

INTRODUCTION

TO THE CONTINUING
RETROSPECTIVE
OF THIS DIOCESAN
NEWSPAPER1980-
1989By MICHELE LEVANDOSKI
Archivist

The 1980s were a difficult period for the United States and the Springfield diocese. The AIDS epidemic emerged in the 1980s and many Americans struggled between the desire to learn more about and understand the disease and fear of the dangers posed by it. In the mid-1980s a farm crisis hit the country, affecting many farm families in central Illinois.

The diocese also struggled as the shortage of seminarians resulted in the closing of the Immaculate Conception Seminary in 1986. The declining number of practicing Catholics also meant that several parishes were forced to close or consolidate. The diocese was also hit with a double tragedy when Bishop Joseph McNicholas and Bishop William O'Connor (who retired in 1975) died within months of each other in 1983.

However, not everything was so grim. The church faced a number of problems in the 1980s, but Catholics in central Illinois pulled together and found ways to deal with these issues. The diocese started Project Isidore, which provided interest-free loans to farmers and for the first time a parish received a lay administrator.

In newspaper news, the name of the diocesan newspaper was changed. After nearly a decade as Time and Eternity, the newspaper was re-titled Catholic Times, which it remains to this day.

The 1980s were a difficult period for the diocese, but as the articles that follow will show, perseverance and charity helped get the church through this rough patch.

Fewer, fewer, fewer and fewer

By ED WOJCICKI
of Catholic Times

SPRINGFIELD — The Diocese of Springfield very likely will have at least 71 fewer priests active in pastoral positions 20 years from now — which means several dozen parishes and missions now in existence would be without a resident priest.

A study by Father C. Joseph O'Hara of Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, projects a 37 percent decline in the number of active diocesan and religious priests, from 194 this year to 123 in the year 2005. That projected drop of 71 priests is one sober interpretation of the bottom line of Father O'Hara's comprehensive study.

The study was presented to the Presbyteral Council last week by Father Ken Becker of Pierron, who asked the Loras College expert to make projections for the Springfield diocese. Father O'Hara had conducted similar studies for other dioceses.

Father Becker said the study is useful because many people are not aware of the fairly rapid decline in the number of priests in the diocese.

The study necessarily had to include a series of assumptions.

AIDS education: What Catholic students will learn

By RICK WADE
of Catholic Times

SPRINGFIELD — The goal of the AIDS education program being developed for the Springfield diocese will be twofold: To inform students of the imminent dangers of the virus, and to integrate that information into a broader context of health, self-esteem and responsible decision making.

According to George Pressey, AIDS education in the diocese's schools will be tied into each grade level's existing health or sexuality programs.

Beginning in the fourth grade with general information about the nature and extent of the infection and infectious diseases, each level presents more detailed medical and theological information.

In sixth grade, students are taught basic facts about AIDS like signs and symptoms of the disease, how it's transmitted and how it isn't. They are also instructed in the Christian response of compassion to the suffering of others and a concern

The figures mentioned above assume the retirement age of our priests will be 75; a predictable number of priests will leave active ministry before that age due to illness, death or other reasons; there will be an average of four ordinations of new priests per year; and some retired priests will continue in the active ministry. ...

According to the study, the average age of our diocesan priests today is 55.6 years, and the average age will drop to 45.3 years by 2005.

The total number of diocesan priests today, including those available for service and the retired ones, is 185 — a figure that will be almost cut in half by the year 2020, when Father O'Hara projects there will be 95 priests.

A breakdown of today's 194 priests active in pastoral ministries in the diocese includes 142 diocesan priests, 45 religious priests and six priests from other dioceses, for a total of 123 by the year 2005.

The diocese now has 179 parishes and missions, in addition to numerous other places where priests provide service, such as hospitals and schools.

In presenting this study to the Presbyteral Council, Father Becker said the actual decrease in the number of active priests probably will exceed 71 in the next 20 years, because the current low number of seminarians will not effect four ordinations of new priests per year in the near future.

Father O'Hara offered other projections based on different sets of assumptions. Some of these projects were more optimistic while others were more pessimistic than the middle-range figures presented above.

Father O'Hara's pessimistic projection would leave us with only 39 diocesan priests available for active service by the year 2020, while his optimistic outlook has the number of available active priests climbing to 148 by the year 2020 after falling off to 108 by the year 2000.

CATHOLIC TIMES, July 20, 1986. Editor's Note: Included in Father O'Hara's 1986 predictions were the number of active diocesan priests in future years. His prediction for 2010 was 90; currently the Diocese of Springfield has 75.

for their well-being.

