

Thursday
July 27, 2006

The Catholic TIMES

Serving the Catholic Community of the Diocese of La Crosse

Envisioning Our Future

As the Bishop of La Crosse, I have officiated over the last 15 months at the funerals of a number of our priests at a rate of almost one a month. During the same period we were blessed to ordain four men to the priesthood for our diocese. Obviously one can see that we are not replacing our priests at a pace that meets the demands of our parishes.

One of my responsibilities as bishop is to provide for the sacraments through the work of the priests of this diocese. The very first bishop of the Diocese of La Crosse, Bishop Michael Heiss, faced the problem of the proper distribution of his priests.

Father Gerald Fisher reports in his historical work, "Dusk is my Dawn," that Bishop Heiss was inundated with requests from communities seeking a pastor: "To his Lordship the Catholic Bishop of La Crosse," writes one community, "We the undersigned Catholics of Medford and vicinity do petition your Lordship to see if it would be pleasing

The Bishop's Corner



Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI

to you to make arrangements with some one of your priests to come here and say Mass at least once a month If ever there was a priest wanted more in a place than here, may God help it."

People had to travel for miles on foot or horseback just to assist occasionally at Mass. Today there is no one in our diocese who must travel more than a few miles by car to be able to attend Mass every Sunday.

We are blessed in the diocese to have dedicated priests who extend themselves by celebrating multiple Masses for Christ and the good of the communities they serve. We are fortunate to have a number of religious-order priests here within our diocese who have

chosen to exercise their priesthood for the good of our communities.

Our international priests have left their homelands through the permission of their bishops to offer assistance to our communities. I pray that we will have their priestly ministry for years to come. Believe me, without them we would certainly be in a very difficult position. I watch in amazement at the generosity of our senior priests, many of whom continue to serve past retirement out of love for their people.

However, I worry about our future and the continued health of our clergy, both young and old, as the demands for priestly service continue. The graying of the clergy, the small number of vocations, the number of parishes (165) in the diocese and shifting demographics means that we must begin to study carefully how we will prepare for the future.

A year ago, I commissioned a number of pastors to begin a study of what we will look like as a diocese in the year 2025.

They were given the task of envisioning the needs of the diocese and how we would meet them with the statistical projections offered by a religious research foundation concerning the number of priests, deacons, pastoral associates and parishes in our diocese. We need to do this now, before being forced to make decisions out of a crisis of numbers.

I look forward to the Pastoral Planning Committee results that will be given to me soon and to sharing them with the priests, religious, deacons, pastoral ministers, parish staffs and the faithful of the diocese.

We will enter into a phase of consultation, looking forward to our responsibility as Church and together meeting the challenges presented to us. It is my prayer that our efforts will produce a Church that will maximize the availability of our priests and ministers, strengthen our resources to serve our faithful and present a Church proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ with strength and clarity. With God's help we will accomplish our task.