



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

## Use priests' talents to better serve the church

I wonder how different the church would look if priests and deacons were given positions that better matched their talents. I wonder if many of its present problems would be fewer.

I raise these concerns because of a comment a bishop recently made to me: "Gene, we have priests who have studied for years to obtain degrees but who never utilize them once they obtain them. Minds filled with valuable knowledge are left to die on the vine."

If we were to add up all the studies undertaken by priests and deacons, we would find that a high percentage of our priests are extremely well-educated. Why doesn't the church use of all this education better?

Necessity is the first reason that comes to mind. The shortage of priests compels the church to utilize every warm body it has to fill parish slots. The principle followed here is that the pastoral needs of parishioners take precedence over the need to accommodate any one priest's personal talents.

Need over accommoda-

tion is a principle that possesses validity in that priests and deacons, especially those working in dioceses, come from the people in order to serve the people. The principle must, however, be rethought in light of the greater need for excellence in new, complex times.

When the Carmelite Scripture scholar Father Roland Murphy taught seminarians and laypersons studying to be church leaders, he repeatedly reminded them that "study is ministry." They must never cease the pursuit of knowledge and never stop developing their talents on grounds that they are busy serving people.

Excellence in studies and self-development more often than not translates into excellence in service, making these pursuits not a selfish luxury but absolutely necessary. Study and self-development not only energize those who pursue them but those they serve as well.

Unfortunately, when priests and deacons grow frustrated because they aren't fully using their talents, a door opens through



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### The Human Side

which anger, exasperation, apathy, passivity and a host of other behaviors can enter the church.

Another reason the church fails in using its talent better is that while most priests, deacons and bishops know each other's names, backgrounds, positions, foibles and achieve-

ments, they seldom know each other's aspirations, convictions and vision. The situation is too impersonal.

This happens in all of life. People just don't sit down with each other to share their ideas and feelings about their talents and how they would like to utilize them. The only time they might do this is when they become so desperate for a job that they go to a counselor to talk matters over.

I often wonder what would happen if diocesan personnel boards and bishops ever so little sharpened their listening skills and invited discussion of how well a cleric's talents actually are

being used. My guess is that the personal touch and transparency this would create would immensely bolster the morale of everyone involved, and it would have a positive impact on a priest's or deacon's ministry.

It will take a long time for the church to recover from the difficulties of the last year. Recover, it will. How fast this happens will depend in great part on how much better it gets to know its own personally and promotes the immense talent it has in its midst.

Father Eugene Hemrick is a columnist for Catholic News Service.

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