

PANEL ON PARISHES
January 2009

Change is the permanent condition of living beings.

INTRODUCTION

If things are happening around us, then the atmosphere is vibrant and alive. We might not enjoy or understand what is going on, but change is a sign of life. Our church is very much alive.

Last week we heard about how vibrant and life-giving parish life can be for us. Yes, we need vibrant parishes. But this week we will look at another facet of our Catholic experience, the decreasing number of priests. Of course, this has a direct impact on our parish life.

For the most part, we see this all around us. Parishes are being “yoked” or “twinned,” which means that one priest might be pastor or two or more parishes. In the Archdiocese of Hartford, parishes are being “clustered,” which means that a group of priests are given the pastoral care of a group of parishes. My understanding is that the six parishes of West Hartford will soon be “twinned,” so that three priests will lead the six parishes. In Norwich we recently closed two parishes and merged the communities into an already existing parish, and we are considering other consolidations.

We must say, at the outset, that these developments are very complex. The number of priests available for parish ministry is a factor in what is going on, but by no means is it the only factor. By the end of this short presentation, I hope a few of the other factors will be surfaced.

Also, the last point of this introduction - my hope is to present accurate information, but no solutions. In fact, I hope to leave you with many more questions than I might answer.

Please keep all this in mind as we now move forward. The decline in the number of priests is a factor in what is happening in the Church today. And so we will look at this one factor, remembering that the decrease in the number of clergy is not happening in a vacuum.

To discuss what is happening with respect to numbers of priests in our locale here in CT, we must establish some context broader than our immediate surroundings, to avoid the pitfall of narrow vision.

We begin with the big picture

UNIVERSAL CHURCH

In the whole world, there are 1.1 billion Catholics, and this number increases every year. This represents about 20% of the world’s population.

Conversely, 80% of the people in the world are not Catholic.

The Catholic Church is growing at the fastest rate in Asia (3% a year) and Africa (2% a year)

CATHOLIC UNITED STATES (in the world)

In this country, there are about 69 million people who self-identify as Catholics

This is 6% of the whole universal church - a very small piece. 93% of the world's Catholics are someplace else

Even though we are a small part of the universal church, we are very influential, very generous to charities

Also, we are very religious in comparison with other developed countries. Here, about 22% of Catholics attend mass at least once a month.

In European countries, attendance is down to 3 to 8 %. Of course, where the Church is growing, participation rates are much higher.

CATHOLIC UNITED STATES (at home)

Here at home, Catholics are 23% of the total population of our country

This percentage has held steady since 1995. In 1960, at the high point of Catholic influence in the political system, Catholics were 16% of the population.

Please note that it has taken almost 50 years for Catholics to achieve an increase of 7% of whole population. That is not vigorous, steady growth, but a steady and sustained community

This number (23% of total US population) would be much lower today except that the many of the millions of people who have emigrated to the United States from Central and South America and Asia are Catholic. That means that American Catholics have left the Catholic Church in very large numbers in the last 30 years

So - in the whole world, Catholic population is up

In the United States, Catholic population is steady, but has undergone significant change, especially in the past 10 - 15 years

MIGRATION

We have one last point to consider about the United States, and that is migration, or shifts in population

Our Catholic population has remained steady, with respect to numbers, but not with respect to location. This is what has happened since 1960 (almost 50 years)

In the southwest of the US, the Catholic population has increased by 261%
In the south, the increase is 196%
In the mid-west, the increase is 59%
In the east, the increase is 52% (one percent a year)

So, not only has the Catholic population remained steady for the past several decades, at the same time undergoing significant ethnic change, but that same population has migrated from East and mid-west to west and south.

IMPLICATIONS

The numbers can give us a headache, if we don't move from them to some implications drawn from the numbers. (But sometimes implications can give us worse headaches)

Last summer I had the opportunity to travel to Lima, Peru. In Peru, about 90% of the population is Catholic. Part of the journey was a visit to a Catholic parish on the outskirts of Lima. There I met the two parish priests who spoke of the difficulties they faced in reaching out to their 100,000 parishioners.

