

Fostering Solid Vocations

By Bishop Victor Galeone

At the Presbyterial Council and Priests' Personnel Board meetings, a topic that continues to surface is the diminishing number of priests available to staff our parishes. Matching our seminarians with the number of priests approaching retirement age causes deep concern.

Periodically, parishioners send me their suggestions to help resolve this dilemma. Some suggestions, like women's ordination, are not a possibility. If we Catholics believe, as we should, that the Holy Father is the Lord's visible representative on earth to decide doubtful matters of faith and morals in Jesus' name, the matter of ordaining women to the priesthood was resolved definitively in 1994. The purpose of the present message is not to discuss the merits of Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis: On Reserving Priestly Ordination To Men Alone*, that was issued that year, but rather to consider what is feasible for us.

Others have suggested that the church should permit a married priesthood in the Latin rite. Since celibacy is a church discipline, like abstinence on Friday or Latin in the liturgy, the Holy Father could dispense with this ancient practice tomorrow, if he wanted. Since I don't foresee that as an imminent eventuality, again I would like us to focus our attention on what can be done. And that brings me to the topic of this message.

In 1985 the Archdiocese of Atlanta had only eight seminarians. Today they have 50. What brought about this dramatic increase, when the number of seminarians in most other dioceses continued to decrease during that same period? Eucharistic adoration.

Ten years ago, on the feast of Corpus Christi, newly arrived Archbishop John Donoghue directed that a perpetual-adoration chapel open at the Cathedral of Christ the King. Today, 10 parishes in the Atlanta Archdiocese have perpetual-adoration chapels and at least 40 other parishes have adoration on a weekly or monthly basis.

Father Brian Higgins, director for vocations for the archdiocese, has no misgivings about the turnaround in the vocation picture: "I believe our success in vocations comes from eucharistic adoration, people taking time to pray before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament."

Some may think Father Higgins' statement naive. But considering what Jesus said in the gospel, one realizes the fundamental role of prayer in fostering solid vocations not just to the priesthood but to the religious life as well. On that occasion when Jesus saw the crowds wandering like sheep without a shepherd, he told his disciples, "The harvest is great but the laborers are few; so pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to reap it." (Mt. 9:37)

Some may feel that eucharistic adoration serves no practical purpose and might find it a waste of time. Mary Elkins, special events coordinator for the Archdiocese of Atlanta, would disagree. In an article that appeared in *Our Sunday Visitor*, she said: "That hour that I spend in adoration is better than any therapy I could ever pay for, because I'm spending it with the Lord. I'm able to sit in the quietness. It forces me to stop and listen to God. And then there are times that I just need to ramble...and I know he's there and he will calm me. He puts me right back where I need to be."

A few parishes in our diocese have perpetual-adoration chapels, while others have adoration periods on a weekly or monthly basis. As we began the Year of the Eucharist last October, I encouraged pastors - "especially in those parishes that do not have any set adoration periods" - to schedule a monthly Holy Hour perhaps on First Fridays for the specific purpose of praying for vocations. I would like to repeat my request with even more insistence now. And to you, the parishioners, if your parish does offer this special devotion, make time in your schedule to participate. You may have to forgo that favorite TV show, but your sacrifice will mean all the more.

In a passage of his encyclical letter on the Eucharist, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul referred to the point I'm stressing in this message. I quote: "The centrality of the Eucharist in the life and ministry of priests is the basis for its centrality in the *pastoral promotion of priestly vocations*. It is in the Eucharist that prayer for vocations is most closely united to the prayer of Christ the Eternal High Priest. At the same time the diligence of priests in carrying out their Eucharistic ministry - " together with the conscious, active and fruitful participation of the faithful in the Eucharist - " provides young men with a powerful example and incentive for responding generously to God's call. Often it is the example of a priest's fervent pastoral charity which the Lord uses to sow and to bring to fruition in a young man's heart the seed of a priestly calling."

Let us pray that through the living witness of our priests and the eucharistic prayer of our people, our diocese will be blessed with many and generous vocations.