

Understanding the assignment of diocesan priests

I have a few memories that are distinct, even if the conversations are fuzzy. About 10 years ago, one of my parishioners was standing in the doorway to my office. During our conversation, I must have mentioned some difficulties with some abrupt reassignments. How twice I was the last to learn of them. In one case, the diocesan paper had already gone to press before I got a clue. Ron stepped in and closed the door. He was one of many retired Naval officers in the parish who worked at the local nuclear power station.

“Father, wasn’t that what you signed up for?” he asked. “My last Navy move came while I was living with my family in Italy. I went to work one day and was simply told that I had been reassigned. It was up to me to go home and tell my wife and kids that we were moving to another country. This is happening to service people all the time.”

The message: Father, don’t feel you are special.

Today, I am in a different position as I reflect on these things. Because we are the Church, some of us think that change should be easily understood and communicated. Things are rarely simple in personnel matters, and there is much that correctly remains unpublished.

Here are some considerations:

- o Parishes are geographical, and membership is based on residence location. Pope Francis said, “The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, charitable outreach, worship and celebration” (Joy of the Gospel, #28). It is difficult to plan both for where people live and for where they actually affiliate.
- o Change is a constant for Church and parish life. The best things parishioners do to create a stable and welcoming community are praying together and supporting functioning pastoral and finance councils.
- o Change is a part of Indiana Catholic history. Our diocese was split from the Diocese of Fort Wayne in 1944. By then, many parishes in what is now our diocese had already experienced 60 years of population decline. Of course, huge growth continues along our southern tier of counties.
- o There is the saying, “the further you can look back, the farther ahead you will be able to see.” *The Diocese of Fort Wayne: A Book of Historical Reference 1669-1907* by Rt. Rev. H.J. Alerding (1907) is dense with information about our present territory. Another book that chooses a layperson’s perspective through six U.S. eras is *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America* (Harvard University Press, 2008). These books recall Santayana’s observation, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” History informs present processes, but does not remove the possibility of happy surprises or stubborn mistakes.

By the way, if you have a copy of Bishop Alerding’s book to donate, I can find it a home.

o The histories trace moments when the local bishop was resented as an “outsider” meddling in parish life. This is understandable when Catholic minorities live among many neighbors that hire and fire their own preachers. Never look down upon the proud American desire for self-governance; it produces some great energies in parishes, but it should not confuse us about the appointed role of the bishop. Some parishioners in my first pastorate resisted the bishop’s direction and fund raising, asking “what has he ever done for us?” I learned that they always had a priest, and never had sent a son to the seminary in 115 years.

o Parishes need to change pastoral leadership every six to 12 years. The process uncovers new opportunities, new ways of framing the call to faith. Change reminds us that laypeople have a baptismal right to leadership and are much more than “Father’s helpers.”

o The good of priests, as a group, requires change. They must have varied postings in order to develop skills and experience. Their own ministry is enriched and they become qualified to mentor newer priests and deacons. The presbyterate (the group of priests as a whole) is a living part of the diocesan Church. The Catholic Church has a diocesan (“local Church”) identity within other regions, and some priests’ work unifies a wider identity in protecting life, and promoting education and social outreach. A priest with various assigned experiences is valuable to the Church across the state and country.

o It is difficult to assess how certain parishes are “consumers” of priests in relation to being “builders” of priests. I join the majority of priests in acknowledging that previous parishes shaped me significantly. Parishes rightly expect a servant-priest, but this must be joined to a parish’s desire to help their priest to enjoy effectiveness and health. This last point is important to me as I work to make “good” assignments.