

Dioceses enlist mentor programs to help priests

Mentorship programs are common in the professional world, with senior employees helping those new to a job acquire the skills they need to be a success. Catholic dioceses across the country are now recognizing the valuable role mentors can play, with many adopting a variety of such programs to support first-time pastors, the newly ordained and seminarians nearing ordination to the priesthood.

With the latest wave of the clergy sexual abuse crisis rocking the Church on every level, the importance of true Christian mentorship, even among priests, is crucial.

Pastor to pastor

The Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska, has a successful mentorship program that helps priests assuming the role of pastor for the first time. Shortly after his installation, the new pastor is paired with an experienced one. They meet regularly for a year or more. In monthly meetings they discuss the transition and any difficulties the new pastor is experiencing. The new man can ask questions, taking advantage of the advice and experience the senior man can offer.

Father Jeremy Hans was ordained a priest in 2015, and named a pastor in 2017. He oversees two rural parishes in northeast Nebraska, St. Ludger and St. Ignatius, with a combined total of 264 families. Parishioners include farmers, workers from the medical care industry, teachers and small business owners.

Father Hans was paired with Father Jim Keiter, who was ordained in 2001 and is pastor of All Saints Parish in rural Cedar County, Nebraska. They share a common background: Both attended the same high school and share an interest in

science. They meet for breakfast at a café halfway between their parishes. Father Hans asks many questions about parish administration; Father Keiter's counsel includes reminding him to stay focused on the bigger picture rather than getting "bogged down in details."

Father Hans explained, "[I have to] keep in mind that we are here to bring everyone to Jesus Christ and make sure that we are moving toward that goal."

Father Keiter also talks to him about the parochial school, how to work with parish staff and "how to identify the gifts of parishioners so that you can invite them to use those gifts for the parish in a particular group."

Father Keiter said, "I've served at four parishes, two of which I've been pastor. I like to stress that every parish is different, and what works in one may not work in another."

The priest noted that he, too, learned from the mentorship experience. He explained, "Talking through things out loud together sheds new light on our experiences. It has been extremely beneficial to both of us, as I learn, too, and take home new ideas."

He also noted that the camaraderie he shared with his fellow priests was of tremendous value. He said, "In our diocese, the majority of parishes have only one priest. It is easy to get consumed by an assignment; the devil loves to isolate anyone he wants to attack. ... We have to do things with our brother priests."

'Love your people well'

The Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina, assigns seminarians to parishes in the summer months to be mentored by pastors. Father Scott McCue is pastor of St. Thomas More Parish, Chapel Hill, and has mentored "six or seven" seminarians during the summer months since his ordination in 2001. He noted that the

diocesan bishop, Bishop Luis Zarama, is also instituting a yearlong seminarian internship program to take place between the seminarian's second and third theology seminary studies.

Priests: A Complex Identity

“Priests have a complex identity, which corresponds to the way they exist in the world. If they only filled a specific religious role in society, their identity would be quite simple. In fact, priests exist in the world in three principal ways that are interrelated. Priests exist as human beings. They also exist as believing Christians or disciples of Jesus Christ in his Church. Finally, they exist in a unique sacramental mode, as part of the order of presbyters in the Church.”

– **“The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests,”** a statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops (2001)

Men new to ministry, Father McCue said, often have the attitude that they must be “all things to all people.” However, he continued, “You have to figure out what you are good at as a priest and do that really well. People will forgive you for your shortcomings. Just love your people well, and the rest will fall into place.”

He suggests to his seminarians that they be “very simple,” and “prepare to open your heart to love your people like Jesus the Good Shepherd. Meet people where they are. Be merciful. Be

joyful.”

As St. Thomas More is a large parish, visiting seminarians are given a wide exposure to parish life. They are involved in such areas as pastoral care, youth ministry, liturgy, parish administration and marriage preparation. He is also introduced to the social life of the parish and the fraternal life of parish priests. The goal of the internship, Father McCue noted, is that it allows the seminarians “to get that very necessary practical experience in addition to the intellectual, spiritual, human and pastoral formation that the seminary provides.”

Father John Kane was assigned to Father McCue as a transitional deacon in 2015. He went on to be a parochial vicar after his ordination to the priesthood in 2016. He was recently named vice rector of Raleigh’s Holy Name of Jesus Cathedral.

Father McCue served in a mentor role with him, he said, teaching him such things as how to prepare a Sunday homily and how to respond to criticism and difficult situations “with calm words that help the listener and still proclaim the truth.”

Mentorship is “good and needed,” he said, and can come in a variety of ways: “through good example, and through good teaching, but also through learning from the mistakes of others, even mentors. In any kind of mentorship, especially in the priesthood, if you pay attention, you will realize that it is Christ who does all the mentoring in the first place. And Christ is perfect.”

Essential guidance

Five years ago the Diocese of Oakland, California, adopted mentorship programs for newly ordained priests and first-time pastors. Father Jerry Brown serves as continuing formation

director for Oakland's priests, and has served as a mentor. He oversees both programs. Once a man is ordained or becomes a pastor, he meets with Father Brown and is given a list of 18 diocesan priests he can choose from to be his mentor. He may also request someone not on the list, but Father Brown must approve.

Regarding the newly ordained, he said, "Becoming a priest is a big change from the regimented, routine life of the seminary. Inside you're watched 24/7; once you get out, no one is telling you what to do or checking up on you. It's in this situation that guys can get into trouble."

Adapting to the high visibility of the priesthood can be another challenge. Father Brown explained, "You are a nobody as a seminarian, but once you're ordained, everyone's grabbing your hand and asking for your blessing."

The newly ordained sometimes have "personality clashes" with their new pastors and experience the loneliness that can accompany the diocesan priesthood. Father Brown said, "You're by yourself a lot of time. You have to learn to go out and make friends."

In the Diocese of Oakland, Father Brown recalled three new priests who in recent years left the diocesan priesthood. None took advantage of possible mentors available to them. Father believes that men leaving the priesthood in their first five years of ministry is a significant problem nationwide, and the mentor program was one way Oakland Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ, was attempting to combat the problem.

New pastors can also benefit from a mentor's advice. Father Brown remembered when he was first named pastor and was placed in the difficult position of having to terminate the employment of some parish staff. He said, "It was my good fortune to have a mentor who guided me with a steady hand. I was on the hotline to him all the time."

He recalled another situation in which he was the mentor to a new pastor. When the pastor first came to the parish, he wanted to remove a central image in the parish church of a resurrected Christ and replace it with a crucifix. Father Brown recalled, "I told him to wait. You have to take the time to get to know the people before making major changes to the church."

The pastor heeded his advice, and a few years later when the community was familiar with him he made the change without any difficulty.

The mentorship program, Father Brown concluded, is a reflection of Bishop Barber's concern that "his clergy be taken care of. It has really made a difference."

Jim Graves writes from California.