

Archbishop reflects on first Baltimore Christmas, need for vocations

My first Baltimore Christmas has been delightful, days of prayer and celebrations – overflowing congregations at the Basilica of the Assumption for the Christmas Vigil Mass and the Midnight Mass at our Cathedral of Mary Our Queen. Monsignors Hobbs and Armstrong and their staffs offered us all glowing examples of what solemn liturgies can do for the heart and soul.

Less solemn, perhaps, but very meaningful was the pre-Christmas Mass celebrated at the Basilica with our dedicated staff of the Catholic Center. This gave me an opportunity to thank them all for being the face of the Church in their daily contacts with our parishes and other institutions of the Archdiocese as well as with the secular communities of Baltimore and beyond. A Christmas reception and luncheon followed enabling me to express individual thanks and challenging my capacity to recall names. (I give myself a C- at this stage and appreciate your patience.)

Another joyful and meaningful evening gathered all our seminarians and their parents for Mass in the Cathedral Lady Chapel and for an excellent buffet supper in the rectory. I did have a brief visit with all our assembled seminarians before my official arrival, while they were on retreat last summer, but this Christmas gathering gave us all an opportunity for more relaxed interaction.

By now, most Catholics in the area are aware of my concern for priestly vocations. This is not to minimize our need for good deacons, religious sisters and brothers and solid marriages – in due time I would hope to comment on these as well. But when a growing number of parishes are without their own pastor or share a pastor with one or more parishes, the need to emphasize the call to priesthood should be lost on no one.

Cardinal Keeler initiated the practice that required each seminarian to write him a letter at Christmas and Easter spelling out their progress in seminary formation and

their journey to the altar. I was the grateful recipient of their letters this year and found myself impressed and even inspired by comments like, "Spiritually, I am thirsting to have Christ in my life and want to be faithful to Him." And, "Making time for my spiritual life is a priority for me....Without building a daily intimacy with Jesus, there is no way to progress in priestly formation."

Yes there are any number of honest admissions regarding the inevitable struggles and obstacles in responding to a call to priesthood. Reassurance comes quickly, however, when fledgling followers of Christ speak of the support and encouragement they find in their respective seminary communities, in the priests of our Archdiocese and in our vocations team.

Twenty-six studying for Baltimore might seem like a healthy number until we realize that these are spread over nine or more years of formation. The arithmetic is not encouraging, but the growing awareness of the need for priestly vocations in recent years is encouraging as is the caliber of our seminarians.

"The harvest is great but the laborers are few. Pray the harvest master to send laborers into his vineyard."