

Pastor's Pen: The Truth About Priestly Vocations

I begin this pastor' pen with a bit of a warning. The first part is going to seem depressing and grim. It is not that I am trying to spin it that way, only that as John Adams once said, "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." The picture of the priesthood in our diocese's immediate future is grim. However, the second part of this column seeks to shine a ray of long-term hope. Things don't have to be grim.

First, the reality as it stands right now. In 2013, just 8 years ago, there were 62 active diocesan priests in our diocese. We also had 6 religious order priests and 20 missionary priests from Africa and Asia to cover the 110 parishes and missions of our diocese. So, we had 88 priests at our disposal. Furthermore, we had 20 retired priests, over half of whom were still in good health and could do fill in work and assistance across the diocese. As of now, we have 49 active diocesan priests, no religious order priests and 18 missionary priest to cover 107 parishes and missions throughout the diocese. So now we have dropped in just 8 years to 67 active priests serving our diocese. That is a drop of 21 priests. We have 19 retired priests in the diocese, but only 5 are still in good enough health to fill in or offer assistance.

Second, we had 8 years ago the dangerously low number of only 12 diocesan seminarians. Only 6 of them were ordained. That is about the norm. 4 of those who got ordained are still serving this diocese. This fall we have 8 seminarians. These 8 seminarians are spread throughout 8 years of formation. If the average holds, we will ordain 4 in the next 8 years. In that same time frame, we have 10 priests who pass the age of retirement for priests (75). So, right now, the best-case scenario is us losing another 6 priests to serve the diocese. Yes, best case! That is taking into account that no one quits, takes a leave of absence, or dies before the age of 75 over the next 8 years.

Hence, if people are wondering why the bishop is giving his priests multiple parishes for their assignments and some of those parishes and chapels do not have Sunday Mass, he is responding as best as he can to the situation on the ground. He also has to work within the constraints of Canon Law on how many Masses a priest can say in a single day. The norm is 1 per weekday and 2 on weekends days and he can give permission for a priest to have a third Mass if pastoral necessity requires. Anything more, the permission can only be given by the Pope. In my 24 years of priesthood, that has happened once. That time was last Christmas when we were given permission to say 4 masses on either Christmas Eve or Christmas day. I doubt the same permission will be given this year. It is worth saying here the following: The bishop nor I have any intention of closing any part of my current assignment! Anybody saying this is either speculating based on no data, stirring up unnecessary trouble, or outright lying. Please stop saying these things!

As the former vocational director of this diocese, Fr Joe Corel, told me well over a decade ago, "We have been hiding the truth about how bad things are and stretched our

priests to the breaking point by giving people every Mass at every time they want.” We did this to avoid the confrontations that would happen as people lost mass times or worse yet, Sunday Mass. FYI, Sunday Mass times are set by the bishop and not by the local pastor. He does it because he looks at what will get the greatest number of people (so church seating capacity matters) while keeping within the restraints of Canon Law.

I want the four parishes to understand this as Christmas approaches. Christmas falls on Saturday this year. This means I have the Christmas schedule and the weekend Mass schedule all within 36 hours of each other. Throw in the over 100 miles of driving that I will have to do and I will have an 8 Mass minimum in those 36 hours and it is a tough schedule without even entertaining 10 masses and a midnight Mass at midnight which would leave me only 3 hours of sleep on Christmas morning with 4-5 Masses to be said that Saturday. (Christmas Masses and weekend Masses are counted separately). Before people start getting upset, please remember that this diocese has not received a priest from any of these parishes in decades if at all. I am not blaming these parishes specifically. Years of us as a whole (the diocese and all her members) not taking vocations seriously have led us to this point. Not just here, but all over the diocese.

The reasons why we don't have priests are legion. Some of it is that so many priests just weren't the role models of priesthood to spark an interest in anyone's minds. Most priests do not recruit. Throw in decades of scandals and the society doing to priests what they have done to law enforcement (defining the whole by the bad minority). Throw in falling Mass attendance and the increasing secularization of our society. Throw in people holding their breath until women and married men could get ordained. Throw in the 'now me or not my child' syndrome that oftentimes takes place when something is said. It snowballs. My own parents did not support my going into the seminary and only accepted me being a priest years after I was ordained, that was a hard hurdle to jump. In other words, everything has been working against it. However, the priest shortage is a self-inflicted wound. That means we have the capability to undo it. It will not happen overnight.

On your part as laity, it is simple: pray, encourage, and nurture. We need masculine, strong, honest, and courageous young men. That is what I have been recruiting for 24 years. My parents didn't approve because they thought the priesthood was beneath me and my abilities. Don't do that. If we don't like weak, cowardly, detached, or tyrannical priests don't send weak, cowardly, detached, and tyrannical young men to the seminary! WE get what we give. Truth be told, our diocese wouldn't accept such people anyway.

I was dead serious in what I said when I got here, I want to work for the day when this assignment is split again and Bevier and Clarence can have Sunday Mass again. We are a long way away from this though at this moment. Until we as a whole get serious about priestly vocations and stop with the excuses, we only guarantee things get worse. So, let's get up and start doing what needs to be done. I am doing my part; you all have to do yours.