

October 4, 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the recent Convocation of Clergy of the archdiocese in mid-September, at the local Vicariate meeting last Friday and at Fr. Erikson's presentation at the adult faith formation series this past Tuesday night at St. Irene Parish in Carlisle, attention has been drawn to the report the Archdiocesan Pastoral Planning Committee submitted to Cardinal O'Malley this past spring.

In January 2006, Cardinal Sean O'Malley identified three areas of pastoral life that he considered particularly challenging for the archdiocese today—Faith Formation, Marriage, and Pastoral Planning. He appointed a committee to study each area and charged each committee with bringing its findings and recommendations to him and to the Presbyteral and Archdiocesan Pastoral Councils. In elaborating on his charge to the Pastoral Planning Committee, the Cardinal asked that the Committee look at what exists in terms of services and programs; review the best practices locally and nationally; and formulate recommendations and priorities to guide the archdiocese into the future.

The 13-page report which includes statistics and recommendations is not a working plan in itself but rather is meant to serve as a basis for further consultation leading to a pastoral plan for the future of the archdiocese. The study is sobering nonetheless with facts like these:

*The Archdiocese of Boston is currently served by a total of 500 active priests. Of these, 38 are on health leave or unassigned, 97 in special ministry and 365 in parish ministry. Of those in parish ministry, 108 are 65 years of age or older. At a projected average net-loss rate of 25 active priests per year and a projected average of 5 newly ordained priests per year, by 2015 there will be only 292 active priests, i.e., priests who are not retired or permanently disabled; only an estimated 212 will be available for parish ministry. This will leave approximately 10-12 priests in each of the 20 vicariates in full time parish work. Not all active priests will be capable or willing to serve as pastors. It is likely that more religious communities -- as have the Marists, Oblates and Franciscans -- will be turning their leadership of parishes back to the archdiocese, owing to insufficient numbers of priests; a few new communities will likely take responsibility for some parishes. The current dependence on many senior priests to assist with liturgical life will surely continue but their numbers will begin to decrease.*

The impact of such a decline in clergy will have a stunning effect on parish life and will heavily impact the ministry of priests in those areas of their work for which the ministry of an ordained priest is necessary. As critical as these times are, however, they offer opportunities for creative solutions to problems and will certainly call forth as never before the leadership and ministry of people in our parishes. It cannot

escape our attention that this will happen in our own times, that our children will grow up, marry and begin to raise their own families in parishes which will be administered in significantly different ways.

This study does not report newly discovered information. What's new here is a concerted, open effort to deal with the situation in hand and ahead. In many ways, the Catholic Church in the midwest has been dealing with the same issues for several decades. A comparatively clergy-rich personnel situation in the northeast has shielded us from the immediate impact of what has been inevitable.

I have written here before that it's my hope to retire at 12:01 a.m. on April 17, 2017, my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, God willing I should live that long! As you can see from the paragraph quoted from the report, my services will be still be at a premium as I try to blow out all the candles on my cake. I've never envisioned retirement as leaving ministry behind and I'll be pleased, as I'm able, to continue to serve in the ranks of the ever decreasing number of senior priests.

But with whom will I serve? There will be many fewer active priests in ministry by then. Will lay leadership have emerged to shoulder even more responsibility than today? I hope so and I pray so - but I am not sure. For example: we have revamped our faith formation program for children, at the request of many parishioners, but we still have a serious need for teachers which (as of this letter's date) will leave **70** children without a class to attend when individual classes begin this week. If we are unable to muster catechists for the traditional task of instructing our children, how will we call forth leadership for other ministries in parish life? A new sense of ownership of parish ministry must be shouldered by all if parish life is to remain vibrant. Theologically and pastorally the Church has been encouraging lay leadership since the early 1960's and, indeed, the face of parish staffing has changed significantly: perhaps too much for some and not enough for others. From an objective point of view, however, much *more* change needs to happen as parishioners will be able to rely less and less on others to do the work.

I have emailed copies of the report to the parish staff, the Parish Pastoral and Finance Councils, the Parish Buildings and Grounds Commission and the Parish Development Commission. The report is available online and you can link to it through my blog at **ConcordPastor.blogspot.com** (check LINKS in the sidebar for **RCAB Planning Report** or the post titled **Planning for Tomorrow's Church.**) Next week I will have some copies available at church for those who are not online.

////////////////////////////////////

On Saturday, October 13<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m., the CCHS Men's Soccer Team will play a night game in memory of Lois Wells, who passed away earlier this year after a courageous battle with cancer. Lois is the mother of Steve Wells, the team's assistant coach, who, with his older brother Dan played in the soccer program in the 1990's. All proceeds for the game will be

donated in Lois' memory to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute to support cancer research. Some of our parishioners are involved in this benefit effort and I am pleased to lend them my support here. The game matches CCHS vs. Boston Latin High School and will be played at the CCHS Stadium Field.

Sincerely,

Fr. Fleming