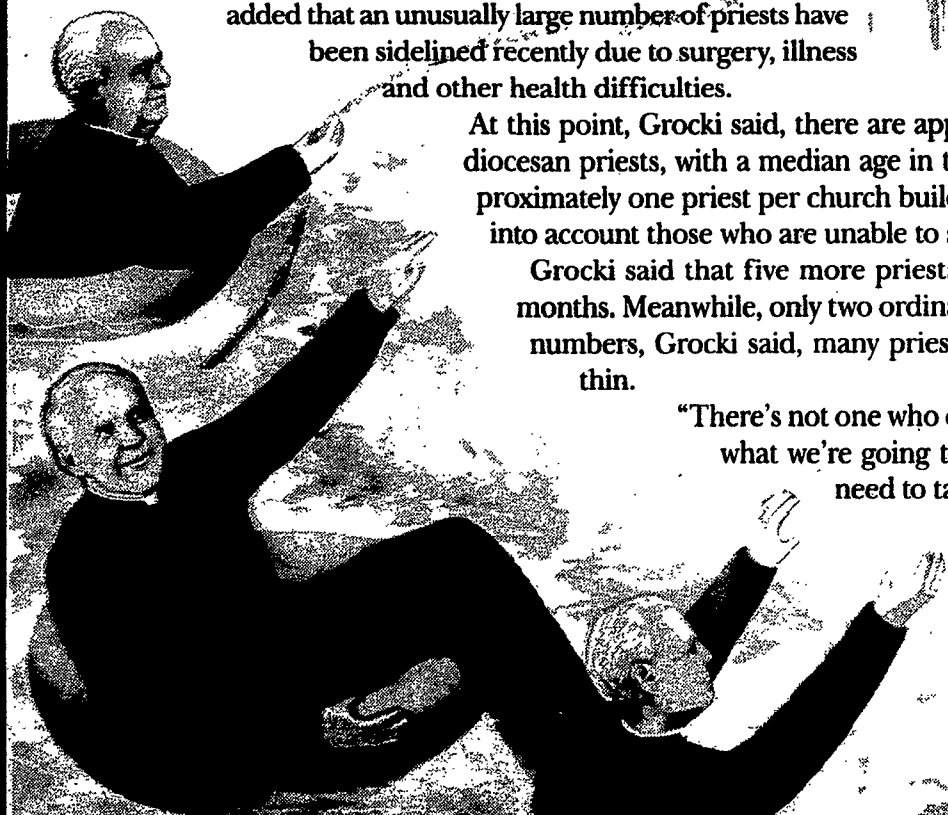
Grocki said that five more priests, perhaps six, are due to retire in the next few months. Meanwhile, only two ordinations are scheduled for this year. In light of these numbers, Grocki said, many priests have voiced concern over being stretched too thin.

"There's not one who doesn't make a remark to the effect, 'I don't know what we're going to do,'" Grocki said. "When they do get sick and need to take some time off, it's getting more difficult to replace them."

Although adjusting to the priest shortage is not a new concept, Grocki maintained that "it's not happening fast enough."

The issue has been a primary focus in the process of Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium, as regional planning groups prepare

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