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Parishes take active role in promoting vocations
More than 100 parish vocations teams put spotlight on ministry

By Karen Mahoney Special to your Catholic Herald

MILWAUKEE – Catholics in southeastern Wisconsin and around the country are concerned about the future of their parishes. Their fear is a reasonable one, based on a shortage of priests.

In 1970, 614 archdiocesan priests served the Milwaukee Archdiocese; by 2004 there were 399. According to 2006 statistics, there are 393 diocesan priests and 339 religious order priests serving the more than 704,000 Catholics in the 10-county archdiocese.

Many of the area's Catholics do not have a pastor to truly call their own, at least not in the way they once could. With 219 diocesan and three Eastern rite parishes in the archdiocese, area priests are often called to serve two or even three parishes.

Concerned with the decline in priestly and religious vocations, a number of Catholics are dedicating their lives to praying for vocations while simultaneously encouraging young adults to pray often, listen to God's call and make lifelong commitments to the faith.

Last year's vocations fair at St. Paul the Apostle Parish in Racine drew a large crowd of families and youth interested in learning about the call to Holy Orders, as well as exploring the call to lay ministries. Representatives of the Milwaukee Archdiocese, as well as those from various religious orders, presented information, answered questions and shared their personal journey to consecrated life.

While another vocations fair is possible, according to Bea Willing, St. Paul Vocations Team chairperson, the team is currently focusing on the vocations call of every parishioner.

"We are doing a series of witnessing and sharing of persons – married, single, young and old – as to how they are living out their baptismal call to wholeness, holiness and service in their daily life through the Gospel," she said. "We are using the theme, 'You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world' as a project."

Presentation in Racine

The year-long series began in September with a youth and family presentation acknowledging the call to vocations through baptism. The next event will be Feb. 10-11, where people in various fields will share their call to vocation. The June session will focus on parenting for adults and grandparents, while September's session will focus upon the teaching profession.

According to Willing, it is too early to tell whether the efforts will result in an increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. She is happy to know that they are planting the seeds and praying that they take root and grow.

"We have had one person investigate the religious life due to our vocations fair," she said. "And only God knows the rest. The Holy Spirit works in quiet and mysterious ways and our job

is to plant those seeds. If and when it happens, we may never know, but that is where our faith comes in.”

Faith and the support of family, according to Fr. James Lobacz, vocations office director for the Milwaukee Archdiocese, are keys to promoting vocations. Fr. Lobacz oversees 125 vocations teams throughout the archdiocese.

Rooted in families, parishes

“Every vocation to religious life or priesthood comes from a family and a parish,” he said. “Since the invitations and initial support for candidates comes at these levels, this is a very important program. We have some vocations teams that are just getting started and others have been around for years. This past October, we had about 100 people come for the annual ‘vocation team workshop.’”

The vocation team workshops help to equip parishes to educate members on vocations and create a successful team, as well as pray for vocations, said Fr. Lobacz.

“It also offers linkage between candidates and vocations directors,” he said. “Once someone says to himself or herself, ‘I think I want to explore this,’ people at the parish can offer support and contact information.”

Another program is the recently released “Fishers of Men,” an 18-minute film which is a major resource in a new vocational fulfillment and recruitment project sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The film is intended to renew priests’ sense of fulfillment in their vocations and to encourage them to draw upon that satisfaction to invite other men to pursue the priesthood. Developed by the USCCB Committee on Vocations, the project encourages priests to step back from their daily lives and to reflect on the many positive reasons why they pursued a vocation to the priesthood, to discuss those reasons with other priests and to share them with other men as an invitation to consider the priestly life.

According to Thomas D. Braun, chairman of the recently formed vocations committee at St. Mary Parish in Waukesha, reaction among 10th grade Christian formation students who were shown the film was positive.

“They really enjoyed that short movie,” he said, “Seeds were planted and the kids asked some deep questions.”

Long-range parish plan

The multi-faceted vocations committee at St. Mary is working on a long-range plan to encourage vocations to the religious life, including implementation of a scholarship program.

“We provided our first scholarship to a seminarian a couple months ago,” said Braun. Information about the program can be found at <thinkpriest.org>.

At the heart of vocations promotion is “Called by Name,” a program that invites men and women to consider priesthood or consecrated life respectively. Recommended by the U.S. bishops’ Committee on Vocations in their document, “A Future Full of Hope: A National Strategy for Vocations to Priesthood and Religious Life for the Archdioceses and Dioceses of the United States,” the program affirms a common calling based in baptism.

Continuing the “Called by Name” program, which culminates in January, the parish vocations team not only focuses on suggesting names of potential candidates, but also is working to nurture youth and create a culture that supports religious vocations.

“That will take gaining support among parents, teachers, coaches, young adults and kids,” said Braun. “It will also take a lot of prayer.”

Coining the phrase of nationally known speaker and priest of the Society of our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity, Fr. John Corapi, “No priest, no Eucharist!” Braun is committed to encouraging vocations, and admitted that priests are needed to provide the majority of the sacraments, in building up the church as the Body of Christ and to save souls.

“But the priests need the laity to respond with our support, our faith and our action,” he said. “We’ve noticed that some parishes are particularly successful at fostering vocations, like St. Peter’s in Slinger or Mary Queen of Heaven in West Allis. Others have not had priests or religious come from their ranks. We all need to follow the best practices of those more successful at this important task.”

Although St. Mary Parish has no plans after “Called by Name,” it will continue to support vocations.

“We have a man, Jim Doyle, in his final year of preparing for the diaconate,” said Braun. “We hope to provide additional support to him, as well as using his journey to educate our parishioners. He is also on our committee.”

The team has approached Catholic Memorial High School about including lesson plans that deal with vocations, as well as offering support to students showing an interest in the consecrated life.

“We plan to do additional work in our Christian formation program, do more work with the Serra Club to support priests,” Braun said. “We’ve talked about the possibility of doing something with our altar servers to foster in them more thought about their vocations, as well as taking students on a field trip to Saint Francis Seminary.”

St. Mary Parish is one of several parishes to embrace the district-wide call by Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan to establish a committee to encourage and develop an atmosphere that supports priestly and religious vocations.

“Fr. Jim (Volkert, pastor) approached other parishioners and invited them to join us,” Braun said of the their vocations work. “The team now consists of eight laity and Fr. Jim. It is a good group of people who care about vocations and our parish in particular.”