

Awake Yet?

If I've failed to stress the significance of the challenge before us through my words, perhaps the frequency of my writing on the subject (three consecutive columns and counting) will succeed in doing so!

Over the past two weeks, I've attempted to inform you of some of the challenges our parishes and priests face due to dwindling numbers of priests, shifts in population and a change in attitudes toward the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

In short, we have 20 percent fewer priests than we did 30 years ago and the exact same number of parishes. That's 20 percent fewer priests to celebrate over 1,100 Masses every week, make sick calls, preside over weddings, funerals, baptisms and attend to a myriad of administrative duties. Not only are we losing five priests a year to retirement, others are falling from the ranks due to health challenges, including some brought about by the stress and physical strain of ever-increasing workloads.

You might read my previous columns for more statistics to support this alert. And if it sounds like I'm "sounding the alarm," I am! Our people see a priest at Mass every Sunday and understandably draw the conclusion that the priest shortage isn't something with which they need to be concerned. Now the time has come, however, for our people to see what our priests have seen coming for some time, for all of us to be equally focused and to bring our attention, prayers and wisdom to this challenge.

It would be a mistake, however, to focus solely on the priest shortage as the only challenge to be addressed. While a significant factor, the reality is that even with enough priests to cover our Masses, many of those Masses are far below capacity. In fact, in many parishes and areas of our Archdiocese, our Church can likely provide spiritual nourishment to our people with significantly fewer Masses than are currently offered. As with the priest shortage, it isn't apparent to many of our faithful the impact of half-empty churches – not only on resources (human and financial), but on the quality of the liturgy (participation in the prayers we say, the music we sing and even the quality of the preaching in front of half-filled pews). In short, liturgical schedule changes are needed not only because of fewer priests. Full

churches energize our parishioners, our young people and the priests as well.

Fact: less than 30 percent of registered Catholics in the Archdiocese of Baltimore attend Sunday Mass.

Given these stark realities, we need to begin the process of planning a Church that provides sacramental care that reflects the needs and available resources of today's Archdiocese for the sake of the mission Christ entrusted to us. We will begin this process by evaluating Mass schedules in every parish throughout the Archdiocese.

I realize the emotions and reactions that are elicited by the mere mention of a change in the Mass schedule. Pastors, too, have fears about the impact a change in Masses may have on their parish. Will people leave? Will they stop giving of their time, their financial gifts? These feared reactions, while understandable, also make clear the need for better and increased catechesis of our people on the role of Mass in our Catholic lives.

To be sure, this is the Church's challenge: helping people to answer the question, "Is the Mass simply a convenience to fit into our weekend or is it the essential center of our lives, worth every sacrifice?" I hope to begin to answer that question in the coming weeks and months and will be asking our priests to do the same. The ties one has to a particular Mass and to their parish are not to be taken lightly. For over 200 years, we've perfected a "parochial" sense in our thinking and planning. This is particularly true for our older Catholics. Just ask anyone in Baltimore over 60 where they grew up and they'll respond by giving you the name of their home parish, just as easily as they could give the answer to the question: "Why did God make you?"

Are we as Jesus' disciples willing to meet the challenges before us for the sake of Christ's mission? In addressing this we'll need broader thinking and generous collaboration to work through our challenges. The priests and people from neighboring parishes will need to come together to review liturgical schedules, needs and resources of each area to make decisions that are for the good of the region and the entire local Church.

This should be less challenging in today's Church, given the ease with which people find spirituality in churches outside their parish boundaries. Collaborating beyond

boundaries is critical for the kind of regional planning that is necessary if we are to address our challenges at grassroots levels.

We have many “plates” spinning at present, none more important than the implementation of our strategic plan for schools. And I assure you this will continue unfettered. However, I would be negligent in my responsibilities as your Archbishop if I were to further delay the pressing need to address how we provide for the spiritual and pastoral needs of our people given the resources we have today and those we project to have in the near future. For starters, our liturgical schedules need to be adjusted throughout the archdiocese for the sake of our mission and our goal of nurturing vibrant liturgies and making good use of our priests.

So, as we embark on the process together, be assured that it must:

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