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Bishop, priests to discuss pastoral planning in Tomah

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LA CROSSE – In a Sept. 8 letter, Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI called all the active priests of the diocese to gather in Tomah Nov. 9-10 for a mandatory meeting on pastoral planning.

“It is necessary to examine how the pastoral care of the faithful in our diocese will be provided now and well into the future,” the bishop wrote.

According to Father David Kunz, pastor of Mary Mother of the Church, La Crosse, and chairman of a committee established by the bishop a year ago to formulate a pastoral plan for the diocese, Bishop ListECKI was “immediately confronted with the fact that we’re running out of priests” when he became bishop of La Crosse in March 2005.

Father Kunz explained that, when then-Bishop Raymond Burke left to become archbishop of St. Louis, the diocesan administration had asked each deanery to come up with a plan to do with one priest less than its current number. “This was met with a mixed response,” he said.

Pastoral planning committee

“Bishop ListECKI decided to set up a commission to come up with a plan for the whole diocese, said Father Kunz. The plan “was to be comprehensive instead of the quilt-work



Father David Kunz

(deanery) approach. We were asked to consider the greater vision – not just the reduction in priestly personnel, but how we can go about strengthening the entire diocese.”

Members of the pastoral planning committee include diocesan chancellor Benedict Nguyen and vicar general Monsignor Richard Gilles. The committee’s chair, Father Kunz, and its other members are all pastors: Fathers Jeffrey Burrill, Steven Kachel, Donald Meuret, G. Richard Roberts and Robert Schaller.

Father Schaller, pastor of St. Elizabeth in Holmen, noted that the average years of service of the priests chosen to work on the plan is between 20 and 25. “I think the intention of the bishop was to make it clear that, if you present a plan, you will be living in that plan,” he commented. “This is not to show disregard for the wisdom of older pastors,” he

emphasized.

According to Nguyen, these pastors have prepared three documents during a year of meetings that began in September 2005. These documents answer the questions of “where we are, where we need to be, and how to get there.” Nguyen said that they will be made public for the first time at the Tomah gathering.

Current situation

To describe the current pastoral situation of the diocese, Father Schaller pointed to some old warning signs, some of which predate his 19 years in priestly ministry. They included a declining number of priests and changing parish demographics. “A priest can find it very difficult to minister to three or four parishes,” he observed. “All (the parishes) feel neglected. This is a recipe for problems, both for the priest and the parish.”

Father Kunz concurred. “The way we do ministry today is going to kill us tomorrow,” he said. He noted that there is “a lot of interest” on the part of priests, since they already recognize the need for change or else are quickly coming to recognize this fact. “There is openness across the gamut of age,” he said.

But Father Schaller stressed that a lack of priests is not the only factor at play. “I would maintain that, although the declining number of priests is the driving force, the chang-

ing culture and demographics demand a restructuring of some sort,” he said. “We don’t want to waste our human and financial resources, and we now have the opportunity to improve the current situation.”

Mentioning the shift to suburbia – for example, from Stevens Point to Plover or from La Crosse to Onalaska – Father Schaller noted that most parishes have experienced a real decline in numbers. Father Kunz pointed out that this decline is especially tough on small, rural parishes, since they were so small to begin with. “The parents stay, but their children are leaving,” he said.

While the current plan is “more organizational and structural,” Father Schaller said he believes it will “give us more tools, so that we can address the spiritual problems.”

Spiritual dimension

The spiritual orientation reflects the intentions expressed by Bishop ListECKI in his letter to the priests. Citing his three-fold spiritual vision for the diocese – Catholic identity, evangelization and stewardship – the bishop wrote, “It is my conviction that these three objectives are not only well-suited to the pastoral plan, but can only be fully realized when our parishes become even more vital than they currently are, which is the goal of the pastoral plan.”

Seen in this light, observed

Father Kunz, the plan provides “a kind of hope for the future.” He emphasized that the plan prepared by the committee is open to change. “It is important to realize that this is not *the* plan, but *a* plan,” he said.

The two-day gathering of priests in Tomah will be conducted in a private, “retreat-like” atmosphere, where Father Schaller believes they “will be more free to speak their minds.” “They will have the opportunity to point out the strengths and weaknesses

of the plan,” he said.

Next steps

The following day, Nov. 11, the committee will present the plan to the permanent deacons and deacon candidates, pastoral associates and members of the diocesan curia at Holy Cross Diocesan Center in La Crosse. Finally, over the upcoming months, members of the committee will travel to all the diocese’s deaneries to allow parish council members to participate in the discussion.

According to Father Schaller, Bishop ListECKI expects a revised plan on his desk by mid-summer of next year.

Father Kunz explained that great pains are being taken to provide opportunities for consultation since, “ultimately the success of the plan depends on the understanding of all the (priests and laity).”

To alleviate the pressure on the priests traveling to Tomah Nov. 9, he added, details of the committee’s work have

not yet been made public. But whatever the plan calls for, he said, “we will have to learn to trust each other and collaborate with each other more, as well as with our deacons and pastoral associates.”

When asked what everyday people in the parish can do right now, Father Kunz pointed out what Bishop ListECKI wrote in his letter: that pastors should ask their parishioners to pray “for the grace of the Holy Spirit to guide us in our deliberations”