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Diocese investigates answers to priest shortage

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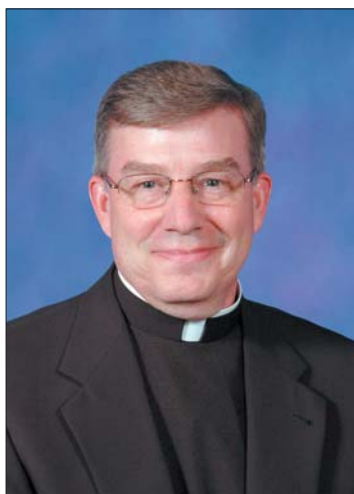
LACROSSE—An important topic at this year's Priest Unity Days, June 12-14, was pastoral planning for the Diocese. As a result of the discussion, Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI decided to set up a pastoral planning committee to investigate the best ways for the Diocese to serve its people in the years to come. Members have yet to be selected, but meetings will likely begin in September or October.

The discussion at Priest Unity Days began under the direction of Father David Kunz, pastor of Mary, Mother of the Church Parish, La Crosse, and chairman of the Personnel Council of the Diocese of La Crosse, which advises the bishop on priestly assignments and welfare.

In his talk Father Kunz cited diocesan statistics current as of March 11. In an Aug. 10 interview with *The Catholic Times*, he reported that these statistics have changed very little in the past five months.

The total number of priests in the Diocese is 182. Of those, 59 are retired, eight are on leaves of absence and nine serve outside the Diocese. There are 19 priests over age 70 who are still pastors, and 22 international priests. That means 65 native, pre-retirement-age diocesan priests are available for service.

In his talk Father Kunz contrasted the statistics with those



Father David Kunz

of when he was ordained. "In 1980 I was ordained to a presbyterate that had 215 active diocesan priests to serve the diocese," he said. "In that year there were also 55 priests who had reached senior status.

"In other words," he continued, "in the course of 25 years the number of active priests in the Diocese has been reduced by two-thirds."

According to "A Projection of Priests for the Diocese of La Crosse," a report on the Diocese conducted in 1996 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Washington, D.C., the number of priests from the Diocese of La Crosse available for active ministry will continue to decrease until 2025 and will bottom out at around 58.

Father Kunz said the projection was thus far accurate. "The numbers they projected at this point in time are very

close to what we are," he said. "Actually we are just slightly under the number they projected."

Father Kunz said the report was done with a variety of calculations, but the most accurate seems to be with the presumptions that the Diocese will receive two new priests each year via ordination or incardination and that some priests over age 70 will remain active pastors.

When asked about the presence of international priests as a long-term solution, Father Kunz said, "I think if you read the history of the Diocese, it has never been able to supply all its priestly needs. We've always relied on those outside the Diocese, whether it was from Ireland or a diocese out east or Chicago.

"Those venues are not open anymore because all of them are struggling themselves," he continued. "The new venue is international priests from Poland, India, Ghana or Nigeria."

Father Kunz had the opportunity to view some priests of the future from several dioceses while serving on the faculty at Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) Seminary, Winona, Minn., beginning in 1995 and as rector, 1998-2002.

"My experience was that the seminarian population remained fairly stable at IHM," he said. "I think what plays into it is that young men today coming into a seminary

situation may be more serious about exploring a vocation, but they also bring a whole lot more problems."

Some of the causes of problems he cited were broken families, psychological issues, affluence, societal permissiveness and difficulty in trusting. "That has repercussions in terms of your formation program," he said.

Father Kunz said that about one-third of those entering a minor seminary would actually graduate and attend a theological seminary, and about 25 percent of the original group would be ordained.

Father Kunz believes that now is the time to converse about solutions to the priest shortage. "These conversations have already begun among (the priests) on the deanery level," he said in his talk. "We need to continue these conversations and to broaden these conversations to include members of our parishes and members of the deanery pastoral council. I believe the conversations need to be had on the diocesan level."

