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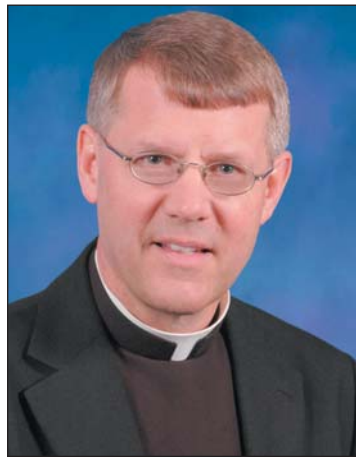
The priest shortage and pastoral planning: hope for the future

By FRANZ KLEIN
Staff Writer

LA CROSSE – In February 2006, Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) issued a study that projected the number of priests serving the Diocese of La Crosse through the year 2035. The study was requested by Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI, who decided in 2005 to initiate a pastoral plan for the future of the diocese. Together with demographic shifts, the declining number of priests available to serve as pastors was a prime motivator behind his decision.

Last May, Bishop ListECKI approved the pastoral planning committee’s contingency plan, which could reduce the number of parishes in the diocese from 165 to 75 without closing a single church building. A new committee of pastors and lay faithful is currently preparing protocols for how this would happen if it becomes necessary.

As a prime motivator behind pastoral planning, the number of available priests plays a big role in whether and how the plan is implemented. The CARA study’s most likely projection has the number of available priests decreasing from 109 in 2006 to 93 in 2015, and finally increasing to 95 in 2035. Among other factors, the pro-



Father Joseph Hirsch

jection assumes that an average of three men will be ordained each year through 2035, and a greater number would retire or leave diocesan ministry.

Since 2006, CARA’s assumptions have rung true. Two men were ordained for the diocese in 2006, one in 2007 and three in 2008. This June, five more men will be ordained, while a sixth ordination is scheduled for later in the year. Twelve ordinations in four years will give the diocese an average of three new priests each year – in line with the projection.

During that time, a larger number of priests have resigned their pastorates and been granted senior priest status, and a few other priests have left their pastorates to join religious orders or for other reasons. This is also in line with the projec-

tion, and explains the declining number of available priests.

Father Joseph Hirsch, diocesan vocations director and vicar for priests, called the possibility of six ordinations in 2009 – the largest class since seven were ordained a decade ago in 1999 – “phenomenal.” But he also admitted that the average number of ordinations would most likely continue along projected lines for the immediate future. “We have 24 seminarians right now and we’ll be losing six to ordination,” he said. “And we’ve got four to five guys coming on board, so we’ll be in the 20s next year.”

However, Father Hirsch also pointed to signs of a growing “culture of vocations” that would make CARA’s projection of three ordinations a year through 2035 too low.

First, the number of high school seminarians from the diocese at Holy Cross House of Formation in La Crosse has increased from two to seven, with the possibility of three to six more joining next year.

Secondly, the number of priests and parents working together to promote vocations has risen dramatically. “We’ve got priests doing that these days, we have parents doing that these days in very proactive ways,” he said. “We have our adventure camps, mission trips, youth rallies, retreats. All these things working together

are teaching prayer, catechesis and moral responsibility. And that’s where the vocations are going to come from.”

Along these lines, CARA also issued a second, “less likely” scenario as part of its 2006 study. According to this scenario, the average number of ordinations would gradually increase from three to five per year by 2035. If this happens, the number of priests would still decline to 96 by 2015. But by 2025 the number of available priests would rise to 106, and by 2035 to 123 – 14 more than the number available when the study was produced in 2006, and a whopping 28 more priests than the number that would be available if the diocese were to continue ordaining three men per year.

When interviewed by *The Catholic Times*, Father Hirsch had just returned from visiting Fernando Lara Hernandez, a diocesan seminarian who is studying in Mexico. “They told me they have 42 ordinations each year” in Guadalajara, he said. “Keep in mind, they have seven million people. Nevertheless, that’s a huge amount. So I asked, ‘What’s the secret to getting 42 ordinations?’ They say, ‘It’s because the family is strong, parishes are strong, the traditions are strong. All of these things create a culture from which vocations come.’”