

Thursday
November 16, 2006

The Catholic TIMES

Serving the Catholic Community of the Diocese of La Crosse

Pastoral planning committee rolls out draft proposal

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LA CROSSE – Seldom does a bishop call together his priests for a mandatory meeting. The fact that Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI requested that all active priests of the Diocese of La Crosse come to Tomah on Nov. 9-10 for closed-door meetings to discuss pastoral planning was indicative of the seriousness of the matter.

At Tomah, the 100-plus priests actively engaged in pastoral ministry were presented with a sweeping plan of parish and personnel reorganization – the work of a committee of pastors established by the bishop a year ago – that, if approved, will affect most parishes in the diocese.

After the priests critiqued the plan in 20 hours of intense discussions, the plan was presented to the diocesan curia staff as well as the diocese's deacons, deacon-candidates and pastoral associates on Nov. 11 at Holy Cross Diocesan Center in La Crosse.

The bishop speaks

Addressing those gathered Nov. 11, Bishop ListECKI explained that, at one of the first priest-gatherings he attended after he became bishop of La Crosse, he could tell how few native clergy the diocese has. "There is an obvious problem here," he said.

"The number of priests is declining and will continue to decline," the bishop said.



Bishop Jerome ListECKI speaks to the curia staff, deacons, deacon candidates and pastoral associates at Holy Cross Diocesan Center on Nov. 11 regarding the proposed pastoral plan, which would restructure the diocese's parishes and redistribute its clergy. The work of a committee of mostly priests appointed by the bishop a year ago, the plan went before the diocese's priests Nov. 9-10 for comments and criticism. The plan will now be presented in the diocese's deaneries for critique by the laity before a modified version receives a yeay/nay vote by the Presbyteral Council in April. The bishop expects a final version on his desk by mid-summer.

"The average age will stay in the 60s, and the number of international priests available is questionable."

"As your bishop I would be negligent if I waited for a crisis to act," he argued. "This leads to the worst-made decisions, since oftentimes forced decisions are made without analysis."

In light of these concerns, the bishop said he was compelled to form a committee of pastors, and to give them the freedom necessary to arrive at

a solution of lasting value: "I met with the committee and told them everything is on the table, even putting the bishop in a parish."

Pointing out the presence of a number of these pastors, who were at the Diocesan Center to present the plan Nov. 11, the bishop added, "We owe them our deepest gratitude."

Those gathered gave these priests a sustained round of applause.

The bishop then gave the floor to Father David Kunz,

pastor of Mary Mother of the Church in La Crosse, who served as chairman of the committee responsible for the pastoral plan.

Declining number of priests

According to Father Kunz, the committee members arrived at a series of reasoned assumptions, which formed the basis for the plan's proposals.

Foremost among these assumptions is that the number of priests available will continue to decline. Father Kunz ex-

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plained that the committee had commissioned Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to prepare statistical projections on the presbyterate in the diocese.

The results of its analysis indicate that the number of active priests in the diocese (103 currently, which is down from 310 in 1965) will further decrease to 99 within four years, decline to 90 by 2015 and to 82 by 2025. The report assumed that the diocese would ordain an average of one new priest per year for the period.

The number of priests available to serve as pastors, Father Kunz added, will always be lower than the total projected number. This is in part because newly ordained priests need a period of transition before becoming pastors.

Father Kunz said his years in seminary work led him to advocate that newly ordained priests not be assigned a pastorate for at least two years. "There has to be a transition into the priesthood," he said.

Demographic projections and pew counts

Father Kunz said the committee also studied the State of Wisconsin's county-by-county demographic projections to the

year 2030, which should play a role in determining where to concentrate the diocese's resources.

In addition to the burgeoning population along I-90, these projections indicate a 25 percent population growth along the I-94 corridor, especially in the Eau Claire and Dunn County areas, slight growth in the Wausau, La Crosse and Stevens Point areas, and a population decline in other, more rural parts of the diocese. "This confirms what we already know from our ministry," he commented. "The growth in the rural areas is just not there."

A careful examination of the diocese's most recent pew counts was also invaluable to the committee, Father Kunz said. "If you add up all the numbers for October 2006, the number of Catholics at Mass on a given weekend is just slightly over 71,000, which is about 35 percent" of the total, he said. "That in and of itself should lead us to reflect seriously about what we're doing."

Mission vs. maintenance

"The bishop has said we have to be about mission," Father Kunz said regarding the low number of Catholics who

come to Mass.

"We are constantly balancing maintenance and mission," he added, explaining that, by maintenance, he was referring not only to parish structures but also to administering the entire parish. "But when we spend more time on maintenance, we spend less time on mission."

However parishes are restructured and the priests who serve them assigned, it will be done such that mission is emphasized, Father Kunz said. "A major source of stress for priests has been the administration of parishes," he added, explaining that priests were ordained primarily to minister, not administrate.

"There will be a greater cooperation among priests themselves, with deacons and associates, and among the parishes themselves, which will (in some cases) need to set aside years of animosity to work together," he said.

Parish closure not the answer

While some archdioceses and dioceses such as Boston and Toledo have closed large numbers of parishes, Father Kunz emphasized that the committee's plan calls for the very minimum of parish clo-

tures.

"This model works well in a metro area, where parishes are sometimes within blocks of each other," he explained. Other nearby dioceses such as Winona and Superior have utilized a clustering model, he added, indicating that the committee also shied away from this model, since it entails entrusting ever-growing clusters of tiny parishes to individual priests.

Immediate steps

According to Father Kunz, regardless of the form the final plan takes once consultations are complete, pastors should begin work immediately, voluntarily reducing the "needless duplication" of Masses and empowering the laity to act in the name of the Church whenever possible.

"Based on capacity, there are twice the number of Masses (as) needed in the diocese," he observed. "We need to ask who ministers in the name of the Church," he added, citing hospital visits and other activities for which lay people can and should be trained. "Volunteerism is no longer going to suffice."