

Golden Years or Anxious Years?

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The theme of my address this evening is Golden Years or Anxious Years?

The theme is a question because it related to the retirement of Catholic Diocesan priests. Truth is, there may be, could be, more questions than answers when it comes to the future stability of retirement for many diocesan priest.

Even use of the word “retirement” is questionable, because in a practical and theological sense, one never “retires” from priesthood. Priesthood is forever! The sacramental character is one with the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Thus, some folks are annoyed by referring to a priest’s retirement. A cleric can retire from office, but not from the ordained state, and sacramental work can be carried on by priests regardless of age, emeritus or not.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law uses the term “resignation from office”. A pastor may offer his resignation for a just cause. To become effective, however, that resignation must be accepted by his diocesan bishop. A pastor is requested by the Code to submit his resignation from his office (his pastorship) when he reaches the age of seventy-five. The diocesan bishop may accept the resignation or defer it. Thus, the granting of a request for resignation from office is not automatic.

If the bishop accepts the resignation, the diocesan bishop is obligated to provide suitable support and housing for the resigned pastor.

The Code of Canon Law does not mention parochial vicars or priests assigned to a diocesan curia, to posts in education, to a seminary, to works of Catholic Charities, etc. The Code says the support and housing provided the resigned pastor should be in accord with norms established by the Conference of Bishops.

Bear in mind, the 1917 Code of Canon Law did not contain a norm inviting the resignation of pastors. In those days, there was no thought given to priestly retirement. It was routine for priests to “die with their boots on”, which frequently meant wearing the title of “pastor” long after some should have been retired for their own good or the good of the parish. The priests “retired” in gone-by days were those who suffered serious strokes, heart attacks, blindness, etc. and were unable to function any longer as an active priest.

A Vatican decree in 1966 titled Christus Dominus stated that “parish priests who on account of advanced age or for some other grave reason (no specific age was mentioned) are unable to perform their duties adequately are requested to tender their resignation spontaneously or when the diocesan bishop invited them to do so.” The decree also said: “The bishop will make suitable provision for their support.”

A motu proprio of Pope Paul VI titled Ecclesiae Sanctae, also in 1966, called for resignations of pastors to be tendered at age 75. That’s the first official notice, as far as I can tell, of a specific age. In 1970 Pope Paul VI restated the invitation to pastors and bishops to resign voluntarily at 75.

At its November 1987 meeting, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops decreed that diocesan bishops are to establish a diocesan policy for the retirement of priests in accord with provisions of

Norms for Priest and Their Third Age. This decree of the Conference was reviewed and approved by the Congregation for the Clergy in 1988.

These Norms of 1988 reiterate the request that pastors are asked to submit their resignation by the age of 75, but the diocesan bishop, in consultation with his presbyteral council, can adopt a diocesan policy which allows priests for pastoral or personal reasons to retire from diocesan assignment at an earlier age. The Norms refer to “retirement” and “retired” priest...not just “resignation from office.”

Thus, particular legislation in a diocese can establish an age earlier than 75. Nothing in the Code of Canon Law prevents a diocesan bishop from legislating in this area. However, it’s important for local diocesan legislation to include the retirement of priests not holding the office of pastor, lest priest not holding a canonical office be ignored.

The Norms also recommend assignment of a priest in each diocese to assist senior priests and retired priests with their “third age”.

Furthermore, the Norms speak of the responsibility of each diocese to guarantee priests adequate support through a long-range, financially independent and professionally managed pension fund. Also, Dioceses should be receptive to resources and expertise provided by national organizations both within and outside the Church. Such an organization might include Laiety in Support of Retired Priests.

Lastly, the Norms call for a special sensitivity to the needs and inclusion of senior and retired priests into the life of the diocese. Retired priests should not be put on the shelf, but invited to share and participate in diocesan life.

Canon 281 of the current 1983 Code of Canon Law states that clerics deserve remuneration consistent with their condition, taking into account the nature of their work, the conditions of time and place, so they can provide for the necessities of life as well as for the equitable payment of those whose services they require. Provision must also be made, says the Code, for illness and incapacity from old age.

In accord with Canon 281, Canon 1274 says each diocese is to collect funds for the support of clerics, and if support in a diocese is lacking, the Conference of Bishops should take care to provide for the social needs of unattended or under attended clerics.

Canon 1274 also says that each diocese is to establish a common fund through which bishops are able to satisfy obligations toward other persons (persons other than priests) who serve the Church and care for the needs of the diocese. Canon 1274 recommends that dioceses assist one another as needed.

Canon 1274 says that to meet responsibilities toward clerics, it might be suitable to work through a federation of dioceses or through cooperative endeavors within the territory of a Conference. Canon 1274 seems to place upon the Conference a responsibility to ascertain if adequate provision for illness, disability and old age is being met by diocesan or regional funds, and to assist in organizing whatever needs to be done within the territory of the Conference.

Meanwhile, a 1990 document from the Third Age Center at Fordham University identified issues that need to be addressed in seeking a standardization of benefits for all retired priests in the U.S.

This historical background, as dry as it may be, brings us to why we gather this evening. It seems many issues involving priestly retirement may still need to be considered in some dioceses: questions of salary, health benefits, pension security, portability, auto expenses, insurance, retreats, continuing education, housing, handicap and disability needs. It is fair to say that there is no clear picture of where we stand nationally regarding standardization. Nor is there a clear benchmark to guide future planning, even as the need for retirement planning is growing.