Besides hearing more detailed scientific information, seventh- and eight-graders will also learn of the emotional and psychological suffering of persons with AIDS and how Christians — as individuals and as a church — can respond.

High school AIDS education will be more specific in terms of medical facts, identify accurate sources of information and local AIDS testing sites and discuss ways to prevent the disease.

They'll also be discussions of the pastoral implications of the disease. Issues such as prejudice toward outcast members of society, church teachings on homosexuality, chastity and abstinence, and the responsibility of the church to educate its members about AIDS are potential topics of discussion in the curriculum.

Supplemental materials for high schoolers state that teaching young people to use condoms so they can be sexually active and safe is "medically unsound and may encourage the

very behavior which places a young person at risk."

"We can't deny that condoms exist," observed Pressey. "But by acknowledging the existence of condoms, by merely defining them, we are not promoting their use."

"We can't tell them, 'Wear a condom and you'll be safe,' for two reasons," said Sacred Heart Academy principal Sister Mary Paul McCaughey, who worked with Pressey developing the recommendations. "A, it's not true, and B, as Christians we are called to something more."

Sister M. Paul said Sacred Heart has held an in-service on AIDS for the teachers and staff, and sophomores in biology class get information on AIDS. But there's more to it than medical information.

"AIDS is not the root problem. It's low self-esteem whether it's drugs or sexual involvement," she said, adding that AIDS education is part of a larger effort to promote self-worth and responsible decision making. ..."

CATHOLIC TIMES, Feb. 28, 1988

Parish gets 'lay administrator'
Sr. Phyllis is the first in our dioceseBy ED WOJCICKI
of Catholic Times

STE. MARIE — St. Mary of the Assumption Church will create history here next week by welcoming Dominican Sisters Phyllis Marie Schenk as the first lay pastoral administrator of a parish in our diocese.

St. Mary's will no longer have a resident priest as pastor, but will continue to operate as an independent parish. The situation is vastly different from that in which a priest is the administrator of both his own parish and a nearby mission church.

"These people already have a broader vision of faith. They own well their responsibility for the parish."

In Ste. Marie, Sister Phyllis will administer the day-to-day operations of St. Mary's and provide a number of pastoral services, while priests from Newton and St. Anthony's in Effingham will celebrate weekend Masses and other sacramental functions, such as weddings and funerals.

Sister Phyllis will also be lay pastoral administrator of St. Valentine Church at The Bend, although weekend Masses at the mission church of Ste. Marie will be suspended.

Sister Phyllis believes a greater experience of "shared ministry" will emerge, since St. Mary's parishioners are well-prepared for this change and already use their spiritual gifts in the service of the larger group. The parish for the past five years has had an active parish council, which developed under the guidance of the departing pastor, Father Bob Spriggs.

The council's committees — worship, religious education, building and maintenance, apostolic, and finance — already have a hand in nearly every aspect of parish life. For example, the worship committee plans for the seasons months in advance, and the finance committee prepares a computerized cash flow sheet for every meeting.

Commenting on the change in leadership, parish council president

Jerome Kocher said, "I've asked myself, 'What are we overlooking?' I really haven't come up with anything."

Sister Phyllis was at Providence College in Rhode Island this summer, finishing up a master's degree in religious studies with an emphasis on religious spirituality. She lived for the past year at Newton, where she was the director of religious education but spent half of her time as pastoral associate for St. Mary's in Ste. Marie. As a pastoral associate she worked with the parish pastoral council and its committees,

taught adult classes, made communion calls, visited the sick and introduced at-home retreats.

What developed was a solid relationship between Sister Phyllis and the people — making it easier for the people to choose to ask for a lay pastoral administrator instead of a different priest as pastor. "It helps that we know each other," Sister Phyllis said. "I'm so proud of them. These people already have a broader vision of faith. They own well their responsibility for the parish." And Kocher said, "I have all the confidence in the world in Sister Phyllis. I told her she'll have to stand tall at times to get the job done." ...

Sister Phyllis' work with the parish pastoral council will expand, and she will also be responsible for scheduling priests to celebrate weekend Masses and the sacraments. ...

While Sister Phyllis will be in charge at St. Mary's the wording of Canon Law requires a priest to be "endowed with the powers and faculties of a pastor to supervise the pastoral care." The Presbyteral Council has recommended that for the time being, the role be given to the chairman of the Priests' Personnel Board, who is Father David Peters in Wood River. His actual involvement with Ste. Marie will be negligible.

CATHOLIC TIMES, Aug. 3, 1986

Project Isidore

Diocese offered
interest-free loans
to struggling farmersBy ED WOJCICKI
of Catholic Times

The Diocese of Springfield this week announced a new program of interest-free loans to assist farmers who are struggling to make ends meet.

