

J.J.

Remarks for Ministry 2000 Priests' Meeting
For Hamilton and Sidney Deaneries and Greater Dayton,
at St. Christopher, Vandalia, February 27, 1996.

My remarks will be in two parts. The first is scriptural, the second socio-theological.

The other day we began to read Exodus in the Office of Readings. It occurred to me that the experience of the children of Israel is not unlike our own. At the beginning, the children of Israel were in a difficult, indeed intolerable situation in Egypt. Then came the Lord's intervention to rescue them through the Passover miracle. Now they were free and were headed toward a wonderful new situation. What did they do? They began to complain that they didn't really know where they were going. They were afraid. The "good old days" in Egypt began to look pretty good.

Our situation is similar. In the "good old days" before Vatican II things were pretty grim, at least for priests. In our diocese, most priests spent the first years or so of their ministry teaching high school, whether they had any talent or inclination for teaching or not. They had to wait twenty or twenty-five years to get their first parish. Salaries and benefits were meager because there were so many priests. Nobody ever retired. Then came the miracle event of the Council which changed a lot of things in the Church. God freed us from the "good old days" and promised to lead us into a wonderful new situation. Now we are not quite so sure where God is leading us and we are beginning to look back on the "good old days" with

nostalgia. At least there were enough priests and we knew what we were doing.

But God isn't going to lead us back into the "good old days" any more than God led the children of Israel back into Egypt. We can only move forward, and we have to try to move forward with as much attention to God's will as we can muster. Our Ministry 2000 process is one of the ways in which we are trying to discern God's will in the seemingly trackless wilderness in which we find ourselves.

So much for Scripture. Now for some socio-theological considerations. These considerations came to me in part as I was preparing the series on local church that were published in The Catholic Telegraph earlier this year.

The basic unit of the Church's life is not the parish but the local church as a whole, the diocese. That may be one of the basic lessons that God is trying to teach us as we study new ways to carry out parish ministry. In the past, we looked on parishes as a planetary system, each parish in its own orbit with hardly any contact with the neighboring planets. Now we are beginning to see that, if we maintain that approach much longer, we are going to be in big trouble because the individual, distinct planets simply do not have enough resources to survive on their own. We have to accustom ourselves to new levels of collaboration, simply because that seems to be the way in which the Lord wants the Church to work.

These new insights have come to us from several directions.

The first is the so-called priest shortage. Of course there is a priest shortage if we look on the fifties and sixties as the norm. But if we look on those years, as I have come to look on them, as an atypical abundance of ordained ministers, then we are simply reverting to a more normal proportion of priests to lay people.

The second source of this new way of looking on our parish ministries arises from demographic change. To a certain extent, this change is constituted by our people's move from the city to the suburbs that began to take place after World War II. Lots of big new parishes were founded, but the old ones kept right on going. Now we are seeing that we simply don't need as many parishes as we have. But the demographic change is not merely geographical. We are also experiencing a change in the economic and educational levels of our congregations. In the "good old days" most Catholics were lower middle class people whose time and energies was necessarily taken up with making a living for themselves and their families. They had few resources, other than minimal financial contributions, to put at the service of the Church. Now it's different. Our people are far better off than their parents economically and they are better educated, too. They now have new resources to share with the Church.

One of the things that I believe the Lord is calling us to is to find ways in which these gifts that our people have to offer can be put to appropriate use.

Finally, the new situation in which we find ourselves is caused in part by new expectations of the Church on the part of our

congregations. In the past it was enough if Father provided the sacraments and came to visit people when they were sick. Now our people expect all kinds of new services and opportunities (e.g., bereavement ministry, pre-sacramental instructions, prayer groups, liturgy planning for weddings and funerals, the chance to serve as lectors and as special ministers of the Eucharist, a voice in the life of the parish through parish councils and commissions, etc.).

Doing the same old things in the same old ways is simply not enough any more. We seem to be called to find ways to respond effectively to these new expectations.

All this is difficult, indeed frightening. Like the children of Israel, we are being led to give up something, to leave something behind, without knowing exactly what it is we are going to get in return. God didn't abandon His people then. I don't think God plans to leave us on our own now.

In conclusion, let me remind you that I believe that there are two outcomes that we are looking for in this Ministry 2000 process.

The first is a set of plans and approaches that will guide me when it comes time for decision making. The plans that you will submit to me are important and I intend to follow them as far as I am able in the circumstances that present themselves when the time comes for implementation. I may not be able to follow them in complete detail, but the plans you submit will provide the main direction in which we will move. There are no other plans already formed.

But the second outcome is also important. That is the education of our people that will take place as you go through the process. By the time you are finished, the people who work on Ministry 2000 with you will know a lot more about parish and Church and ministry than they know now. It is my hope that you will find ways to share this educational experience with your parishes at large. Merely putting plans together will not be effective unless as many people as possible also know why we are making plans at all and why these particular plans seem to be the best we can come up with for this local church at this time.

I can't guarantee you the promised land at the end of this particular journey. I can only say that I am convinced that this is the direction in which God is calling us to go.

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Most Rev. Daniel E. Pilarczyk
Archbishop of Cincinnati
S. D. Gl.

