

A Wake-up Call

The Catholic Review

My Dear People of the Archdiocese of Baltimore,

Last week, our priests gathered over three days to pray and to discuss issues of common concern facing the presbyterate, our parishes and the Church in Baltimore.

The issue that loomed largest in our conversations was that of the shortage of priests—both today and in the future—and the challenges this presents as we seek to ensure that the spiritual needs of the faithful of our Archdiocese are adequately met.

To fully appreciate the seriousness and the immediacy of the priest-shortage challenge we face, consider the following statistics:

- Seventy-two of our 153 active duty priests will become eligible for retirement over the next 15 years, an average of just under five men per year;
- Seventeen of our 153 active priests are already over the retire-able age of 70;
- Since 1976, we are ordaining an average of only three new priests/year;
- If the current trends hold, the number of active priests will be reduced from 153 to 100 over the next 15 years.

This data, though alarming, is certainly not new to us. In fact, my predecessor, Cardinal Keeler, wisely implemented a planning process to project the impact of the priest shortage in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and to recommend various options for ministering to the Catholic people of our Archdiocese given these realities. The Cardinal formed a committee to carry out this process and which documented its

recommendations in a report entitled, *The Hope that Lies Before Us*.

The committee's work, guided by the Holy Spirit and rooted in the belief that this challenge presents a positive opportunity for building the future of our local Church, set the following as its goals:

- Providing quality pastoral care throughout the Archdiocese;
- Preserving the bond of community between priests and parishes or other pastoral communities they serve;
- Ensuring the availability of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist to all;
- Ensuring the availability of all the Sacraments, including Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick;
- Helping the faithful to respond to their Baptismal call to participate in the mission and ministry of the Church;
- Affirming and lifting up priestly vocations as a gift from God and a noble, happy calling;
- Caring for the health and well-being of priests.

The Hope offers our Church a road map for the future, especially as we evaluate various models for parish ministry. We've seen it successfully employed in "tests" in various parts of the Archdiocese, such as in Mountain Maryland and South Baltimore, where one priest serves as pastor of numerous parishes and is assisted by other priests, as well as deacons and lay people, in providing pastoral care to Catholics in the area. There is more to be gleaned from this planning effort and it gives us a tremendous head-start as we seek to reinvigorate this planning process.

Not unlike our approach to addressing the challenges facing our schools, we must not only strategically plan for the long-term, but also address immediate needs given the realities before us—needs which can be identified by answering the following questions:

- Do we have enough priests to serve as pastors for the current number of parishes?
- Do we have enough priests to celebrate all Masses currently scheduled in our parishes?
- Is there sufficient demand among the faithful to justify and/or support the current number of parishes and the current Mass schedule?
- Can we continue to sustain the aging and, in some cases, expansive parish campuses that once served much larger communities?

In the weeks and months ahead, we will begin to chart a course—one that will be open and transparent and will involve voices from every perspective, including the faithful—that will help us answer these questions and others. Our overarching goal is to discern how we can best serve the current and future pastoral needs of our people, given the present and projected challenges.

Much more will be written and shared on this subject, I assure you. Please pray for me and all who seek to face these challenges with an earnest heart and know of my prayers for the Holy Spirit's guidance as we carry out our mission of bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to God's people in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

In the Lord,

+Edwin F. O'Brien
Archbishop of Baltimore