

Aren't There Untapped Resources of Priests?

Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest." (Matthew 9:37-38)

With fewer and fewer diocesan priests available for ministry in our diocese, it is natural to wonder if there is a supply of priests that simply isn't being tapped. Below are the most commonly asked questions – and answers – about finding additional priests.

1. *Can't we get priests from other countries?*

There is not a significant number of priests from other countries available for service in the Diocese of Cleveland. In comparison to other countries, and even other areas of the United States, our local church is priest rich. In the United States, in 2004, there were 1524 Catholics per priest, based on the total number of all priests. In the world, in 2004, there were 2748 Catholics per priest. As you can see, the United States already has a greater number of priests per Catholic than the rest of the world. However; that should not be understood to mean that we do not have a need for more priests here in our Diocese. Yet the Vatican has asked bishops to be extremely sensitive to needs, especially evangelization, of the growing Church in third-world countries – and not to turn to those countries for assistance as other countries experience a shortage of priests. By ordination a priest has a specific relationship to the Diocese that calls him to ordination; so normally he is expected to serve in that Diocese for life.

Historically our Diocese has welcomed priests from other countries to assist our ethnic parish communities in the pastoral care of parishioners with specific language or cultural needs that our own priests are not able to fulfill. That will continue to be necessary in the future – as will the need to assist priests from other countries to become accustomed to our language and cultural needs so that he can minister in the most effective manner to the people entrusted to his care. We have been, and will continue to be, enriched by the presence of priests from foreign countries who serve here for a defined time commitment prior to returning to their home country.

2. *What about additional religious order priests?*

As of January 1, 2005, 15 parishes in the Diocese of Cleveland are entrusted to the care of Religious Communities. All of these religious communities enrich our local church, bringing their particular charisms and talented personnel to minister to the parishes entrusted to their care. However; the number of priests in religious communities is declining just as the number of diocesan priests is declining. Some religious communities have indicated that they may not be able to staff the same number of parishes in the future and have made a commitment to work with the Diocese in a smooth transition when they are not able to assign a priest to a specific parish. All of the religious communities currently serving in our Diocese are committed to working in a collaborative manner as we look assure the vibrancy of parish life in the future.

3. *Aren't there priests serving in diocesan offices, administration, or special apostolates that could be called on for parish ministry?*

Most diocesan positions which once were served by a priest have gradually been turned over to religious and lay persons over the past 15-20 years. There are very few priests serving in these areas. Those priests that remain usually do so while also serving the larger diocesan community by providing liturgical and sacramental ministry in parishes.

4. *What about parishes with more than one priest?*

Of the 233 parishes in the eight counties of the Diocese of Cleveland, 144 parishes are served by only one priest; 45 parishes have 2 priests; 13 parishes are served by 3 priests; and only one parish is served by four priests. The current diocesan guidelines for the assignment of priests indicate over 500 households to qualify for a full-time pastor, 2800 households to qualify for an associate pastor, and 3800 families for two or more associates. We also need several parishes for training newly ordained priests and for some priests to be assigned who, due to a variety of reasons, are not able to serve as pastor. Geography, additional duties and language needs are also factored into consideration when addressing these guidelines.

5. *Why doesn't the diocese promote more vocations?*

Our diocese has one of the best programs in the country for promoting vocations. The 2005-2006 academic year provided a major boost in enrollment in our seminaries and one of the largest incoming classes of any diocese in the United States. We have 22 new seminarians at Borromeo College Seminary, and 4 new seminarians at St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology, bringing our total seminary enrollment to 68.

While the recent response has been an increase over the immediate past, it is not enough to keep up with the aging and retiring population of those already ordained for service in the church. The preparation and discernment of seminarians prior to ordination will cover the next 10 years, and not every seminarian may be ordained. During the next 10 years, 85 diocesan priests will reach retirement age.

Many good and faithful people have responded generously to the call to serve the church through ordained ministry, but continued prayer and support of the vocation recruitment efforts still needs to be a high priority for all the faithful. While we have one of the most highly regarded diocesan programs in the country, much more can be done in utilizing these resources and taking initiative at the parish level. It is especially important for families – parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles – to invite young men to consider the possibility of a priestly vocation, to encourage anyone who expresses an interest in the priesthood, to support someone who is considering entering the seminary and all our seminarians. Above all, it is important that we continue to pray for our priests, our seminarians and all who minister in the church.

Going Deeper:

1. Which of the questions and answers above was most interesting or surprising to you, and why?
2. Has your parish taken steps to promote priestly and religious vocations? Have you personally taken steps to promote these vocations? Describe the steps you have taken.

Next week: Number 8 in our VPL series.... “Help Wanted...New Roles for New Times”