

Office of the Bishop

May 29, 2019

My Dear Brother Priest:

I am writing to you today about three critical issues that pertain to the future of the presbyterate in our diocese: the formation of our priests; care for our retired priests; and the protection of the seal of confession.

Priestly Formation

As you know, after I visited the parishes of the diocese in the first year of my service as bishop, I appointed a task force chaired by Monsignor Dan Dillabough to examine the whole constellation of issues that surround the formation of priests and their transition into parish ministry. This task force, which reflected the diversity of our presbyterate both in cultural and in formational backgrounds, placed great stress in its report on the need for deep pastoral formation for our seminarians, and on the critical first five years of transition into priesthood. The task force also called upon the whole body of the presbyterate to be involved in the development and support of vocations to the priesthood.

In part because so many of you have promoted vocations to the diocesan priesthood in recent years, and due also to the splendid work of Father Minimo and Father Spahr and their collaborators, we have seen an increase in the number of seminarians studying for the diocese. But we have also experienced in the lives of our seminarians and newly ordained priests in recent years deeply traumatic moments in their transition to parish life after seminary formation. Such traumas have been reflected widely in other dioceses as well, and are generating a growing reexamination of formation programs for diocesan priests across the country.

During the past three months, I have spoken with the deans, the presbyteral council, the personnel board and the diocesan curia about these issues and about which program of formation constitutes the best pathway for the diocese of San Diego at this time. As most of you know, the Franciscan School of Theology is moving to the campus of the University of San Diego this summer. The Franciscan School, which opened in California in the 1860's, educates both the seminarians of the Santa Barbara Province, and lay leaders for the Church in California. Because of the School's relocation to USD, the diocese of San Diego for the first time in half a century has the opportunity to form its theologians here in our local church, with a quality Master of Divinity program from an internationally trained theological faculty.

It is my conclusion, widely shared within the consultative groups that I have spoken with, that the needs of the diocese will best be served by forming our seminarians locally, utilizing the theological program of FST, elements of the Franciscan School's wider formational resources, and a program of human, pastoral and spiritual formation that will take place at Saint Francis Center under the direction of Father Spahr. I have asked Father Mike Sinor to serve full-time in this work, providing spiritual direction and working directly with the priests in their first five years of priesthood.

The chief benefit of such a program is that it will have a much deeper level of pastoral formation in our own parishes, including a full pastoral year after the second year of theology to help both the seminarian and the diocese determine if parish ministry is a good pathway for the candidate, and what areas of personal growth should be focused on in the coming years. Forming our students here in San Diego will also help seminarians to come to know our priests better by the time they are ordained, and also to experience in the rich diversity of our parish communities both the joys and the challenges that parish life brings to priests in San Diego and Imperial Counties.

Part of this new program will include month-long modules in Rome and the Holy Land for every seminarian, as well as a longer immersion program of culture and language in Mexico for all of our students who have not already acquired those capacities.

Ever since the diocese of San Diego closed Immaculate Heart Seminary more than fifty years ago, our local church has sent seminarians to a wide variety of formation programs — Saint John's in Camarillo, Saint Patrick's in Menlo Park, Mount Angel Abbey, Saint John's in Colledgeville, and of course on a continuing basis to the North American College. All of these programs have produced exemplary priests for our diocese. All of them have had specific strengths and weaknesses. I believe that at this moment in the life of the Church the pastoral strength and focus provided by forming our students locally, with the resources of the Franciscan School and our own priests and lay leaders who are experienced in formation, offers the best opportunity to allow the grace of God to flourish in the hearts and souls of the candidates that Christ brings to us for discernment and training.

Six students will enter first year theology at the Franciscan School for the diocese this year, and in future years all of our new students will attend FST. Let us pray for them and for the three students we will have continuing at the North American College and the three students we will have at Mount Angel. We are truly blessed with these men.

Supporting Our Retired Priests

The diocese of San Diego is particularly enriched by its body of retired priests, who have given the whole of their lives in service to the people of God and continue to provide magnificent priestly assistance after their retirement. Without this continuing commitment and sacrifice, our local church would simply not be able to function effectively.

For this reason, it is particularly important that the diocese provide adequately for the support of our retired priests. As you know, in July we will be separating the priests' retirement fund from the joint fund that has been shared with the diocese of San Bernardino for the past forty years. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the higher housing costs in the diocese of San Diego require a higher housing benefit for our priests; this is the one area where our San Diego retired priests have told me they are hurting. The second reason for the split is that the level of funding in the joint plan is only 74 percent at the present moment and would fall substantially if a new housing benefit were enacted. This is too low a level of funding to provide true security.