Father Kunz said that such conversations were to be broader than simply a discussion of the priest shortage. Rather, they must focus on how to best serve the faithful.

Father Kunz noted that certain areas in the Diocese are experiencing growth, while the population in others is declining. "It's not growing in rural areas," he said. "People

are moving off the farms. We have a couple of small rural parishes where they've not had a baptism in three years, and they have five to six funerals each year.

"There are parishes where the number of households is the same, but the Catholic population has declined," he continued. Such numbers reflect households where all the children have moved out and one spouse has died, and one person in a home is still considered a household.

Father Kunz noted that cities tended to be growing, and those rural areas associated with cities were also growing. He said that this information would be analyzed as it is reported in the Bishop's Annual Report, a financial and statistical report submitted annually by each parish.

In his talk Father Kunz noted that there were certain matters that would not advance a solution. "It is not helpful to talk about ordaining women or married men or calling back those who left the ministry to get married," he said. "Frankly, none of us can do anything about these."

Father Kunz believes the conversations should be focused on the expectations of the faithful regarding their pastors, deacons and lay ministers. "Father is not going

to have time to go to everything you would necessarily want him to be at," said Father Kunz. "It would be nice if he could, but a priest is just not going to have the time, especially when we begin to talk about two or three parishes under one priest."

Father Kunz said that priestly time was a matter of priorities. "There are three things in particular that a priest alone can do and must do: say Mass, anoint the sick and hear confessions. Everything else can be done by someone else, so when I look at my calendar, I have to prioritize."

Father Kunz believes that parishes need to look more seriously at lay ministry and the permanent diaconate. Yet he said certain mindsets must also be overcome if this solution is to be viable. "There's a frame of mind in some parishes that says they're not willing to pay for a layperson to work in the parish," said Father Kunz. "There's also a mentality dealing with (the idea that) if a priest can't do it, it must not be that important."

Christopher Ruff, associate director of deacon formation and director of the Office of Ministries for the Diocese of La Crosse, said that the Diocese currently has 20 active deacons who mostly minister on a part-time basis, although

some are employed full time. He also said there are currently five women religious pastoral associates, who are appointed by the bishop to assist the pastors in parish administration.

Ruff believes that deacons will be more heavily involved in parish administration in the future. "I never want to see the diaconate reduced to 'We're short on priests so here's our fill-ins,'" he said. "Deacons have their own vocation acting in the image of Christ the servant, and it's not dependent on a priest shortage."

Deacons are able to celebrate liturgies of the word with a Communion service, witness marriages and baptize.

Regarding the laity, the Diocese currently has two programs for fostering lay ministry – the Lay Formation Institute (LFI) and the Leaders of Prayer. The LFI is a two-year formation program that combines theological study with pastoral formation. Many participants in the LFI minister in their parishes.

The Leaders of Prayer program is for those who have completed LFI, and it prepares the laity to preside at liturgies of the word with Communion services during the week in the absence of a priest, wakes and Eucharistic adoration without benediction among other things. Leaders of Prayer

are even able to lead Sunday Communion services in the absence of a priest at nursing homes or hospitals.

"They are able to lead the faithful in prayer on other occasions and bring Communion to the sick," said Ruff, noting that others could do these duties but that Leaders of Prayer were "formally trained to do it well."

Ruff doesn't believe there will ever be huge numbers of lay people employed by the Church. "I think the primary vocation of the laity is to bring the Gospel into daily life in the secular world," he said. "I see the laity as awakening more and more to that vocation and that's exciting. Hopefully our programs of formation assist them in that vocation, but clearly with the shortage of priests, there are pastoral needs that go beyond just the secular vocation of laity."

He added, "The priest needs to delegate, and the key is what and how."

While the Diocese hasn't formed any concrete answers yet, Father Kunz thinks certain conclusions can be reached. "The future is hopeful if we're serious about the conversations," he said, "and it's bleak if we don't take seriously the need for conversations with all those different groups."