

# Challenges are Opportunities for Future of our Church

## The Catholic Review

Dear People of the Archdiocese of Baltimore,

The issue of a shortage of priests has always been with our Church. Whether in the early days of the newly reated Diocese of Baltimore or when European immigration was at its zenith, bishops have always contended with the issue of having enough priests to serve the spiritual needs of the people.

More recently, people in our Church at every level have been conscious of the ever-advancing crush of priestly retirements and the equally critical shortage of newly ordained priests. For years this was seen as a problem “on the horizon,” to be dealt with “down the road.”

As Archbishop of Baltimore, the bell was rung on this issue for me during a passionate and spontaneous discussion at last September’s Priests Convocation. Conversations about projected numbers of priests, retirements and the need to further engage the laity in the ministry of the Church yielded to broader and more lively discussions about Mass schedules, regional approaches to ministry and more dynamic liturgies and parishes.

A great sense of urgency animated the 125 priests in attendance and we left the Convocation united in our belief that we must meet this challenge head-on. For me, just seven months removed from the pain of consolidating 13 of our schools, I left with the grim realization that this was not an issue to be left for my successor.

Four months later, in January 2011, I, along with the members of the Presbyteral Council, was presented with a report by the Priest Personnel Board titled, "Report of the Committee on Priest Personnel Policy Planning." I did not commission this report. Rather, it came as a true grassroots initiative of the Priest Personnel Board and was offered as a possible roadmap for addressing aspects of the upcoming "clergy shortage," changes in parish demographics and many related challenges that had been discussed the previous September.

The report was the work of a Personnel Board Committee of six priests and two sub-committees of six other priests. It was the result of the collection and analysis of data, followed by meetings that took place over six months during which the members "deliberated at length on the implications of the data, and crafted to the best of its collective ability responses to the challenges thereby presented."

Following the January Presbyteral Council meeting, I wrote to our priests asking that the plan be discussed at region meetings so that the input of all the priests could be shared at the March Presbyteral Council meeting. I also solicited direct input from priests and parish leaders.

My letter (to priests of the Archdiocese) of March 18 provided my impressions of that most recent Presbyteral Council discussion. Since then, I have had time to further ponder the report, as well as to consider all the comments I personally received to both the report and my letter. These include comments offered via the January and March Presbyteral Council meetings, regional priest meetings, and numerous personal conversations and written correspondences.

As a result, I have formulated a vision for what should be included in any process we undertake to achieve our goals. Thus, I offer these observations for our Archdiocese as we prepare to move forward together in this critical and exciting next chapter of our history:

- Mission - The declining number of priests is an urgent issue, but the opportunity to create a more dynamic Church that helps people encounter the Living God must be our primary goal in planning for the future of our Church. This mission must be pervasive in all our plans which need to address not only the reality of fewer priests but also the many other changes we face.
- Participation - Because the entire community of faith is impacted by this effort, it must rely on the substantial participation of the laity and the clergy.
- Scope - Because the challenges before us are similar to those experienced in other dioceses, we must look beyond and outside ourselves to evaluate other parish planning models. Therefore, our planning must involve inquiries, such as what other dioceses have done, what best practices exist in the areas of parish planning and consultations with outside expertise.
- Urgency - Changes must be made without undue delay.
- Leadership - I will rely on the vicar bishops to play a central role. Courage and creativity will be required to share the Good News most faithfully and effectively in the 21st century. Certainly the significance of this effort cannot rule out my personal involvement.
- Stewardship - We have a responsibility to steward the sacred patrimony of the Archdiocese, the physical and financial resources that are entrusted to us to fulfill our mission. Though not singular factors, we must incorporate economic realities into any decision-making to ensure our plans are responsible, achievable and sustainable.
- Shared Sacrifice - There will and must be sacrifices at every level and we must be open to closures and mergers of parishes and changes to Mass schedules, painful though they may be.
- Unity - We can only achieve our goals if we proceed as one, as People of God, exhibiting charity, trust, collaboration and coordination throughout the process.

- Vocations - While we seek to manage the impact of fewer priests we must not lose sight of our ability and obligation to promote vocations. Encouraging priestly vocations must not be diminished but rather strengthened as we seek to build responsible lay ecclesial ministers and ministries.
- Roles - Any plan must clearly define and respect the roles of priests as pastors, deacons, lay ecclesial ministers (PLDs, Pastoral Associates), the Archbishop, Auxiliary Bishops and Central Services. It must also provide for appropriate education of the laity to assume an increased role in service and ministry to the Church.
- Rules - Theological/canonical principles must be faithfully followed. Any disputes must be resolved according to accepted Church guidance.

So, where does this leave us today? In the course of my review of the Personnel Board's plan, consideration of the responses I have received and reflection on the challenges and opportunities for our Archdiocese, I believe further discussion and research are needed on a number of key points before a formal vision and process can be finalized.

Thus far, I also believe that the clergy has been well represented in various discussions of the underlying issues the plan seeks to address. The laity has not. The development of any plan must be fully transparent and consultative, I am convinced, if we are ultimately to be successful in achieving our goals. Therefore, in addition to upcoming meetings already scheduled with the Personnel Board and with several of our younger priests - the men who will lead our parishes and our Church when the fruit of this effort is in bloom - I intend to meet with lay parish leaders in the coming months to have their perspective represented in this discussion.

In the meantime, many parishes and regions are already engaged in local planning

efforts. I do not wish to stifle the good work that is underway, though do ask that it be coordinated closely with the vicar bishops, who will brief me to ensure any decisions yielded by this good work are in concert with my vision for parish planning.

If I am, indeed, going to authorize a “reconfiguration” within our Archdiocese, a conclusion I’ve come to accept as a necessity, I need to articulate a vision for our future and how we get there. I am confident that our additional diligence and discussions, combined with the previous proposal from the Personnel Board Committee, will contribute significantly in continuing to shape that vision and a sufficient plan for moving forward.

We have a singular opportunity before us, and an even greater responsibility, to prepare the future of our Church. Though we may be motivated by a need to address critical staffing questions, we must not lose sight of this opportunity to build a future that brings the people we serve closer to God. This cannot be an exercise to address a single issue in a single part of our Archdiocese at a single point in time. Instead, it must be a journey of all the faithful, united in purpose and guided by the Holy Spirit, working together to build a vibrant, sustainable community of faith for the next generation of Catholics in the Archdiocese and beyond.

I look forward to sharing in that journey with each of you, and ask for your prayers for me, for our Church, and for our success in this most important endeavor.

In the Lord,

+Edwin F. O’Brien

Archbishop of Baltimore