

June 14, 2009

Changes can be approached with fear and apprehension or with joyous anticipation and excitement. I hope our very deliberate efforts to help priests and people deal with transition will have been helpful to the 15 parishes which will experience changes in priestly leadership on July 1.

On July 1, four of our pastors will retire, ten pastors will be reassigned, one associate pastor will be reassigned, and one priest will be assigned to studies.

As Catholics, we are a people of hope because we know God is always with us, very especially in challenging times. At the Last Supper, Jesus promised that He would not leave us orphans but that, if we love Him and keep His Commandments, He would send us the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to remain with us always.

Priests are as human as anyone else and certainly anticipate moving to a new assignment with trust in the Lord but a little nervousness. I urge you to welcome your newly assigned priests wholeheartedly, pray for them, love them, and resolve to use your gifts and talents in working with them to continue the mission of Jesus.

Catholics in our diocese have a remarkably deep commitment to parish life. It is where their faith is nurtured, often where they experience community, and where they receive strength from the Mass and the Sacraments. Parishioners, priests, and parish staffs generally adapt remarkably well to personnel changes and other modifications required by circumstances and changing demographics.

In the United States, between 1967 and 2008, the Catholic population has grown by more than 20 million, yet the numbers of priests have diminished by 18,486. Parishes have become much larger than ever, fewer have associate

pastors, and an ever-growing number of priests are required to staff more than one parish simultaneously. About 50 percent of the parishes and missions in the United States share a pastor with one or more other parishes.

In our diocese, the Catholic population has grown while the numbers of priests have been diminished. In 1967, we had 264 priests (152 diocesan and 112 religious) and today we have 144 priests (103 diocesan and 41 religious). Of the current number of diocesan priests, 30 are Senior (retired) priests.

Some may remember when there were 20 priests on the faculty of Bishop Noll Institute and more than one associate in our larger parishes. Today, we have a total of six associates in the entire diocese. Several large parishes are served by just one priest. Ten priests simultaneously serve as pastor of more than one parish. Father John Kalicky, C.P.P.S., is pastor of four parishes in Whiting, Father Jerry Schweitzer is pastor of three parishes, and eight additional pastors each have responsibility for two parishes.

While challenging in several ways, 95 percent of the priests serving multiple parishes across the country say they are satisfied with their ministry and feel appreciated and respected for their priesthood. They and their parishioners recognize the value of combining the resources of several parishes – whether it be for liturgy, religious education, or parish staff.

Our diocese is blessed with 58 deacons, many lay ecclesial ministers, and a recognition on the part of increasing numbers of parishioners that their active involvement in the parish is essential for a very dynamic parish in which dozens of ministries flourish.

I believe that most of our parishes have more ministries flourishing now than ever before. I detect a real excitement on the part of the people who are

actively engaged in continuing the mission of Jesus within and beyond their parish.

Through Baptism, Jesus calls us to mission, not maintenance. The Lord calls us to be good stewards of our gifts in behalf of His mission of bringing the Father's love, peace, justice, and truth into our communities. Our good stewardship begins with an attitude of gratitude for all that the Lord has freely given us and a desire to use our time, talent, and treasure to build the Body of Jesus, the Church, and the kingdom of the Father in our families and communities.

May this time of transition in parish leadership be an occasion for renewed hope in each of us as well as a time to re-commit ourselves to live our Baptism to the fullest.