

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



The Eucharist and the Priesthood

“There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood,
just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist.”¹

These words of Pope Saint John Paul II have echoed over and over again in my daily prayer during this season of Eucharistic Revival. It has been clear to me since becoming your bishop that here in the diocese of Toledo, there is a deep and evident love for the Eucharist, and a deep and evident love for the priesthood! Yet many of our faithful may not be aware that the number of priests in our diocese has been declining for several years; that many priests are now serving multiple parishes, some to the point of exhaustion; and that, in the past few years, the number of diocesan seminarians has also declined.

In some ways, these trends should be no surprise. The past two decades have seen a sharp decline in Catholic parish participation throughout North America and Europe. In our diocese, Mass attendance declined 47% from 2005 to 2022. During that period, 37% fewer children were baptized and 45% fewer people received Confirmation. These numbers clearly indicate that there are not as many people practicing the faith in our diocese, which means there is a smaller pool of possible candidates for the priesthood and subsequently a lower number of seminarians.

The reality of our diocese mirrors national trends. From 2014 to 2021, the total number of seminarians in the USA decreased 22%.² Vocation directors cite many contributing factors that go beyond the obvious rise in secularization and the priority shifts of a generation

averse to lifelong commitment and riddled by “fear of missing out” (FOMO). The tense and confusing ecclesial climate seems to be discouraging young men from answering the priestly call. The scandal of priestly sexual abuse has also caused hesitation about entering seminary. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact: the inability of the vocations office to host typical in person events, and the rise in anxiety for young adults, were obstacles to healthy discernment.

So what should we do? With the tide rushing forcefully in the wrong direction, should we just give up? St. Paul’s words come to mind: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Do we believe that He can and will curb the tide? Do we believe that He can make the difference? Do we believe and hope in Him to draw men to the priestly vocation? We believe!

Salvation history teaches us that whenever humanity moves away from God, an abundance of divine grace is available to the faithful who are open to it. The Lord uses the service of his prayerful people to lead humanity back to God. Here and now, we are the people the Lord is depending on to open the eyes of hearts and minds to see the reality of our situation and to address head on our need for priests. It takes the joyful, faithful witness of priests themselves coupled with the support and encouragement of all the lay faithful.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery. On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination*, Doubleday, New York, 1996, p.77-78. See also: “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Priests for Holy Thursday”, 28 March 2004. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_20040406_priests-holy-thursday.html

² Vocation Ministry, *The State of Priestly Vocations in the United States*, 2023, p. 23. Available online at: <https://vocationministry.com/stateofpriestlvocationsreport/>.

Jesus encouraged his disciples not to give into despair when faced with small numbers of ministers and a culture greatly in need of His message. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:36-38). Jesus taught His disciples that sometimes, the only solution is prayer and fasting! Thus, I invite every Catholic in the Diocese of Toledo to do two things to implore the Lord of the harvest for more laborers to be ordained to shepherd the Church in our diocese: these are simple, practical, and doable!



First, I ask every Catholic to pray one Hail Mary per day for an increase of priestly vocations. I especially encourage families to add this Hail Mary to their prayer before meals, regular daily prayers or family rosary, as a way of encouraging their children to seek God's call for their life. Mother Mary will intercede for us with her Son for an increase of priests in the Person of her Son!

Second, I ask all who are able to offer some form of intentional fasting or penance each Friday for this same intention. The fasting or penance might be foregoing a meal, abstaining from meat, avoiding snacks between meals, or some other small sacrifice that can be united with Jesus' loving offering of his life for the salvation of the world on Good Friday, the very sacrifice we encounter in the Eucharist.

At a diocesan level, I kindly request that every parish offer some time of Eucharistic Adoration each week for the intention of an increase in priestly vocations. This might be a new addition to the parish calendar, or it might mean encouraging prayers for vocations during an already scheduled period of weekly Exposition and Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Many of our recent seminarians have come from parishes where Eucharistic Adoration for vocations is regularly offered. I also ask every parish in the diocese to pray specifically

for an increase of priestly vocations each week at Mass during the Universal Prayer.

Without an increase of priestly vocations, we risk not having enough priests to celebrate the Eucharist. In challenging times like ours, faithful Catholics need the Eucharist more than ever to sustain them in their mission of sharing the faith with the large number of

people in northwest Ohio who are distant from Christ and his Church. The Eucharist and the priesthood are inseparable.

While the challenges we face may seem daunting, I ask that you approach your prayer and fasting/penance for priestly vocations with **hope**. Just think, if every parish in our diocese sent just one man to the seminary every ten years, we

would have 122 seminarians over a ten-year period. If just half of them were ordained priests, we would be ordaining an average of over 6 men per year! This would be a huge shift from our current 20-year average of less than 2 ordinations per year. Dare we hope?

The word "revival" comes from the Latin verb *re-vivere*, meaning "to live again" and "to restore to life." During this parish year of the Eucharistic Revival, please join me in praying that enthusiasm for priestly vocations might be born anew in the hearts, minds and souls of young men throughout our diocese, leading to a generous response to Christ. We pray that their future ministry, especially their celebration of the Eucharist, will empower many people in Northwest Ohio to live out their Catholic faith with renewed zeal. "There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist."

Many resources to promote priestly vocations are available at: <https://toledopriesthood.org>

+ Daniel E. Thomas

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