

Archbishop O'Brien conducts his first clergy conference

When Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien was installed as Baltimore's 15th spiritual shepherd last October, he highlighted three priorities: promoting vocations, advancing the sanctity of life and building up the city of Baltimore.

In his first clergy conference with about 175 priests serving throughout the archdiocese, Archbishop O'Brien outlined some of the preliminary steps he is taking to advance those causes and he asked his priests to help him.

The March 4 conference was held at the Shrine of St. Anthony in Ellicott City and included representation from archdiocesan and religious order priests. Participating clergy also prayed together, received the sacrament of reconciliation and attended a spiritual retreat during the daylong gathering.

In the last five months, the archbishop said he has visited more than 100 parishes, three Catholic high schools and scores of ministries offered through Catholic Charities. He is finding the archdiocese to be filled with good, hardworking and dedicated people, he said.

"I want to thank you for your support," said Archbishop O'Brien. "I've had a chance to get impressions of the archdiocese and the great work that's being done."

As part of its commitment to the city, Archbishop O'Brien announced that the archdiocese will be undertaking a study of Catholic schools in the urban vicariate to identify ways of strengthening education.

Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, said the study will be completed by fellows in the MBA program at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

"In the past, it seemed as though we were going by necessity along a course where as soon as enrollment was down or finances were hurting, a school was placed on an endangered species list and sooner or later if it did not improve it would close," said Bishop Madden. "I thought that it didn't seem right as far as our mission as a church

and our concern for the poor, so we tried to take a look at innovative ways to look at the issue.”

The Johns Hopkins investigators will examine issues like school financing, governance, human resources and quality assurance, Bishop Madden said. They will evaluate demographics and the best locations for Catholic schools. Archdiocesan officials have also met with the planning division for the City of Baltimore to understand where the city is locating its public schools, he said.

The archdiocese will use the Hopkins report, expected in May, to shape the future of urban Catholic education, Bishop Madden said. Similar studies might later be suggested for the eastern and western vicariates.

Six years after the archdiocese introduced “The Hope That Lies Before Us,” a pastoral plan for dealing with the priest shortage, Archbishop O’Brien said the archdiocese will revisit the plan to evaluate how it is working.

Bishop W. Francis Malooly, western vicar and vicar general, said a committee of priests and auxiliary bishops will undertake a study looking at parish leadership models and priest recruitment strategies.

“We’re going to look at what they recommended in The Hope That Lies Before Us and what we’ve been doing in the past six years,” he said. “We have broken down into three subcommittees. Some members of the committee will meet with Ruth Puls, director of Ministry Formation for the archdiocese, and with pastoral life directors (PLDs).”

Three members of the committee will meet with PLDs “to get a sense of how that is working,” said Bishop Malooly. Other members will meet with the directors of the archdiocese’s Clergy Personnel and Vocations offices.

PLDs are deacons, religious and lay leaders who take care of the day-to-day governance and leadership of parishes without resident priests. There are currently 8 PLDs serving in the archdiocese, with priests assigned to their parishes to celebrate Mass and meet sacramental needs.

In connection with the study, Kathleen Swanson, archdiocesan planning/council

services coordinator, will research how other dioceses are dealing with pastoral leadership strategies and recruitment, Bishop Malooly said.

Everywhere he has visited, Archbishop O'Brien said he has encouraged Catholics to pray for religious vocations. During the clergy conference, he challenged priests to make vocations a priority, asking them to include prayer intentions for vocations at every Mass and to promote the issue with parish councils.

"If a parish council isn't talking about vocations, I wonder why," said Archbishop O'Brien. Noting that there could be far more vocations coming out of Catholic high schools, the archbishop said he has met with Dr. Ronald J. Valenti, superintendent, to discuss ways of promoting vocations in the schools.

"We're going to try to raise consciousness," he said. "When I go to schools, I ask the kids to come up with ideas."

Within weeks after he asked students at Bishop Walsh School in Cumberland to think about vocations, Archbishop O'Brien said students there decided to compose prayers for vocations. He plans to visit them again in the spring to see what other progress they have made.

The archbishop said he is impressed with the vicariate system which organizes the archdiocese. He has commissioned a review to look at communications strategies at the Catholic Center in Baltimore. Archbishop O'Brien said he has also met with leaders from BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development) to discuss ways of strengthening the city. He lauded the outreach of Catholic Charities, calling it the best agency of its kind "anywhere."

On the prolife front, the archbishop said Catholic hospitals are open to helping women in crisis pregnancies, and he asked priests to give him their suggestions for ways the Catholic Church can do more to reach out to pregnant women in need of support.

Father Brian Nolan, associate pastor of St. Jane Frances de Chantal in Pasadena, told The Catholic Review he was "very impressed by the archbishop's caring concern for his priests."

“He’s open to looking at anything we bring up, and he follows up on the things the priests are concerned about,” said Father Nolan. “You can tell he’s very open to listening to his priests.”

Near the end of the clergy conference, a priest pointed out that it was Cardinal William H. Keeler’s birthday - resulting in a prolonged standing ovation for the retired archbishop.