

Priests seek ways to be better 'fishers of men'

written by Malea Hargett |



During the diocese's first Priestly Life and Vocation Summit April 21-23 at St. John Center in Little Rock, priests were challenged to actively invite more young men to consider a vocation to the priesthood.

"It's fundamental," said Msgr. Scott Friend, vocations director and vicar general for the Diocese of Little Rock. "It has to happen on the local scene first. It's the priests that are the ones who have to invite. And then also, the priests of the diocese have to father the seminarians into the presbyterate."

In 2003, 78 percent of the U.S. ordination class said they were invited to consider the priesthood by a priest, but in 2001 only 30 percent of priests said they actively invite men to consider the priesthood.

The Fishers of Men program was created by the U.S. bishops' Committee on Vocations in 2005.

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For three days the priests gathered for their regular spring continuing education to discuss vocations efforts in the state, their priestly identity, the vocation culture and how to be "good leaders, good shepherds."

Msgr. Friend said the summit was the next step in diocese's efforts to build a "vocation culture" in the parishes. Since Msgr. Friend was named vocation director in 2005 he has been recruiting and mentoring an increasing number of seminarians, but he believes the work is best done on the local level with the pastors and associate pastors who know the men and their families.

With 27 seminarians today and possibly another 10 more in the fall, Msgr. Friend said the vocations director and associate vocations directors can no longer do the majority of the work.

"In this day and age, it is not a practical model any more," he said. "All of us as priests are vocations directors ... We all have to become involved."

During a session April 22 on building a vocation culture, the 71 priests in attendance discussed ways they can become more accessible to young men and encourage discernment in the parish.

Among the ideas were:

Starting vocations committees in parishes.

Msgr. Friend said he knows of only two parishes — Christ the King and Our Lady of the Holy Souls in Little Rock — that have committees.

Hosting a regular dinner with young men of the parish

Having a vocations chalice that parish families take for a week and pray for vocations in their homes

Teaching regularly in the schools.

"I really encourage being in the classroom. I teach religion one day (a month) to our eighth grade," said Msgr. David LeSieur, a former diocesan vocation director and pastor of St. Vincent de Paul Church in Rogers. "It gives me an opportunity to be with those kids and let them see me and give them a different perspective."

Praying for vocations during the intentions at Mass

Having a weekly holy hour for vocations

Participating in the annual fifth grade vocations day at Subiaco Abbey

Some priests said encouraging young men to the priesthood is as basic as being "happy priests" who smile and live their vocations.

"We as the presbyterate should live our life with zeal," Father Greg Luyet, pastor of St. Michael Church in West Memphis said.

One idea — reopening a seminary in the diocese — raised a few eyebrows as well as a few nods in agreement.

"We have been growing so well in our vocations ... it is something that could be talked about," Father Thomas Arackal, administrator at Immaculate Conception Church in Fort Smith, said. Some of the priests' ideas centered on what families can do to encourage vocations. One priest suggested parents of priests could reach out to parents of prospective seminarians to ease their minds.

"Some of them have negative stereotypes of the priesthood," said Father Mark Wood, pastor of Blessed Sacrament Church in Jonesboro. "They can give them sort of a witness talk."

Once a young man is accepted as a diocesan seminarian, there is still work to be done by the pastors, Msgr. Friend said.

"If I have a seminarian from my parish, I need to keep up with him while he is in formation even if I have transferred and gone from my parish," Father Arackal said. "It is important for me to continue the friendship and ... invite him to the parish wherever I am."

Msgr. Friend said the first step in organizing the summit was to ask several priests to interview about 20 diocesan, religious order and extern priests around the diocese, posing 15 questions. The answers were used during the summit to talk about some of the priests' most positive experiences and bring about a renewal of the priests.

'Wisdom of the fathers'
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"It's very moving to read some of the wisdom of the fathers here," Msgr. Friend said. "There are stories — since we are all dealing with the mystery of the Lord — where they have been with somebody and they have been healed or where they brought someone back to the Church."

That goes on every day in our diocese and nobody hears that story. This experience has convinced me that the marvelous priestly ministry that is going on in this diocese is a story that needs to be told.”

Characteristics of prospective seminarians

The Fishers of Men program offers several qualities and characteristics that should be displayed by prospective candidates.

- Has a personal relationship with God integrated through prayer
- Has the ability and willingness to talk about his faith
- Has some involvement in the local parish
- Has a desire to serve others and make a difference in people’s lives
- Is approachable
- Possesses a psycho-sexual-socio maturity
- Has shown capability of living a chaste celibate life
- Has leadership skills
- Has healthy relationships with men, women and children
- Is a person of integrity