The people are faith filled, hopeful, very Catholic. The parish has a main church and several chapels

Another example comes from England, and it might not be so dramatic. In a parish outside the city of Manchester, in northern England, a family member of one of our sisters died. The family was not able to choose the time of the funeral, because by directive of the local bishop, all funerals were to take place at parish masses. Funeral masses were too getting too numerous for the number of priests available

There can be other examples closer to home:

the diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota - only 26 of the 89 parishes have resident pastors
the diocese of Dodge City, Kansas - every priest is the pastor of 3 parishes
the diocese of Santa Fe, New Mexico has 91% of its parishes "clustered"

There is a statistic used in pastoral planning called the "priest to people ratio." You take the number of available priests and divide it into the Catholic population. It gives you an average, meaning that in a particular place you will find places where the ratio is too low, and others where it is too high.

In South America, the ratio is 1 priest for every 3000 people
In the United States, the ratio is 1:1200
In Connecticut, the ratio is 1:900

You don't need to indicate your response, but how many of us here in this room are within easy travel distance of three or four parishes?

On Sundays, how many of us have several mass times to choose from, in a few parishes?

Here, CT, we are experiencing a decline in the number of priests. Is there a shortage of priests? Yes, there is, but not here - at least not yet.

We still have a high degree of convenience in the practice of our religion. We are just arriving at the edge of being inconvenienced, but in other parts of our world and country people are truly inconvenienced. And in other parts of the world, where the church is still growing, the riches that we have with respect to availability of mass and sacraments has never been known.

WHAT ARE WE TO DO?

Now that we might be seeing the situation in a larger context, how do we respond? What can we do? What should we be considering?

The first step would be to realize that things probably won't be getting better very quickly.

Most dioceses are in the midst of a very strong campaign to increase vocations to the priesthood and to religious life - since both vocations are part of a vibrant Catholic culture, and are essential to parish life, although for different reasons.

In fact, this is Vocation Awareness week (Jan 11-17). What are you doing to help?

Even in light of this vocation push, presuming that the situation of the decline in the number of priests continues, I would suggest three actions

FIRST - have an accurate/real understanding of the wider church. Understand that the greatest growth is not here, but in Africa and Asia. This accurate understanding would include the following facts:

The United States has 6% of the world's Catholics, but we have 12% of the world's priests, and we continue to bring priests in from other countries

Remember what has happened here in the last 30 years with respect to population growth, ethnic shifts and geographic shifts of the Catholic population

SECOND - cultivate a deep love for the Eucharist

We Catholics are uniquely Eucharistic. The Sunday celebration is meant to be the center of our faith. Gathering for the celebration is intended to be the highlight of our life together as God's people.

More than any other activity, the celebration of the Eucharist is the key to the meaning of our Baptism into Christ

Eucharist is not specific to any priest or parish. Love of the Eucharist helps us to understand that parish boundaries sometimes fall, but the Eucharist continues

Love of the Eucharist helps us to accept that driving five or even ten miles to join a community of faith - a Eucharistic community - is not too much to ask. Love of the Eucharist helps us to be members of the world-wide Church

THIRD - love and understand collaborative ministry

We all know that effective collaborative ministry isn't supposed to rely solely on priests or deacons. By reason of our baptism, we all carry a share of the responsibility for the mission of the Church

Collaborative ministry has three facets:

- priests who are willing to share aspects of their pastoral work with laity
- laity who are willing to undertake ministries in their parishes
- laity who are willing to accept ministry from other laity

This is a complex issue, filled with practical and some theological questions. Some of these questions include

- priests who aren't inclined to share
- laity who can't gain access to education and formation for ministry, or who are willing and able, but can't afford to work in the Church because of low wages, etc
- laity who still have certain expectations for the presence or ministry of the priest only

I would suggest that within collaborative ministry is our future.

Some say that the collaborative style of ministry - whether it is growing from grace or necessity - is the silver lining behind the decrease in the number of priests.

The decrease is allowing the gifts of lay people to rise up in various situations, to be recognized and accepted for the good of the whole Church.

This is no small consequence.

CONCLUSION

Much material has been presented to you this evening. It isn't of much value until it is

responded to, questioned and discussed, and so we will move on to that portion of the evening.

I leave you with the text of a bumper sticker I saw recently:

“If nothing changes, nothing changes.”