

A REFLECTION ON VOCATIONS-FR. JIM

The movement towards clustering has been accelerated by the fact that in the next three years we will have no ordinations in our diocese, but at the same time have 15 priests reach the age of retirement (and another 17 reach the age of 67 and would be eligible for retirement if they had significant health problems). This is not unique to our diocese. The reality of today for Catholics in America is that there are 15,000 fewer priests than there were forty years ago. In the last ten years alone, the Catholic population in the United States has increased by 7.6 million members, but we have 6,500 fewer priests. Forty years ago there were only 547 parishes without a resident pastor. Today there are 3,251 parishes in our country without a resident pastor and this number is steadily increasing each year. Thus a recent study in 2005 showed that 44% of the parishes in the United States are being served by a priest who serves more than one parish. In other words, 20% of active priests serve multiple parishes and this number continues to grow rapidly each year.

Yet in terms of the church as a whole, **we have never had so many seminarians as we do today.** In 1978 there were 63,000 seminarians and today there are 112,000 seminarians, almost double the number from 25 years ago. The problem for us is that the majority of these seminarians **are not in the United States.** This shows that many of the reasons for our present "crisis" of vocations may be cultural. The Catholic Church in our country is impacted by many of the negative aspects of our American culture such as the promotion materialism and narcissism. Our culture is so saturated with sex that celibacy seems inconceivable, self-sacrifice is abnormal, and the idea of a long term commitment almost impossible. This may be one of the reasons that even though some Protestant denominations in our country have both married and women clergy, they too are experiencing a shortage of candidates who wish to become ministers.

The U.S. Bishops commissioned a survey not long ago in which one of the questions asked was: "Would you want your son to be a priest or your daughter to be a religious?" Astoundingly 60% of the U.S. Catholics answering this scientific survey said "**NO.**" This poll was done before the recent negative publicity of the church's sexual abuse scandal. In asking some practicing Catholics who are also parents, I have found similar results to this more sophisticated survey. One possible cause of this reality may be due to the fact that 80% of U.S. Catholics practice birth control, and like the vast majority of Americans are absolutely closed to having more than two children. The outcome of this way of life is that with only two children, many Catholics want grandchildren rather than having their son/daughter become a priest or religious. It is the natural human tendency to let "the other family" foster a vocation to the priesthood or religious life with this way of thinking. This thinking fails to remember **that children are a gift from God** and **what is most important is what God desires for each child.** The parents' role is to help and encourage their children to be people of prayer and to listen to God's voice for their future. We know that in any vocation, God is calling that person to become most fully himself, and to make a difference in the world, by building up God's Kingdom.

I think we all need to begin to help parents, grandparents, and other family member in our parishes see the crucial role they have in fostering and encouraging their sons/daughters to think and pray about a vocation to priesthood, religious life or lay ministry. Have you ever asked one of your family members if they have ever thought about being a priest or encouraged them to think about a religious vocation? Have you ever prayed for a family member that they would be open to God's call to priesthood? A priest I know asked me whether St. Joseph's ever had a person become a diocesan priest, since we have had Perpetual Adoration for the last twenty years. If we haven't, why is this? There is no instant solution to the challenge of clustering, but for the long term let us now begin to find ways to create and cultivate **"a culture of vocations" in our parish,** so that St. Joseph's may be known throughout the diocese, as a place where vocations flourish.

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