

COLUMNISTS

Bishops must face priest shortage honestly

At their semi-annual meeting in Milwaukee last month, the U.S. Catholic bishops held their first-ever public discussion of the growing shortage of priests.

The discussion was prompted by a new study conducted under the supervision of Bishop Richard Hanifen of Colorado Springs, with data supplied by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, based at Georgetown University.

This latest survey indicates that the situation is worsening, contrary to past assurances that we were recovering. In 1965, the year the Second Vatican Council adjourned, there were 58,132 priests in the United States, ministering to 46.6 million Catholics. Today there are 46,709 priests (a decline of 20 percent) and 62.4 million Catholics (an increase of 34 percent). This downward trend is expected to continue throughout the coming decade.

During the discussion, Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark reported that his archdiocese is projecting a drop in the numbers of priests from 540 to 192 over the next 20 years. An auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, Thomas Curry, pointed out that, because of immigration, some parishes in his archdiocese now have 18,000 Catholic households. "The problems," he said, "are simply enormous."

The situation will not improve, given



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

the rising average age of priests (57 for those still active in diocesan ministry). And there are simply not enough seminarians in the pipeline to provide replacements for those who retire or die.

There are only 3,474 candidates for the priesthood in graduate-level seminaries today. That represents a 57 percent decline since 1965. Moreover, one-fourth of the seminarians are foreign born.

Major archdioceses around the country, including New York, Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles, are ordaining fewer than 10 new priests this year. Meanwhile, the priests who are currently on the job are facing mounting pressures in their own pastoral situations. Based on discussions within 18 focus groups around the country, Bishop Stephen Blaize of Stockton, Calif., reported that many priests are ex-

pressing feelings of inadequacy, stress and physical exhaustion. That comment is consistent with a number of recent articles on the subject, including Father Francis Dorff's "Are We Killing our Priests?" in the April 29 issue of *America* magazine.

While the bishops are to be commended for addressing, however belatedly, the problem of the growing shortage of priests, it is a source of some discouragement, but not surprise, that so many of them continue to "round up the usual suspects" when challenged to offer an explanation. For example:

1. Fewer parents are encouraging their sons to become priests. That is surely true, but why is it so? Doesn't "the changing face of the priesthood" (the title of Father Donald Cozzens' important new book) have anything at all to do with it? Have not the highly publicized scandals involving sexual misconduct, on the part of bishops as well as priests, had a negative impact? Aren't parents also aware that seminaries have taken on an increasingly gay character? And what of parents' desire for grandchildren, and their increased awareness of the loneliness of a priest's life, especially as a priest ages?

2. There is too much negative criticism of the church. But are the critics making it all up? Is there no basis at all for the crit-

icisms? Does the church's leadership have no obligation to address the problems raised by critics, or is it sufficient simply to deny the problems and attack the critics?

3. Society is secular and materialistic. Is this really a new development? What has happened is that there are now more educational and career opportunities available to gifted young Catholics than there were in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. Is it so difficult to understand why an intelligent, ambitious young man might not be drawn to a life-long occupation where loyalty seems to be rewarded over talent and creativity, and where celibacy is a condition of continued employment?

4. Young men are reluctant to make permanent commitments. Why, then, do 95 percent of them still enter into the permanent state of marriage? Is it the permanence of the commitment that deters them from the priesthood, or is it the conditions under which that commitment has to be lived?

Eventually the bishops will have to deal openly with some of the real reasons for the shortage of vocations to the priesthood. But to their credit, they have at least begun the discussion.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Catholics called to proclaim the Gospel

15th Sunday of the Year (July 16): (R3) Mark 6:7-13; (R1) Amos 7:12-15; (R2) Ephesians 1:3-14.

If you were going into business, the first thing you would do is sketch out a plan. Or, if you were building a house, you would do the same. You'd make a plan.

When a young couple are going to have their first baby, they make all kinds of plans. Even before the baby is born, they buy baby clothes and diapers and read all kinds of books about how to raise babies. Maybe they set aside some money in the bank, to start a fund for college education. They probably started talking about all sorts of names for the child, trying to decide what to call it. Why do they go to all this trouble? Because they love the child to come and want it to be happy and to have the best of everything.

So God from all eternity had plans for each of us. He goes to all this trouble because he loves us and wants us to be happy. St. Paul said that God "administers everything according to his will and counsel." One of the basic questions of life is to realize there is a plan for each of us.

In a recent survey, an amazing 25 percent of men said they would trade five years of their life for a full head of hair. The survey is outright insane: to trade five



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

years of one's life for a few strands of hair? Physical appearance isn't what life is all about. God has a plan for each one of us that reaches beyond this world.

Paul wrote that God chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight, to be full of love. The Greeks had a beautiful word for man: *anthropos*. Literally, it means "one with the upturned face." Animals look down; man is meant to look up. He may look down for a long time; he may do this for so long as to forget there's anything else, anything above, forget that he was made for God. Then God in his mercy might cause something to happen, a crisis to come into one's life. This blessing in disguise might cause him to remember and then look up.

Both the first reading and the Gospel

deal with men with a mission. Amos, the prophet, gets his commission from the Lord, "Go prophesy to my people Israel." And Jesus sends out the Twelve with authority from himself to preach, to cast out devils, to anoint the sick and cure them.

Being sent by Christ is part and parcel of Christianity. Unlike Old Testament times, when only the select few were "sent" on a mission, every Christian is now sent. The account of sending the Twelve in the Gospel is just the beginning of "sending" — there is no Christian who is not sent. God's plan is to give salvation to men through men. God calls men into his church not for privilege, but for mission: to "go out" into the world and pass on the salvation Christ has given them.

Christ is the mediator between God and men. "It is in Christ and through his blood that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven." And we in our turn must mediate God's grace to one another. Vatican II calls God's people "the instrument of redemption" and "the sacrament of redemption."

We are in the church, not so much to be saved as to be sent; like the Apostles, to save others. Those others include one's own family; then all other people who come under one's influence.

Every Mass concludes with an invitation to be a missionary, for it always ends with the word "Go."

The Gospel is a fact; therefore tell it simply. It is a joyful fact; therefore tell it cheerfully. It is an entrusted fact; therefore tell it faithfully. It is a fact of infinite moment; therefore tell it earnestly. It is a fact of infinite love; therefore tell it feelingly. It is a fact of difficult comprehension to many; therefore tell it with illustration. It is a fact about a Person; therefore preach Jesus Christ.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, July 17
Isaiah 1:10-17; Matthew 10:34-11:1

Tuesday, July 18
Isaiah 7:1-9; Matthew 11:20-24

Wednesday, July 19
Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16; Matthew 11:25-27

Thursday, July 20
Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19; Matthew 11:28-30

Friday, July 21
Isaiah 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8; Matthew 12:1-8

Saturday, July 22
Micah 2:1-5; John 20: 1-2, 11-18

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