

From the desk of the Pastor:

The Priesthood of Jesus Christ and the Pastoral Planning Process of Michigan City.

Over the last few weeks, we have been engaged in a planning program for Catholics in the Michigan City area. Our group has concluded its recommendations to the bishop and now we await his prayerful decision. I invite you to continue to pray for him and for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon him while he considers the best course for our city in relation to the recommendations that he received from the study group. I'm sure that all of you will remember that the process was largely initiated as a response to the dwindling number of priests within the Diocese of Gary. And while it is true that the process is largely driven by a reduced number of priests, I think it is important how it is that we have arrived at this moment. I would also like to clarify some ill-conceived solutions to the situation in which we now find ourselves.

First, I'd like everyone to consider that perhaps the real vocational shortage is not about a shortage of priests – but rather a shortage of authentic and holy vocations to marriage. Priests – under normal circumstances – arise from faithful families within the context of family life. If we don't have holy marriages, then we will never have sufficient vocations to the priesthood. We are living in a time when holy marriages are far too scarce. I am not interested in judging anyone or their circumstances, but we have to acknowledge that many couples choose to enter into quasi or pseudo marital unions. These couples do not choose to have their unions sanctified by the Church and often do not even seek a civil contract to express the lowest outward sign of some kind of commitment and societal permanence.

In addition, there are far too many people who have completely separated sex from the context of marriage. For too many people, sex has been robbed of its sacred character and reduced to nothing more than a high-contact sport. In this context sex as a high-contact sport includes absolutely no level of commitment or dignity. This radical lack of understanding regarding sex and marriage is the true vocational shortage.

We must rediscover the dignity of marriage if we wish to promote vocations to priesthood (and religious

life). Our Lady of Fatima warned us that the last attack of the Evil One would be an attempt to destroy the family, this is most often done through an attack on the dignity of sex and sexual identity. If we open our eyes, we will see with perfect clarity that Our Lady's words at Fatima are true. We must rise up as a people of faith and defend the dignity of marriage and family life. Until we reclaim the sanctity of marriage as a vocation to holiness within the Church, we will continue to struggle to fill our seminaries and convents.

During one of our "All Parish Meetings" someone suggested that we should start thinking about woman priests and married clergy if we are going to solve the priest shortage. (I do not know who made the comment as I was sitting in the front pew and did not see the speaker. However, I will say that I was surprised by the comment and discouraged that some people clapped at the suggestion.) I fear that these ideas are a result of inadequate formation, which I would like to confront directly in this article. Is married clergy or women's ordinations the answer to our priest shortage?

My own opinion is an unequivocal "No!" Please allow me to explain why. It is at best shortsighted to imagine that our priest shortage will be solved by allowing priests to marry. While marriage is not intrinsically opposed to priesthood, married clergy are not a part of our particular tradition. Honestly, it is possible that the Church could change the discipline regarding priestly celibacy. We know that it is possible for priests to be married because in the Eastern Rites of the Roman Catholic Church there are, in fact, married clergy. However, it has never been a part of our Latin Roman Catholic tradition. The argument that says that married priests would end our clergy shortage is easily dismissed when you examine the experience of our Protestant brethren. The fact is that while Protestant communities do allow their ministers to get married, they are nevertheless experiencing the same shortage that we are experiencing. If a married clergy were the answer, then the Protestant communities would not be experiencing the same want that we are experiencing.

We cannot, therefore, blame celibacy for the shortage of priests, nor can we assume that allowing marriage would somehow answer the clergy shortage. The root of our clergy shortage is not the demand of celibacy but the demand of the Gospel of Jesus. The root of the problem is a lack of conversion and a failure to encourage sacrificial living at all levels of Christian discipleship.

I also want to address the issue of a female priesthood. I know that our society prides itself on equality and blurring the distinctions between men and women, but this particular issue has already been settled by the Church. In 1994 St. Pope John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Exhortation called "Ordinatio sacerdotalis." In this document the saint wrote, "The Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."

After the publication of the document, some theologians questioned if the teaching was intended to be an infallible teaching of the Church. A "dubium" was therefore sent to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to review the question. Is this teaching infallible and unchanging or just an opinion of the Pontiff? Cardinal Ratzinger, who was then the head of the Congregation, responded by indicating that the statement of Saint John Paul II did, in fact, fall into the area of infallible and unchanging teaching. The Congregation's affirmation indicated that St. Pope John Paul II's statement had all the marks of infallibility, ordinary magisterial teaching. The Holy Father asked the theologians to stop asking if women could be ordained to the priesthood, and to start asking why only men could be ordained to the priesthood. The document, of course, has a lengthy section on the dignity and complementarity of both sexes as equal but distinct according to God's plan of creation. This teaching is not an attempt to diminish women, but to admit that difference of complementarity exists between men and women.

It is my hope that this article will clarify some of the issues that we are facing in the Church today, and help us seek solutions within the framework of Church teaching and discipline. It is my duty before God to form correctly those who are within my pastoral care. I hope that you will all receive these words from the place of love and concern from which

they have been issued. We are always the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and our parishes rest on the authority of Christ and his Church. Blessed be God forever.

As an action plan for the shortage of priests, I invite you to consider the following: Pray for more holy marriages based on the true gift of marital purity. Pray also for more vocations to special ministry in the church. I encourage people to sign up for the Vocation Cross so that you can receive the cross into your home and talk to your children about the need for more vocations and the joy of a vocation of special ministry within the church. (I am in process to start this ministry at St. Mary - if anyone is interested in coordinating the ministry, please speak to me.) If you see a young person who exhibits the virtues and talents associated with ministry, do not be afraid to simply say to them, "Have you ever thought about a call to the priesthood / religious life? I think you would make a good priest / religious. Finally, don't be afraid to offer your children to the church. The life of a priest or religious is one of joy and it would be a great honor if God blessed you by giving you a son who became a priest or a daughter who became a religious.

Peace,

Fr. Dave Kime