



NEWS ARCHIVE:

Roman Catholic Diocese of Saskatoon

Editor: Kiply Lukan Yaworski, Communications
Phone: 306-242-1500; Toll Free: 1-877-661-5005
communications@saskatoonrcdiocese.com

Parishes and deaneries consulted about long range planning for ordained ministry

BY KIPLY LUKAN YAWORSKI

Parishes and deaneries will be consulted this spring about long range planning for ordained ministry in the diocese of Saskatoon.

Declining numbers of priests and changing demographics are creating challenges when it comes to providing ordained ministry to all of the 96 parishes across the diocese.



Bishop Donald Bolen and diocesan leaders are therefore seeking input through a series of deanery and parish meetings about both the challenges and the blessings being experienced in the diocese, and to ask a number of questions seeking suggestions and feedback to creatively address the reality that fewer priests are available to serve in the diocese.

“I would ask the diocese to engage in a creative reflection process, faithful to the Church, in asking where the Spirit might be leading us,” said Bolen, noting the importance of ordained ministry to Catholics as Eucharistic people.

“We do a great deal of work in vocations – but what more could we do to enhance that work?” he asked, suggesting possible areas for reflection. “We bring in missionary priests into the diocese. What are the factors that we should responsibly take into consideration as we do so?”

The bishop stressed that one of the blessings in the diocese is an educated and engaged laity, and suggested this is another area for creative consideration, while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church about ordained ministry. “There are many ways in which priests and the lay faithful work together: but are there models or other ways in which the laity and the clergy can work more closely together in situations where there is a shortage of clergy?”

The diocesan-wide consultation process was launched at a joint meeting April 9, 2011 of both the Diocesan Pastoral Council (DPC) and the Diocesan Council of Priests. The bishop’s two advisory councils received an overview of the situation from Vicar General Fr. Ron Beechinor.

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The present ministry situation is showing signs of strain – for instance, when priests have fallen ill in recent months, it was only by the grace of retired or visiting priests that Sunday ministry could be provided to affected parishes, Beechinor reported, describing “band-aid solutions” that included an elderly retired Oblate stepping forward to help, driving on winter roads to provide ministry to a group of rural parishes; and a visiting priest on sabbatical graciously agreeing to step forward after another pastor of four parishes had a heart attack.

“For the last number of years we have taken something of a ‘band-aid’ approach when confronted with priest vacancies in our parishes. It is becoming increasingly apparent that we are running out of bandaids.”

In short, if the diocese has another parish priest leaving ministry because of illness, a transfer or any other reason, there simply is no replacement available at present, Beechinor said.

At the same time, Beechinor emphasized the many ways in which the diocese has been and continues to be blessed, with gifted leadership from bishops, 22 active diocesan priests who express a high degree of personal and pastoral satisfaction in their ministry, and many priests of retirement age who chose to continue to provide pastoral ministry.

“We are also blessed to have international priests serving – and serving very well – the people of the diocese,” Beechinor added. “Without the presence of these missionary priests, we would truly be struggling.”

He noted that these priests from Africa, India and other countries are here under varying arrangements and for varying periods of time. At present there are 10 international diocesan priests serving in the diocese of Saskatoon with the permission of their bishops.

Active priests in the diocese also include 24 priests from religious orders, again including some from other countries.

These priests from religious orders – Oblates, Benedictines, Redemptorists, Dominicans, Vincentians, one Basilian and one Missionary of the Holy Family – provide pastoral service here with the permission of their religious superiors. Beechinor expressed gratitude for the ongoing blessings of collaboration between religious orders and the diocese.

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“We are also encouraged by the number and quality of the young men studying for the priesthood in our diocese,” he said. Two diocesan seminarians, Matthew Ramsay and Geoffrey Young, will be ordained to the priesthood June 10. Two men will also be ordained to the transitional diaconate this year: Huong Nguyen and Greg Roth. Three others are also continuing their studies toward ordination.

“And we are blessed to work side by side with a gifted group of lay people,” Beechinor said. “We have the competency and commitment and conviction of the baptized and the laity that are providing ministry and doing it with good collaboration.... By goodness and by God this has worked in the diocese of Saskatoon.”

Having said all that, the time has come for the diocese to once again seriously address the question of a declining number of priests available to serve in our parishes, Beechinor reiterated, calling for a broad consultation on the question. “It’s our church, and it’s our responsibility.” Beechinor recalled how people across the diocese responded the last time the issue was addressed in 2001. “There was a wonderful spirit ... and the people made suggestions on the basis of what was good for the parishes, what was good for the deaneries, and what was good for the diocesan Church. We’re hoping that spirit will continue as this discussion unfolds 10 years later.”

During the joint meeting April 9, DPC executive secretary Diane Coté led discussion about the process and its timeline. The goal will be to have input from deanery and parish meetings presented to the bishop at a June 25 meeting of the Diocesan Pastoral Council.

In the process, all parishes will be asked for their creative suggestions about addressing the situation. Parishes will also be asked to consider using a “Parish Viability Reflection Tool” to look again at parish vitality, numbers, stability, involvement and participation. Parishes in each deanery will be asked to consider how they might respond if one less priest was assigned to their deanery.

Larger parishes in the diocese are also being invited to consider the ways they might support smaller parishes in light of a shortage of ordained ministers.

A number of parishes in the Saskatoon city deanery will also be asked to reflect on the possible “teaming” of parishes should the need arise.

“In that scenario, these parishes would remain independent, served by a Parish Life Director, thus retaining their parish identity as a faith community, but would share a Priest Moderator with another parish.” (These pastoral leadership teams have a Priest Moderator providing sacraments and a non-ordained Parish Life Director providing other pastoral and administrative leadership in parishes.)

The bishop concluded the joint meeting by stressing that this is “not a panic situation,” but a prudent discussion of a reality that must be addressed. “This wasn’t motivated by a crisis situation. The idea is to engage the diocese in a responsible way in a reflection on the future; to look in a faith-filled, but candid way at how we might best proceed in the years ahead,” Bolen said, adding:

“God is faithful. I hope this process of soul-searching on diocesan, deanery and parish levels will not be a cause of discouragement, but be seen as an invitation to a greater vitality, ever faithful to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”