

Advisory: Sacrifices Ahead

The Catholic Review

In a typically excellent column, Priest Magazine editor Monsignor Owen Campion tells the story of an aging rural pastor of three mission churches in the Midwest during the early 1940s.

It was wartime. Young dads were in uniform far from home for a tour of duty of an indefinite duration, leaving the task of raising families to mothers, who often helped the war effort by working in factories. Essential commodities such as meat, sugar and flour as well as gasoline were severely rationed. Professional services of all kinds such as those rendered by doctors, engineers and even priests were curtailed, their skills at the service of the military. We get the picture.

Enter the pastor, whose typical Sunday consisted of celebrating Masses in distant locations beginning at 5:00 a.m. and extending into mid-afternoon. In addition, he heard three sets of confessions and managed to squeeze in counseling and instructions, such was the demand for priestly services.

The point of the story: in spite of hardships, restrictions and sacrifices (recall, in those days the strict Eucharistic fast prohibited even a drink of water until the last Mass was offered and there were no Saturday Vigil Masses, nor could any Mass on Sunday begin later than noon), attendance at Masses was full in those days. Surely, there was then a greater sense of mortal sin for missing Mass without serious reason, and prayer in time of a World War takes on extra meaning, no doubt. But neither the people nor the priest thought their sacrifices for the faith extraordinary. They were Catholic, they had to participate at Mass and they wanted to participate at Mass!

Contrast that scenario with today, according to Monsignor Campion:

“Our entire pastoral strategy, across the country, for 40 years, has been to make it comfortable and convenient for all people first to attend Mass and then to be part of parish communities. We have succeeded. This policy has led us to the present

stretching of resources, a process that can continue only so long to cover all the bases. Then, changes will have to be made.”

In parish life now, how convenient to choose from any number of Masses from Saturday to Sunday night, all within only a 10-minute drive.

Changes are being made in every diocese, including our own, and these will involve greater burdens on all of our people, a mindset that requires seeing our faith not as a convenience but as a necessity both for earthly existence and for eternal life.

It’s time to end the talk and take action in our cities and towns—for neighboring parishes to work to coordinate Mass and confession times. Some of our priests are celebrating five Sunday liturgies in a weekend, with an increasing number of one-priest parishes and decreasing numbers of “supply priests.” This is hardly conducive to the spiritual and physical health of our priests or the long-term stability of our parishes.

Vicar Bishops Rozanski and Madden are encouraging clusters of parishes to give renewed, innovative thought toward rearranging liturgical and other pastoral services throughout the Archdiocese.

Our mindsets must change when thinking about our schools, as well.

Dioceses of a similar size in the United States have as many as 30 fewer schools than ours, which expanded to meet the demands of a growing, immigrant-infused Baltimore in the last century but failed to contract at the same rate as the Catholic population in the city shrank.

By mid-2010 our Blue Ribbon Committee on Schools will weigh in with what might call for a radical relocation, redistribution of Archdiocesan schools with a view to making Catholic education affordable and accessible to Catholic youngsters and to non-Catholics in poorer communities. Exhaustive research is proceeding, as thorough as any I have been witness to, and by this month’s end – once the 10 area listening sessions are completed – the final draft of a plan will be undertaken. This will undoubtedly call for substantial changes which will be burdensome to many and will likely have some impact on every Catholic community. I have no inkling of what

the plan will look like, since I have resolved from the start to let the very able and generous Committee deliberate freely.

This is not to throw everyone into panic or to feed the ravenous rumor mill. Simply to say that future plans will call for difficult decisions and renewed resolution on the part of Catholics who want to be Catholics in more than just name. And all of us with administrative responsibilities will do whatever we can to ease the strain.

Monsignor Campion closed his essay by recalling his Ordination Day and how meaningful the Catholic title “Father” became for him. “But fathers can do nothing better than to prepare the children to be strong for themselves.”

That is the very purpose which this “Father” has for this column.