

A Christmas Present for the Archdiocese

The present came, first of all, from the priests who sent in the names and addresses of potential seminary candidates. It came also, if more remotely, from the families of these young men, parents who had brought them up in a setting where the faith was lived and honored. The gift came directly from ten young men themselves, as they participated in twenty-five hours of prayer, reflection, conference and discussion. At the conclusion seven declared themselves ready to pursue further the process of seeing whether God is calling them to be priests in the Archdiocese of Baltimore. The others are also open to a possible call, but waiting for further steps in their lives, such as graduation from college. For me and for Father Jim Barker, our Vocations Director, transitional Deacons Timothy Fell and Jason Worley and seminarians Kevin Brooksbank, Martin Burnham and Stephen Hook, the retreat at St. Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore confirmed our conviction that there are young men, called by the Lord, who are waiting to have that call ratified by encouragement and active support from within the Church. We began our session with a relaxed supper in the dining room of the Continuing Formation Center and from there went to chapel for a conference during which I reflected on the "Joys and Possibilities of Diocesan Priesthood." Silent prayer followed the conference and then came the Holy Eucharist, with hymns on the Christmas theme. A video showing priests in various parish settings and informal discussion closed the evening. Next morning we celebrated the official Morning Prayer of the Church together before breakfast. Of great interest was a panel in which seminarians described their own sometimes slow movement toward seeking admission to the seminary program: a banker, a professional counselor, a food service specialist - each had wrestled with the gentle call for years before contacting Father Barker to begin an official

discernment process. And each related the deep joy and peace of mind experienced in the seminary setting, where like-minded pilgrims share the same program of prayer and study. Quiet time with an opportunity for the Rite of Reconciliation preceded another Mass at which I reflected on how Anna, the prophetess in the temple at the time of the Presentation of Jesus, was moved by the Holy Spirit to see at hand the One who would bring salvation, a reminder of the priest's role of helping to prepare the way of the Lord. Truly we had a sense of the presence and power of Jesus in the Eucharist that morning. Following lunch I spoke on ways in which the Holy Spirit is touching, challenging and empowering priests as we approach the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and then, in silent prayer, we spent an hour together before the Blessed Sacrament, a period which closed with Benediction. The participants then expressed their own thoughts and presented questions and concerns. Their candor and their quality as thoughtful men of prayer enhanced my appreciation for this wonderful Christmas gift of the Lord to the Archdiocese. They were clearly moved by what they had heard and experienced in our time together.