

Common policy may require sacrifice

Thank you very much for your prayers in support of our priests and pastoral administrators as we gathered in convocation in Auburn last week. The days were well blessed and filled with life. I attribute that in large measure to the prayers of the people of our diocese. In addition to that gift, I mention the cordial hospitality of the people of Holy Family and St. Mary parishes, where we worshipped. Their hospitality was ready and warm.

Supported by such prayer and concern, participants engaged in the work of those days in generous and thoughtful ways. We had a dual theme: 1) the need for ongoing, realistic pastoral planning if we are to make the most of opportunities and do our best with challenges we face today, and 2) the health, growth and well-being of our priests in demanding, rapidly changing circumstances.

You know quite well that neither of these issues is new to us. We have done serious pastoral planning for quite some time and made excellent progress.

We have been, and are becoming, more aware of the impact of pastoral ministry on our priests as our numbers diminish, we grow older and our health gradually becomes more frail. Our hope during this convocation was to gather, look at our common experience and decide on how best to build on what we have begun.

It will be no surprise to you to know that there was a strong sense among the body that we simply cannot ignore these issues and continue with a business-as-usual attitude. We all know that doing so would be irresponsible in the present and would place a heavy burden on the shoulders of those who come after us.

You would know as well that how we advance those issues, what we do next in the practical order, is not always immediately and perfectly clear. The best we can do is to accept our common responsibility to express our best judgment, listen respectfully to those of others,

along
the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

and find fair and realistic solutions to our problems.

Whenever possible, we leave the specific course of action to the individual or local community. Only when it is a matter of our faith or a discipline that impacts the reasonable good order of our diocesan community do we call all to the observance of a common policy — even when that policy requires some sacrifice from a particular parish or individual. An example of this may be of help.

We require that our priests preside at no more than three Sunday Eucharistic liturgies, including those celebrated on Saturday evenings, in fulfillment of the Sunday obligation. This policy, we believe, meets our current pastoral needs in almost all circumstances, is in conformity with church law governing this matter and will help us to adjust well to even tighter future circumstances.

Not all of our priests are sold on this practice, something I can understand quite well. Some argue that they do not tire of, or from, a greater number of celebrations, nor does the quality of their participation diminish as that number increases. Others maintain that in their respective parishes any lessening of the number of celebrations would weaken the community — also something that merits careful consideration. I recognize both considerations as valid and

honest ones. They merit serious consideration because they relate to the health and well-being of our faith communities and the priests who serve. We will continue carefully to work toward a common peace and understanding of these issues. I ask your prayers that we will do so.

I close these comments by raising a couple of very sensitive aspects about these questions — aspects that for understandable reasons our pastors and parish pastoral planning teams are reluctant to bring up publicly on their own.

The first is the strong resistance our pastors can receive when they so much as suggest that their parish's pastoral needs could well be met even if the number of Sunday Eucharistic liturgies were to be reduced. A variation of that is the stance some take that clears pastors to proceed with the reduction so long as they do not cancel this one or that one. Often enough these insistent views are rooted more in personal preference or long-standing habit rather than in a corporate search to discover what best serves the common good at this time.

The second concern is born of a fear that if our parish changes in this way, we will lose people and/or income to other parishes. And, if this happens, the reasoning goes, we will soon have to close down because we cannot sustain these kinds of losses. This kind of pressure has led many more than one planning group to say to me, "We know we need to make changes, but we can't do them alone. We need your help."

While I am willing to offer whatever assistance I can in support of those making difficult decisions, I do encourage that all of our communities, to the degree possible, explore these needs and possibilities with honesty and realism. I encourage similar interchange among neighboring parishes. We are not competitors. We are members of the same family of faith.

Our efforts should be directed to the common good, even if that requires something dear to us. Peace to all.



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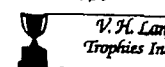
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