

Pastor's Pen: The Winds of Change

This last Sunday, Bishop McKnight sent an email to all the pastors of the diocese telling us the time has come to start scaling back our Sunday Mass schedule. He is aware that he is running low on priests and coverage is an issue. His priests are also rising in average age. There are currently 95 parishes and several missions in the diocese of Jefferson City. To man these parishes he has 48 diocesan priests, 18 priests from foreign nations who are on loan from other dioceses, and 6 priests who belong to religious orders or are on loan from other US Dioceses. Because this diocese has never in its history provided enough priests to serve the people of our diocese, we have had to import priests from Ireland, Nigeria, Uganda, India, Ghana, and from other areas of the United States. Over 50% of the 48 diocesan priests are not native to this diocese and/or state. As the Baby Boomer priests come up for retirement age (70-75) in the next five years and we only have nine seminarians (statistically 50% of them do not get ordained) we have finally run out of road to keep masking the crisis at hand.

Reflecting Reality

In Boonville, at SS Peter and Paul, the seating capacity of the church is 425. In Fayette, at St. Joseph, the seating capacity is 150. There are three weekend masses currently at SS Peter and Paul. This represents a total capacity of 1,275. There is one Mass at St. Joseph. This represents a total capacity of 150. The October count for SS Peter and Paul in Boonville for 2018 was 635 (up from previous years). For St Joseph, the October count was 129. That means with the current mass schedule at SS Peter and Paul, the capacity used was 49.8%. St. Joseph was at 85%. Other than for the sake of convenience, there really is no necessity for two masses on Sunday morning at SS. Peter and Paul.

These same formulas are going to be applied to every parish in this diocese. There will be very few parishes that will go unaffected.

I know people get very angry at the change in mass schedules. So does our bishop. But you must see things from his perspective. Due to the dwindling numbers of priests, he simply does not have the personnel to keep doing this. When one considers that the number of priests will fall sharply in the next 10 years, these cuts might well be the first round of cuts instead of temporary cuts.

Many might say that priests have been able to cover these four masses per weekend up to now. Why the change? First, the bishop does worry about wearing out his priests. As I am sure Deacon Dave can attest to, four masses take a lot out of you. When driving is necessary between the three Sunday masses, it is a heavy schedule. As the priests average age goes up, this schedule is going to become more and more untenable. Because the pool of able-bodied retired priests is rapidly aging and declining in health (and we depend on these priests for so much fill-in work), asking an 80-year-old man to fill in for such a schedule is also difficult. Add to this that pastoral assignments will grow larger for the pastors (having multiple parishes and schools) who are aging as a group, the bishop has decided that Mass schedules need to reflect reality.

Where do we go from here?

Both the clergy and laity need to ask this question. Are these cuts a matter of the first round of cuts? Are these temporary cuts until numbers of clergy go up? Or are these cuts the only cuts necessary if the number of clergy stabilizes?

No doubt, some will tell the Church she needs to change who she will and will not ordain. Statistically, churches who allow women and married men to be ordained are faring no better, and in some cases, much worse, than the Catholic Church. There is no empirical evidence that changing who we will ordain would improve the situation.

Some might rightfully point to the ongoing scandals of the last 20 years as to why we are in the trouble we are. It certainly is contributory. Again, though, if we look at empirical data, numbers of priests and seminarians have been in statistical freefall since the 1950's. That freefall precipitated us taking in men to the seminary who otherwise might well have been rejected and should have been rejected. We are paying dearly for this now.

In the history of the diocese of Jefferson City (est. Nov 27th, 1956) the people of this diocese have never been willing or able to provide from their own the priests necessary to serve the people in this diocese. We have overwhelmingly depended upon the good of other areas of this state, country, and planet to supplement what we were not willing to do. For decades, this kindness masked the crisis at hand. Our own parishes have been part of this issue. To my knowledge the last man to be ordained from SS. Peter is Paul was Fr. Paul Hartley who was ordained in 1981 and St. Joseph has yet to produce a priest for this diocese.

This lack of vision must end. The Church needs strong young men who will step up and at least entertain the idea of priesthood. We need to be doing more than praying. We need to ask, nurture, encourage, and be willing to sacrifice. Who? For years we got the idea of looking for the diamond in the rough. The young man who was awkward, seemingly un-dateable, and unfit for marriage was what was pushed into seminary. That didn't work out well for us. We need the diamonds in plain sight. We need young men who would otherwise make great dads and husbands to look at priesthood. You get what you recruit. I can tell you as a young man who had no support from family and friends to go into the seminary because I was 'too normal' and having family who believed that the seminary and priesthood was beneath me, not having support can be crushing.

If we want our parishes to expand and be lively, if we want more Masses, then all of us must do the hard work of changing the mentality. Why don't we have discernment groups? Why have we not had young men even look at a seminary in years? There is so much we need to do that can be done. We are not consigned to failure and contraction. This need not be the first of more cuts to come. However, we must learn that if what we have done is not working, then following Einstein's definition of insanity, we need to change the course of what we are doing.