What is important for us to grasp is that prior to the 1983 Code of Canon Law there was not much thought given to retirement of priests save for the resignation of pastors followed by encouragement from Pope Paul VI for cardinals, bishops and pastors to tender their resignation from office at age 75. It was not really until 1988 that the Statement on Norms for Priests and Their Third Age was promulgated by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops that retirement of priests was a subject seriously considered by American dioceses. This is why the Catholic Church is lagging behind retirement planning done in corporations, unions, other religious congregations.

Retirement planning in the Church, even after 20 years, is scattered and erratic rather than coordinated and uniform. Two things, in my mind, make current planning inconsistent across the United States: first, planning is left to the individual dioceses, and individual dioceses are inherently and canonically independent; secondly, many individual dioceses are not professionally prepared to organize all that goes into comprehensive, efficient retirement planning. Within dioceses there may be whiffs or suspicion, distrust, misgivings that lead to isolation rather than cooperation in areas that could be advanced by collaboration and combined utilization of programs. There is, therefore, no evident concerted effort to share and coalesce strengths and advantages.

In the meantime, life expectancy in the U.S. in 1940 was 62 years of age. In 1960 life expectancy in the U.S. for males had risen to 66.6 years of age. In 2010 the U.S. male life expectancy had risen to 75.6 years of age. This tells us there will be a growing need for retirement planning for Catholic diocesan priests. Priests are living longer, and this places further burdens on pension funds. Many of the retirement plans in our dioceses already are facing unprecedented challenges-similar to Social Security. There should be national discussions on what needs to be done for priests in retirement and how it can be done. What should we be doing and how should we be doing it?

Priests are different from most lay retirees because when priests retire their expenses generally go up. Items that used to be paid for in a rectory- cleaning, bedding, laundry, utilities, etc., they frequently begin to pay for themselves. In retirement, most priests continue to serve part-time ministry, as best they are able. Without the help of retired priests, many of our parishes would suffer significant sacramental loss. Dioceses are grateful for priests who have retired from administration but continue to do sacramental ministry.

This is where your apostolate comes to help the diocesan priest. Maybe it was Father Dan Dymski who first brought to your attention the needs of some retired priests and the magnitude of the growing problem. At the time Father Dymski wrote his article in America in 2008, a CARA study told us the average age of priests in the United States was 60, and 25% of them were already 75 or older. The study, done for the USCCB, predicted the number who are 75 or older would increase to 40% of priests shortly after 2010.

You, Laity in Support of Retired Priests, became aware the Church needed current data and fresh surveys to identify problems and to prepare for future planning. LSRP raised funds and engaged CARA

to conduct studies to be shared with the USCCB. You made every effort to see that the study was diplomatically communicated and you sought further direction from the USCCB as well as individual bishops. You reach out a solicitous hand to be of service to the Church and to diocesan priests.

You began your efforts with an eye to developing a minimum pension and benefit plan as a benchmark for dioceses. You seek to create among Catholic laity an awareness of the growing needs. You originated a national association of retired priests to provide them a forum to discuss their individual concerns.

Through Gallagher Benefit Services you developed a model pension plan that could be considered by any diocese interested in assessing a minimum but equitable pension plan.

You now have a Website for senior priests. And, you are moving to study recommendations for long term insurance coverage for priests who do not want to become a burden to their families or a "charity case" for their dioceses. Retirement preparation and cost should be seen as the "cost of doing business", not an "alms" from the diocese. The dignity of the person evokes what justice demands.

The information you gleaned is available to any and every diocese that is interested. Your biggest obstacle, however, is an apparent lack of interest, or is it apprehension about your intentions?

Know that I am grateful for all you have done and are doing. I admire not only your generosity, but your patience and willingness to approach bishops and dioceses with the understanding attitudes of faithful and loyal stewards wanting only to help, not goad or strong-arm, not slight or disparage the authority of bishops or their administrations. My prayer is that your sincerity and will win the day and eventually open chancery doors. The retirement problem is too real and too much of consequence for you to abandon your prudent efforts, because planning is likely nine-tenth of the solution to future priestly retirement.

Toward that end I plead with you not to lose determination or enthusiasm, but to continue to meet with Diocesan Fiscal managers, certainly with Bishop Robert Carlson who now is the Chairman of the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, and, perhaps, some of the bishops who are members of that committee. I know you will continue to communicate with the staff of that committee in Washington.

You will be meeting also, or at least attempting to meet, with the bishops of the dioceses, or their representatives, as you determine dioceses that have a reputation for deficient practices. With patient persistence and God's graces your credibility will blossom into friendly relationships that foster acceptance of the good work you desire to do and are doing, for the Church and for the diocesan priesthood.

I am most grateful for all you are attempting to do for our diocesan priests, those retired and those someday to be retired. They are priests forever, but the dignity of the human person and the dignity of the priesthood should allow time to change pace, as the elderly priest prepares to meet his High Priest.

Thanks to all of you who labor to make the priests' golden years, not anxious years but spiritually fruitful years...for both the priest and the Church.

God bless you.

+AJ Quinn

