

## COLUMNISTS

## Priest shortage is a 40-year-old story

This week I'm offering a sampler of three fragment observations, rather than developing a single theme. First, a colleague passed on to me an article from a June, 1962 issue of the *Catholic Courier*. Its title: "Why So Few Priests?" Remember, now, this was the pre-Vatican II era. I'm simply quoting from the article:

"Experts on vocations to the priesthood met in Rome this week and blamed a 'breakdown in family discipline' for the dwindling number going into the seminary in the United States. Canada and the U.S., however, are the only major nations with as high an average as one priest for every one thousand Catholics. All other countries, including many supposedly Catholic countries like Italy, have acute shortages of clergy. Latin America, its religious life already crippled by lack of priests, has little prospects of a change in its condition unless massive numbers of missionaries come from North America.

"Pope John told the more than 500 delegates a 'truly priestly life' is the most effective spur for youngsters to enter the seminary. He termed this aspect of a priest's life as 'one of his most important duties.' He warned clergy against involving themselves in tasks 'no matter how praiseworthy' if these prevent them from their spiritual work with souls.

"A Vatican radio broadcast on the eve of the four day meeting blamed 'secular schools' for bottling up religious impulses of children. The broadcast also said



the  
moral  
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

vocations on the part of more mature youngsters and even adults are notably higher than in previous years and create special problems in the educational programs of seminaries.

"Besides the breakdown in American family discipline, other factors which handicap vocation development, according to Bishop John Wright of Pittsburgh, who spoke for the U.S. bishops, is the 'new and paralyzing emphasis on security — social security, health security, job security — which makes a youngster hesitate to take a chance with his life, to gamble on the Providence of God and to make an unqualified offering of his life to the unknown and unquestioned will of God.'

"He said those who wish to promote vocations to the priesthood speak 'too much of the sacrifices of the priestly life and too little of its joys, intense satisfactions and sweet consolations.'

Interesting, isn't it, to recall that 40 years ago we struggled with a shortage of

priests? Then, as now, we struggled to name causes for the shortage. We speculated about solutions that would address the "crisis." Interesting, too, is that the crisis then affected many parts of the world even more than it did the U.S. That remains the case today.

I don't think that everyone would agree, however, that the religious life of Latin America is "crippled" because of the region's need for more priests. I have been told by my friends who minister in Brazil, for example, that the church there is strong and vital. Priests, however few in number, work with other pastoral agents to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ and promote its beauty and richness among the people.

As we are trying to do today in our own diocese, the challenge seems to be one of finding ways to remain a strong church even as we adjust to declining numbers of priests. We're trying to do this in healthy ways that will prevent us from expecting so much of the priests we have that we prevent them from being healthy and happy themselves, and failing to encourage other men to consider this vocation.

A second fragment for this column is my personal acknowledgement of the death of author Ken Kesey. As someone whose college education took place during the final years of the 1960s, Kesey's book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* remains a classic of my own coming of age. I'm sure this is the case for many other

"boomers" whose college experience during that time was similar to my own. Nurse Ratchet is one of the great figures of modern literature, suggesting that real service results from a humane interpretation of the rules that govern any occupation and every system on earth. In this connection I praise all those competent, compassionate pastoral ministers in whose hands the Roman Catholic tradition becomes a genuine path to fuller life rather than a "club" used by the self-righteous to inflict division and hurt.

My final "fragment" comes from an early morning walk on the beach at Durand Eastman Park. In great big letters carved in the sand was a huge "God Bless America." Written beneath it in a different hand, much smaller but very distinct, was the additional: "and the rest of the world."

As we act to disable the terrorist networks that wrought such horrifying acts against our countrymen and women and all humanity on September 11, we must not forget, I think, that the ultimate solution to terrorism will not be in military action alone. That solution will be realized as the United States and other democratic and prosperous nations assume their role as leaders of the community comprising the whole world, and strive to ensure freedom and prosperity for all people and all nations.

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Kids' Answers from page 20: 1. d, 2. e, 3. h, 4. a, 5. b, 6. f, 7. c, 8. g

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