

Bishop, planning group leaders look at future

By Karen M. Franz
General manager/Editor

WATERLOO — Participants in Planning Group Leadership Day March 31 urged Bishop Matthew H. Clark to repeat the messages of his keynote address to them frequently and throughout the diocese. Doing so is necessary "to break through the denial of the people in the pews, leading them into some sort of acceptance of what the reality is," said Michael Nicosia of Macedon's St. Patrick Parish.

In his talk, Bishop Clark cited a projected 60-percent decline in the number of active diocesan priests by 2025, leaving just 64 priests to minister throughout the diocese's 12-county area. While the diocese currently has one parish for every active priest, that ratio will jump to 2.5 parishes per active priest if the number of parishes

remains constant over the next quarter-century. And if the Catholic population increases at the projected rate of 3.2 percent, the diocese will have one active priest for every 2,000 households in 2030, vs. one priest per 800 households today.

"Effective planning for the next five years must take these longer-term projections into account," the bishop told the 226 participants who gathered at St. Mary's School for the day of dialogue and workshops. "We know for sure that we cannot continue as we are in the face of this pending change."

Bishop Clark said that Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium, the process begun by 35 groups of diocesan parishes between 1997 and 1999, "was the beginning of a process of looking beyond an individual parish to include the needs of neighboring faith communities as well. We must

continue that journey and extend our relationships beyond our proximate geographic neighbors to all the parishes and faith communities of the diocese."

"We are all part of the Body of Christ and thus all part of our diocesan church," he continued. "(W)e must work out ways in which all our parishes — urban, suburban and rural — reflect a unity of concern and action on behalf of all."

The second five-year cycle of diocesan planning will begin next year, with one-third of the planning groups starting to plan for 2002-2007. In addition to companionship on their journey, the bishop promised the planners a clear set of criteria to assess parish vitality and viability, as well as a clear statement of the issues facing each planning group and its member parishes and faith communities.

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David Wallace/Photo intern

Bishop Matthew H. Clark listens to a presenter at leadership day.



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Many Parts

ONE
BODY

Many Gifts

ONE SPIRIT

"For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another (Romans: 12:5)."

"Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered one to the other; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Chapter II: "The People of God," Nov. 1964)."

As St. Paul's letter and the documents of the Second Vatican Council indicate, the Catholic Church is not meant to be a limp body animated only by an active clergy whose numbers are dwarfed by the passive lay faithful. It's meant to be a healthy integrated body made up of equally important parts serving its head, Jesus Christ.

And there are few people more willing to make lay Catholics aware of this vision than Father Robert "Bob" Werth, pastor of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th

EDITORS' NOTE: The Catholic Courier examined the priest shortage in its Facing the Future series last year. With this article and the coverage of Planning Group Leadership Day (above and Pages 8-9) it embarks on a series discussing the evolution of church leadership.

Ward in Rochester. The cluster lies on the southwest side of the city and comprises Our Lady of Good Counsel, St. Monica's and St. Augustine's parishes. A fourth faith community, Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, is located at Our Lady of Good Counsel.

In an era often marked by depressing musings on the declining number of priests, Father Werth said it's time to look at a more uplifting story. That story would stress that qualified lay Catholics are more than fill-ins for positions that can't be occupied by priests, he said. Lay Catholics can be — and, in many cases, already are — first-rate pastoral leaders.

"The laity have so many gifts nowadays because of their higher education level, and because of all they've been through since Vatican II," Father Werth said. "They have developed their own survival skills and ways of expressing God's and their own unique spirituality."

A believer that pastoral service at the parish level is at an all-time high in terms of quality, Father Werth added that he's so confident in lay people that he doesn't spend time fretting about the shortage of priests to fill parish positions.

"I am absolutely convinced that given the opportunity to keep their parish going or reviving their parish, the people in the pews have the gifts to keep their parish going," he said.

Symbol, substance

The 19th Ward cluster practices what it preaches through a variety of nuts and bolts measures, noted Father Werth and members of the cluster staff. The parish bulletin, for example, doesn't even list the cluster

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STORY BY ROB CULLIVAN