

A Wake Up Call Part 2

The Catholic Review

A Wake Up Call, Part 1 Awake Yet?

Meeting the spiritual needs of the Catholic people of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in the face of an aging and dwindling presbyterate was the challenge I laid before you in last week's column.

To recap:

- 72 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 full-time priests are already over the retire-able age of 70;
- The average age of our priests is 61.

Contrast that to the following:

- Since 1976, we are ordaining an average of only three new priests per year (this past year we were fortunate to ordain one man, a 62-year-old permanent deacon!);
- We have nearly the identical number of parishes today (153) as we had 30 years ago (150);
- Our parishes offer some 1,133 Masses each weekend for the 143,113 Catholics attending Mass on average each week. That's an average attendance of 126 parishioners per Mass. Though admittedly raw and uneven data, this is a significant indicator of a need for change;
- We have 20 percent fewer priests today than we did 30 years ago.

Add these sobering facts together and we have a major staffing challenge staring directly at us in the near future. While my focus in calling this increasingly-urgent problem to your attention is intended to seek your assistance as we begin the process of reorganizing parishes based on available resources, I need also to point

out that these effects have already begun to impact our pastoral ministry.

- Six parishes are currently without a pastor (assigning a pastor to a new parish automatically triggers a vacancy);
- Priests are being appointed pastors much earlier in their priesthoods;
- We have 16 pastors leading a total of 40 parishes. Of the 16, 11 are responsible for two parishes, four have three and one has six—soon to be nine;
- The health of an increasing number of priests is suffering, as more are requiring medical care, including many younger priests.

These grim statistics are not particular to the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Nationally, the number of diocesan priests dropped from 35,925 in 1965 to 27,182 in 2010.

During that same span of years, the number of parishes has increased from 17,637 to a high of 19,331 in 1995. It has since receded to 17,958 as parishes have been forced to close.

While parish ministry requires priests to celebrate Masses, make sick calls and administer other sacramental and pastoral care, we must also provide priests to serve as chaplains in hospitals, prisons and universities. Gratefully, we have the supportive presence of religious communities, retired priests and committed laity to assist our parishes in providing spiritual care to the people we serve. Nearly 100 consecrated religious women and men (many of whom replaced members leaving for assignments outside our archdiocese) were welcomed into the Archdiocese this past week—truly a blessing from God. Without them, we surely would not be able to continue meeting the current needs in our Archdiocese.

The presence of these women and men can be felt in nearly every corner of our local Church. Consider that 29 pastorates are held by religious order priests and six of our parishes are administered by Pastoral Life Directors (three ordained deacons and three women).

So, where do we go from here?

As I indicated last week, much of the planning has already occurred, thanks to the

vision of my predecessor, Cardinal Keeler, and those whose labors led to the creation of the 2001 The Hope that Lies Before Us. We will use this roadmap to develop a strategic plan for our Church that reflects the spiritual and pastoral needs of our people, as well as the availability of priests and other resources.

Much of the data is known and we have the commitment and support of our priests to develop a plan that will accomplish our overarching goal of spreading the Gospel to bring our people and others among us closer to Christ. The issues needing to be addressed will vary in our vast and varying Archdiocese. We will need to address sharp population declines, decreased Mass attendance, and aging buildings too costly for parishes to maintain. In the end, it may mean changes to the time and number of Masses and in some cases, fewer parishes.

Having recently undergone a similar process with our schools, I believe there cannot be transformational change without pain, but that through pain comes healing. We also learned that communication is vital to everyone understanding what is occurring, why we are taking the steps we are taking and what we hope to accomplish when our work is complete. We will do our very best to present the objective facts for your information and evaluation as we proceed. At present we have no preconceived plans.

We want and need to hear from you and will seek ways to involve as many people in this process as possible. I will utilize this column, as well as our Archdiocesan website and other communications channels to share information with you and to seek your input as the process moves forward.

Through it all, know of my prayers for you and I ask for your prayers for me, our vicar bishops and all others who must work together to ensure our Archdiocese remains the vibrant community of faith that it has been these past 221 years.

A final question: how many priests for our Archdiocese have we ordained from your parish over the last five years? Or 10 years? 20 years?