

***Excerpted from an article in The Tablet
(May 24, 2003), written by Roger Payne.***

Msgr. John Brown, director of clergy personnel for the diocese, has nearly completed a speaking tour which offers a dose of reality on the current priest staffing situation in our diocese. He's already spoken to more than 2,000 people. Another 200 or so from Queens North Clusters Four and Five, which encompass Queens Village, Floral Park, Bayside, Bellerose, Jamaica, Kew Gardens Hills, Hollis, and Richmond Hill, showed up at Our Lady of the Snows, North Floral Park, last Thursday. They heard about some sobering numbers, and what the diocese plans to do about them.

"They keep telling me not to scare everybody," Msgr. Brown grinned. "So here's the good news: Jesus Christ is with us to the end of time. We're not here tonight to say, last one out turn out the lights."

Nonetheless, "We're in a time of real challenge," Msgr. Brown admitted quickly. Before focusing on the numbers, however, he was quick to highlight the context of his presentation.

"We need to see the shortage of priests in light of Jesus' mandate to spread the Good News," said Msgr. Brown. "That mandate is the real issue. Christ does not say, you have fewer priests, do less. We have to be in this together. We must all fulfill our ministries."

To a great extent, the numbers speak for themselves. The number of available, active priests in the Brooklyn diocese has declined 46% since 1979. Perhaps more alarming, nearly a quarter of those priests will reach retirement age in the next five years, 42% within the next ten, and 81% within the next 20 years. Sadly, during this same period, if current trends hold, new ordinations will only serve to replace the active priests who die before reaching retirement.

The numbers highlight other issues as well. "Every once in a while a pastor loses his mind briefly and says to me, 'I need a young priest.' In our diocese, that's any priest under 57," Msgr. Brown laughed.

More seriously, he continued, "Nobody likes change. But we cannot continue business as usual. If we do not change, we will not be a healthy Church, and we will not fulfill the mandate."

Msgr. Brown went on to explain that a Task Force had been formed in 1998 to study the issue, and had presented the bishop (Thomas V. Daily) with a

plan which was accepted in June 1999. A study of how to efficiently distribute priests within the diocese was conducted, which more or less reaffirmed the status quo. The bishop's pastoral letter of 2000, entitled "Pray the Lord of the Harvest," called for a number of other steps which are already underway. These included formation of a Cluster Office, promulgation of sacramental guidelines so that everyone understands the requirements. As Msgr. Brown put it, "If we're going to say that priests aren't going to do everything, we have to know what's required for each ministry." In addition, Bishop Daily directed the Pastoral Institute to develop more structured programs for ongoing formation of priests, religious, deacons, and the faithful.

In March of 2002, Bishop Daily sent a followup letter to pastors outlining additional steps to be taken. These included reducing Mass schedules, primarily through coordination within clusters. As Msgr. Brown says, "The idea was to preserve choice (of times and languages), but not necessarily within each parish." In that letter, the bishop also reinforced the idea that priests should concentrate on central sacramental services and allow lay ministers to handle other functions.

The bishop also asked in that letter that each cluster submit a plan addressing his concerns, which would also consider which parishes might be joined together. As of last Thursday, Msgr. Brown reported, he had received 19 of the 32 plans requested.

A partial solution is to obtain the services of priests incardinated in other countries who can serve specific foreign language populations. The bishop is already negotiating five-year contracts with a number of foreign dioceses.

Nonetheless, a number of questions remain largely unaddressed, according to Msgr. Brown, most relating to undercurrents of stress experienced by current priests at least partly as a result of diminishing numbers. How exactly to transfer temporal administration responsibilities to others to free up priests to do sacramental ministry? How to promote health among an overworked priestly population faced with rising expectations from parishioners rocked by the sex abuse scandal? How to help them find time to pray and reflect?

And then, of course, the issue of vocations is never far beyond the horizon. It requires no deep thinker to see that a substantial increase in vocations would reverse the trend and make the resulting issues more manageable.

According to Msgr. Brown, the answer lies with everyone. "It's not good enough to say to ourselves, yes, we need priests, but not my family," said

Msgr. Brown. "Priesthood is a great, sacred life. We have to ask ourselves and each other, what is my attitude toward priesthood?"

By raising awareness of such issues and alerting everyone to impending changes, Msgr. Brown's presentation series is itself part of the bishop's strategy. It is hoped that additional solutions will become apparent as participation in the search for new approaches broadens.

"It's going to be painful," Msgr. Brown summarized. "It's going to mean change. This shortage affects everyone. We either plan or we don't plan. But if we're going to lose 308 of our priests in the next 20 years, it's better to plan together."