At the last meeting of the Presbyteral Council, the Priests' Retirement Board and I presented a plan for future funding and benefits to the Presbyteral Council which was approved. The plan establishes on a permanent basis the five hundred dollar per month housing allowance for priests who are fully retired. This benefit will be financed by a one-time gift of two million dollars from general diocesan funds directly to the Priests' Retirement Fund. In addition, the Endowment Trust that was established by Bishop Brom's foresight will donate five million dollars of its accumulated surplus directly to the Priests' Retirement Fund in order to raise the level of the funding to ninety percent. The changes approved by the Presbyteral Council also direct that for the next fifteen years all of the increases in priest pension payments will go to raising the housing allowance, thus allowing the housing benefit to grow from five hundred dollars per month to one thousand four hundred dollars, as long as there is no major economic downturn.

As a result of these steps, the fund for retired priests will be more financially secure and more able to meet the rising housing costs for retired priests. They deserve nothing less.

The Seal of Confession

As you may know, the State Senate has passed this week by a vote of 30 to 2 a bill to require priests to break the seal of confession in certain specific instances pertaining to incidents of the sexual abuse of minors. There is a great likelihood that this bill will become law. Passage of this bill will not advance the protection of children, but it will gravely undermine the integrity of the sacrament of Confession and create a wide breach in the religious liberty which is the birthright of our nation.

For this reason, I would ask you sometime during the next two weeks to speak with your parishioners about this threat to the practice of Catholic faith. I am enclosing for your use an information piece on this question that has been distributed by the California Catholic Conference. Please ask your people to contact their state Assembly members and oppose this bill.

The legislation attacking the sacrament of Confession is rooted in a series of misrepresentations about how abuse of minors is treated in Confession. But much more fundamentally, this attack is rooted in a basic misunderstanding about the nature of the sacrament of Confession itself.

Unlike every other privilege accorded in civil law to confidential communications, the communication of a penitent can never be revealed to another person in any circumstances precisely because in Confession the penitent is revealing his/her sins to the priest solely as a way of confessing before God and receiving the merciful compassion and forgiveness of God. The priest is merely a symbol and conduit of God's action in forgiveness. The priest has no rights to this information, even instrumental rights meant to help the penitent. The information is being passed, both sacramentally and substantively, directly to God through the action of the Church, of which the priest is merely a representative.

This is entirely different from a lawyer who receives a communication from a client and must use and often share that information in order to defend her client. Or a doctor who may share his findings with a colleague in order to confirm his opinion. Thus attorney-client privilege and medical privilege routinely and properly involve substantial sharing of the information which has been received with other. The sacrament of Confession never entails sharing information, or even utilizing it, exactly because the sins confessed are meant to be conveyed only to God, not to any human agent for any human purpose. Thus the confidentiality which the priest must guarantee is absolute and comprehensive of its very nature.

Whether the current legislation becomes law is open to question. Whether there will endure, binding upon every priest, an unbreakable moral obligation to preserve the absolute confidence of the confessional seal, even in the face of civil law, is not.

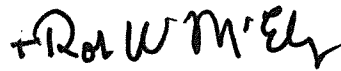
The state Assembly will take up action later this summer to consider the confessional seal bill. We will be sending you information at that time to share with your people and inform them on this important topic.

In the coming months,, the diocese will be launching a broad initiative designed to incorporate the tenets of Pope Francis' motu proprio *Vos Estis Lux Mundi.*" into the life of our local Church. In this initiative, we will bring together all of the employees of our diocese, parishes, schools and institutions in an unprecedented gathering to insure that everyone who works in the diocese of San Diego understands the depth of the moral call regarding the abuse of minors to which Francis is leading us:

The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful. In order that these phenomena, in all of their forms, never happen again, a continuous and profound conversion of hearts is needed, attested by concrete and effective actions that involve everyone in the church...

The legislation pending in the State Assembly to break the seal of Confession will not promote the safety of minors. Bringing the vision of *Vos Estis* to all of our parishes, schools and institutions, as well as our wider society, will.

My brothers, the grace of the priesthood unites us all in a bond founded in faith, sculpted in service, uplifted in joy and profoundly deepened in sorrow. There is such beauty in our local church and in our own presbyterate. Let us pray in these days for all our brother priests, for our seminarians and their families, for the lay, religious and diaconal leaders who illuminate our pathway forward and for the entire people of God formed by the salvation of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. W. McElroy". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

Most Reverend Robert W. McElroy
Bishop of San Diego