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### **“How Are We Doing?” A Call to Leadership**

As you might suspect, as Director of Vocations and Seminarians, a frequent line of questioning posed to me is, “How are we doing? How many seminarians do we have?” In a certain respect, the second answer is meant to draw forth factual data for an answer to the first question.

However, in telling a person that we have presently five seminarians, it still is not really enough data for an answer to their initial inquiry. I am not trying to elude the first question, but the truth about seminary is that it is a place of discernment. When men go off to seminary, it is not a factory process whereby they come out as priests. Rather, it is a place for them to test their initial perceptions over time and to grow in their understanding of priesthood and the Christian vocation, in general. This process leads some men to be affirmed in their called to the ordained ministry for our Diocese, but it leads others to recognize that their call to service may be in the consecrated life or in the vocation of marriage.

Just recently, I was asked to project for diocesan planning purposes, not only the number of seminarians, but also the number of ordinations to the priesthood in the next ten-year period. In making such calculation there were many years with “0” ordinations because I felt that I had to be conservative. The simple fact is that not every man that goes to seminary will be ordained to service as a priest in the Diocese of Ogdensburg. Moreover, not every man who expresses interest in priesthood is accepted into the Program for Priestly Formation for our Diocese for the simple reason that good intentions do not always equal a good candidate.

Yet, I suppose you are still waiting for me to answer the question, “How are we doing?” Qualitatively, I would say, “excellent.” The five seminarians we have at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary near Philadelphia, PA are fine, young men who are seriously looking at God’s call in their lives and taking the necessary steps to follow where that call is leading them. Such a process involves not only introspection, but evaluation by others and the maturity to respond to such critique and to use this as a stepping stone for personal growth. I think most of us realize that for any person to respond in a constructive manner to such scrutiny is not an easy thing, but the ability to do so is a definite sign of maturation. I can tell you that I see such encouraging results in our seminarians today.

Now to deal with the quantitative aspect of, “How we are doing?” Currently, I have two inquiries for admission to the Program for Priestly Formation for the Diocese of Ogdensburg for the next academic year. The application process involves the obtaining of transcripts, sacramental records, letters of recommendation, a physical exam, a

psychological evaluation, a criminal background check, a short family history/autobiography, and some reflection questions concerning the candidate's understanding of Church and of one's own self. After all these documents are submitted, the applicant meets with the Diocesan Admissions Board composed of: the Episcopal Vicar for Clergy, the Director of Vocations and Seminarians, the Director of Catholic Charities, a woman religious, and a married couple. After this interview, the board makes a recommendation to the Diocesan Bishop concerning the application who then renders the final decision.

At first glance, some may question such a lengthy process for accepting candidates for Diocesan Priesthood. Yet, if we understand that the Program for Priestly Formation is meant not just to form priests, but leaders for our local Church, we have a better appreciation for all it entails.

All of this background leads me to the heart of the matter in answering, "How are we doing?" The bottom line is the Diocese of Ogdensburg is lacking at the present moment a sufficient number of candidates to fill the leadership role of presbyter within this local Church. It's no big secret that the number of priestly ordinations is not keeping up with the number of retirements. I know that there are various perspectives held on this predicament: some people may suggest we have not prayed enough, others may put forward the idea that only those parishes which have produced priestly vocations should have a priest, and still others may advocate now is the moment for married and women priests. In addition, I have been queried about what "signing" benefits our diocese could provide to potential candidates or what multimedia blitz could be done to attract applicants.

Yet, in my mind, all of this overlooks a more basic answer to our dilemma...each one of us taking responsibility to encourage and call forth leadership in our Church today. What we need to bring forward new leaders is to be leaders ourselves!

For bishops, priests, and deacons, this is a call to more fully embrace and to live out their consecration willingly as, "alter Christus captitis", that is, to act not just in the person of Christ, but as Christ who is head of the Church. This is a call to leadership, following the example of the Good Shepherd, in service, in moral example, and in prayer. It does not necessitate a return to cassocks and lace surplices or to the use of the extraordinary form of the Mass. However, it does require a bishop, priest, or deacon's own willingness to let Christ come alive in him and to conform his life to the command of Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve.

Second, for women and men religious this is a call to stir into flame the gospel charisms on which their communities were founded. This does not mean necessarily a return to a particular style of habit or poor wages, as much as, to a way of life that encapsulates Christ's gospel and reflects a sharing in the apostolate of Christ. At its heart is the leadership of sign value which St. Francis of Assisi himself attributed to religious life in these terms, "Preach the Gospel and only when absolutely necessary use words!"

Third, for the lay faithful this is a call to once again assume their roles as the primary teachers of the faith and to be leaders in encouragement of vocations. In actuality, it is the role of harvest master. Jesus himself said, "Beg the harvest master to send laborers into the harvest." It is from among the baptized that God calls forth leaders for the Church. A chief role of the laity is to assist a person in hearing and answering this call. As with clergy and religious, this will necessitate the rooting out of selfishness...perhaps a desire for grandchildren or loss of potential economic gain or one's own conception of Church and its accompanying baggage or one's own issues with God and authority...such things need to be set aside if we desire a society in which Church vocations are promoted and valued.

By now, you have come to see that, "How are we doing?" is a loaded question. You are probably shocked by my reply, as well! In my own journey to the priesthood, at a young age, I felt God calling me. It was made real for me by the example of our parish priest, Father Howard McCasland, who is still a role model for me today. It was stirred up by the Dominican Sisters, and later on, lay catechists, who nurtured in the classroom our budding Catholic faith. And, most importantly and essentially, it was nurtured at home by the support of my parents who never told me to be a priest, but who were behind me when I set out on the path to seminary and in time, to ordination.

In other words, in exercising their role of leadership in my life all these persons helped me to be a leader today. In turn, how are you and I doing the same for another who is hearing God's call, today?