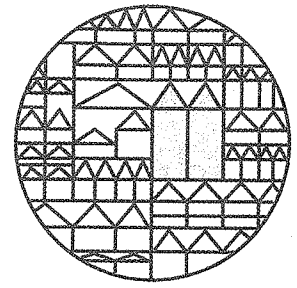


From the Editors



Tomorrow's Priests

The Catholic priesthood in the United States stands at a crossroads. An increasingly sophisticated Catholic laity fills the church's pews and staffs its ever-growing parishes, and yet the church has failed to produce a corps of new priests to match it—in either quantity or quality. True, some data suggest that today's recently ordained clergy are happier than their predecessors, and this is good news for stemming attrition in the short term. But over the long haul, happiness won't be enough.

Dean R. Hoge's new study, *Experiences of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years* (National Catholic Educational Association), paints a worrying portrait of the priests who will serve U.S. Catholics in the decades to come. Compared with the priests in Hoge's previous 1990 study, today's new clergy are not only fewer in number but also older, less educated, less thoroughly schooled in theology, and less likely to see its relevance to ministry. And they are more heavily burdened with responsibilities, especially early in their careers.

Problems in seminary training have been brewing for some time. By the late 1990s, as the work of sociologist Katarina Schuth, OSF, shows, candidates for the priesthood had become increasingly divided between two groups: one focused on "orthodoxy" and Roman control, and less inclined to collaboration with the laity; and another—greater in number, but quieter about it—less interested in orders from Rome and more committed to collaborative governance. As for the quality of individual candidates, the Keystone Conferences, which convened Catholic seminary faculties annually from 1995 to 2001, assessed merely 10 percent of their priesthood candidates as highly qualified, and estimated that roughly 40 percent exhibited educational shortcomings ranging from insufficient preparation to learning disabilities.

Now we have Hoge's study to bring us up-to-date, and the results are not encouraging. Neither the polarization problem Schuth described nor the seminarians' educational disadvantages identified in the '90s has abated. Hoge's new study shows a striking drop in theological preparedness among sem-

inarians. In 1990, only 17 percent of diocesan priests in his sample required remedial pre-theology courses after entering the seminary. Today, that figure has leapt to 47 percent. In focus groups, some priests even voiced serious doubts about the relevance of their theology courses to their ministry. How then can they hope to relate doctrine to experience when parishioners come knocking for counsel?

Relating to laypeople's experience may prove increasingly difficult for other reasons as well. Recently ordained priests adhere to a "cultic" model of the priesthood that stresses the essential difference between clergy and laity; the priest, Hoge explains, is seen as "a man set apart whose job is providing the sacraments, teaching the Catholic Church's doctrine, and being a model of faith and devotion." A "servant-leader" model, on the other hand, emphasizes the collaborative elements of clerical leadership within the community. But the popularity of that model, ascendant in the 1960s, has waned.

In any case, as seminaries continue to graduate fewer and fewer priests, the clergy will become literally more "set apart"—and not just from the laity, but also from one another. In 2005, 54 percent of diocesan priests were serving as pastors after an average of seven years in the priesthood—more than double the rate for recently ordained priests in 1990. And of those working as pastors in 2005, 36 percent of diocesan clergy were overseeing more than one parish. Added to the stress of new responsibilities is the challenge of being placed in increasingly solitary living situations. Nearly half of those in the 2005 diocesan sample live alone, up from 29 percent in 1990. Is it any wonder that loneliness is often cited by the recently ordained as one of the major difficulties of adjusting to parish life?

Of course, seminaries can't do everything. Yet some of the issues plaguing recently ordained priests can be addressed. Too few of these men have the training required to do the job adequately—and they know it. Indeed, increased attention to administrative and leadership skills is the number-one suggestion offered by the recently ordained when they make recommendations on how to improve seminary training. Chanceries should take up the task of training priests in the practicalities of running a parish, and work harder to foster a spirit of community among diocesan clergy. However these challenges are addressed, it is clear that more must be done to ensure the health and competence of the recently ordained. At stake is nothing less than the future of the church's sacramental life. The continuation of current trends could spell calamity. ■

October 24, 2006