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Worsening priest shortage fundamental to pastoral planning

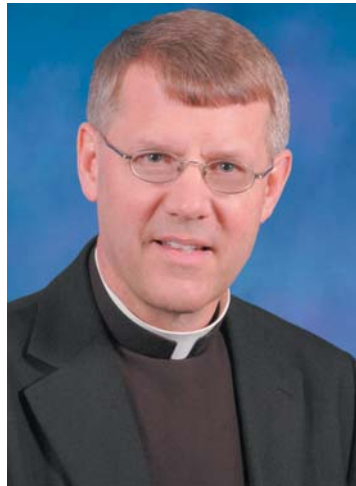
By FRANZ KLEIN
Staff Writer

LA CROSSE – That the Diocese of La Crosse needs more priests is no secret. Pastors of the diocese’s city parishes are living by themselves in rectories built to house three or four clerics. Priests in rural areas find themselves serving three or four parishes.

Along with changing demographics, the declining number of priests was one of the two prime movers behind Bishop Jerome E. Listecki’s 2005 decision to initiate a pastoral plan for the diocese.

After the bishop appointed a task force of pastors to formulate an initial plan, these pastors in turn hired Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) for help in projecting the number of priests the diocese could expect over the next 25 years.

According to the statistics the pastors submitted to CARA, there are currently 179 priests in the diocese, 53



Father Joseph Hirsch

of whom are 75 or older, and another 22 between 70-74 years old. In addition to the 109 priests in active service (including some who are past the retirement age of 70), 21 senior priests continue to serve in parishes. Another 21 active priests will reach retirement age within the next five years.

From the year 2000 to the present, the diocese has ordained 17 priests at an average age of 34 – an average of

almost three per year. Overall, 20 percent of the diocese’s priests are between 25-44 years old.

Based on the ages of currently active priests, CARA determined that, if ordination rates and other factors such as retirement age remain constant, the diocese will have only 94 priests in active ministry in 2025 and 95 in 2035. But if only one seminarian on average is ordained for the next 20 years, the diocese will only have 82 priests available in 2025, and even fewer by 2035.

One of the most pressing questions for the pastoral planning committee was how a small number of priests could best serve the diocese’s parishes. Their proposed solution, which was presented to priests, deacons, deacon candidates and pastoral associates in November, was geared to address the situation.

According to Father Joseph Hirsch, who serves as both diocesan vocations director and

vicar for priests, the “model for ministry” will change. “We’ve got priests trying to cover three or four parishes the way they used to cover one,” he said. “That’s difficult for a priest of any age, especially now, when so many are older. Using the old model, that’s burnout.”

Father Hirsch said that people need to understand that their priests are capable of only so much, and that they will need to collaborate for the good of the Church. “We’re going to need to rely on deacons, and pastoral associates,” he said. “We need to develop the participation of lay people in the Church.”

But Father Hirsch argued that the diocese is not “circling its wagons.” “People need to understand that we’re experiencing what people have experienced before,” he said. “We’ve got a number of (new) priests coming up.”

“We have to trust in the Lord and grow in holiness. The Lord will provide the vocations we need,” he affirmed.