Through Project Isidore, farmers in our diocese can receive an interest-free loan in order to buy fuel, seed, fertilizer, feed or chemicals. The program is the first Catholic-sponsored program of its kind in Illinois and is named after St. Isidore, the patron saint of farmers.

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee started a similar program a few years ago and has had great success with it. "The feedback from Milwaukee was that it helped farmers' morale; it shows the church cares," said Joe Bergschneider of Alexander, who shares with his wife Maymie the role co-director of the Office for Rural Life in the Springfield diocese.

Bergschneider said some parts of our diocese have been especially hard hit by a bad farm economy, and the problems are especially severe where two or three consecutive years of drought have resulted in crop failures.

"I tell you what," Mrs. Bergschneider said. "I did a lot of praying and something had to be done."

Project Isidore is geared toward spring planting, and offers a maximum of \$2,000

in an interest-free loan. That amount will not save a farm, Bergschneider acknowledged, but it has proved to be a major boost for a number of farmers in the Milwaukee archdiocese.

The funds for Project Isidore were made available to the Springfield diocese by donors who wish to remain anonymous. The funds will be disbursed and payments collected by the diocesan Office for Finance, working in close cooperation with the Office for Rural Life.

John Maxwell, director of the finance office, emphasized that applications for a Project Isidore loan will be confidential.

Because the pool of funds is limited, Maxwell and the Bergschneiders said additional donations are being accepted to increase the total amount available.

Maxwell credited the Bergschneiders with investigating the program and persevering for months to get it established in our diocese. ...

Bergschneider, noting that much of the economy in the Springfield diocese hinges on the farm economy, said the rural life office is encouraging parishes to celebrate Thanksgiving harvest Masses.

The office also emphasizes the importance of prayer for farmers, and encourages all parishes to keep the farmers in their prayers. ...

CATHOLIC TIMES, Nov. 22, 1987

Crisis may doom
family farms

PEORIA — The 1985 farm crisis "may well be the final blow" destroying the family-farm tradition in the United States, Bishop Edward O'Rourke of Peoria said in an editorial.

A longtime specialist in farm issues, Bishop O'Rourke strongly urged farmers to reverse their long tradition of individualism and "bargain collectively at the market place."

"In his editorial the bishop expressed shock at the 'shrug of their shoulders' with which some Americans view the impending farm crisis."

He also called for immediate federal loans or loan guarantees to tide farmers over the current crisis, which he said was caused by factors largely outside their control.

As a longer-term social policy he called for "graduated land taxes" to promote moderate-sized family farms.

"Unless prompt remedies are forthcoming soon, approximately 25 percent of the farms in this nation will go bankrupt during 1985," Bishop O'Rourke wrote in the editorial, which appeared in his diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Post*.

Before he was made bishop of Peoria in 1971, Bishop O'Rourke spent 11 years as executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the chief Catholic agency in the United States dealing with rural concerns.

In his editorial the bishop expressed shock at the "shrug of their shoulders" with which some Americans view the impending farm crisis.

He suggested that anyone with that attitude is probably not aware of the dimensions of the crisis, the reasons behind it, the significance of family farms in America, or the long-term implications if nothing is done.

"My urban friends presume that the farmers who are facing foreclosure are paying for their own mistakes," he wrote. While this is true in a few cases, "the core of the present farm crisis is due to forces quite beyond the control of the farmers," he said.

Conditions of depressed

agricultural prices, the 1983 drought, high interest rates and tight credit have particularly affected the moderate-sized family farm, he said. Holders of very small farms usually have an outside job as their main income source and large landholders usually have enough "cash and credit resources to weather the storm."

The most immediate need

farmers face is "additional credit" in order to be able to plant their 1985 crops, he said. He urged support of plans currently being considered by Congress for direct loans to farmers or federal guarantees of private loans.

To reverse a 50-year trend toward ever larger farms — "thus limiting the social impact which widespread ownership and family farm traditions have contributed to the nation in previous generations" — Bishop O'Rourke urged a graduated land tax.

Under this proposal, he said, the tax rate for farmland would go up for larger landholders. "The principle involved is the same as that which is presently in place in our graduated income tax," he said.

Bishop O'Rourke called reducing the federal deficit an important step for bringing down both high interest rates and the high value of the dollar abroad, two key factors which have helped cause the current farm crisis.

He acknowledged that his call for collective bargaining on market prices "flies in the face of" traditional individualism of American farmers.

"I suggest that, unless and until this kind of bargaining takes place, farmers will never receive fair farm prices for their produce," he wrote. "I urge that all farm organizations meet together and thoroughly thrash out this most crucial issue."

CATHOLIC TIMES, March 3, 1985