

# Light For Our Journey

In addressing the need for reconfiguration of our parish schedules one principal driving force is the age and declining numbers of priests available to celebrate the large number of Masses—many of which are unnecessary given the current Mass attendance figures.

As we in Central Services prepare to provide support and direction to the ensuing process that must occur at the “grassroots” level throughout our Archdiocese, the question of vocations to priesthood and consecrated life has to be considered as a central and critical area of our focus in our parallel conversations. In fact, I cannot imagine how any Archdiocesan committee, at any level, in discussing realignment, can fail to discuss vocations, especially to the priesthood.

As I stated in my initial column on the shrinking presbyterate, we are ordaining an average of only three new priests per year. Our average age is skyrocketing. We have 20 percent fewer priests today than we did 30 years ago. I am truly optimistic that this can be turned around. But it will take ingenuity and work on every Catholic’s part to address the consequences of these realities. Meanwhile, the present task remains to take a fresh look at interparochial liturgical schedules to avoid unnecessary duplications and half-empty churches.

After nine years of extraordinary service of Fr. Gerard Francik as our Vocations Director, we are now privileged to have Father Austin Murphy in that critical Archdiocesan office. In the weeks and months ahead, Father Austin will be communicating with more of the faithful to share the programs that are currently in place and to seek advice for new ways to challenge our people, especially our young people, to live their Baptismal call in a uniquely generous and radical way.

To be frank and up-front from the outset, there will be no change in the tradition of a male, celibate priesthood in the Latin Church. Nor in my opinion should there be, need there be. I am wholly convinced that the youth and young adults of these United States are generous enough to give themselves fully and zealously to Christ through a vocation to the priesthood or as a consecrated religious. However, they need our support and they need our prayers and our encouragement to respond to

and live out this call.

I am fully aware that this responsibility is mine too, and I look for new ways to promote the cause. For instance, I participate in a program we call Highways and Bi-Ways. As you have read in these pages, several times each year I meet with prospective seminary candidates, high school students mostly, not in Churches or schools, but in homes hosted by generous families throughout our Archdiocese. We have had more than a dozen of these gatherings over the past 18 months including several for women. They have created considerable enthusiasm and I greatly enjoy interacting with the young women and men of our Archdiocese. I hope for many more such venues in the months ahead.

One question that is invariably posed is, “How can I tell if I have a call to the priesthood or consecrate life? What are the signs?” My initial response is a question of my own: “Why are you living your life, here and now? What is your basic motivation? Are you here to give or to get?” Surely there are other suggestions for helping one discern a calling to religious life—prayer, frequent sacraments, especially Reconciliation, a spiritual director or mentor, involvement in parish life—but unless one can answer the above questions—directly and honestly—there will be little happiness in any calling—whether married, single or religious life.

Certainly, frequent participation at Mass and regular Eucharistic devotion will and must be at the heart of every vocation and program for vocations. In my column last week, I reminded our good Catholic faithful of our duty as Catholics to keep holy the Lord’s Day and to embrace Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist for the transforming experience that they are. This is especially true for those who sense a call to follow Christ in priesthood or religious life.

In addition, Eucharistic adoration: the correlation between Eucharistic adoration and vocations to the priesthood can be seen here in our Archdiocese and throughout our country, where many parishes offering adoration have produced an impressive numbers of vocations in recent years. The numbers of priestly vocations coming out of these parishes reflect the significance of this special relationship and the importance of the Eucharist for the priest’s life and ministry.

This goes for all of us who would seek an enriched appreciation of the Sacrifice of

the Mass. "Adoration outside of Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself," Pope Benedict XVI said. "Indeed, only in adoration can a profound and genuine reception (of Communion) occur."

Pope John Paul II, who spoke prolifically on the Eucharist, described the Eucharist, as "Truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey."

As we seek to enrich opportunities to strengthen lay leadership through our recently instituted office for evangelization; as we continue to conduct one of the finest deacon formation programs I am aware of; I am compelled to ask each parish community and each Catholic school within our Archdiocese:

How many vocations to the priesthood and religious life have come from your midst in the last five, 10, 20 years?

What are you doing about it?

What can you do about it?

What sacrifices are you willing to make to enable the call of the Good Shepherd to be heard?