

# Leading the FLOCK

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## The Eucharist and the Priesthood

“There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood,  
just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist.”<sup>1</sup>

These words of Pope Saint John Paul II have echoed over and over again in my daily prayer during this season of Eucharistic Revival. It has been clear to me since becoming your bishop that here in the diocese of Toledo, there is a deep and evident love for the Eucharist, and a deep and evident love for the priesthood! Yet many of our faithful may not be aware that the number of priests in our diocese has been declining for several years; that many priests are now serving multiple parishes, some to the point of exhaustion; and that, in the past few years, the number of diocesan seminarians has also declined.

In some ways, these trends should be no surprise. The past two decades have seen a sharp decline in Catholic parish participation throughout North America and Europe. In our diocese, Mass attendance declined 47% from 2005 to 2022. During that period, 37% fewer children were baptized and 45% fewer people received Confirmation. These numbers clearly indicate that there are not as many people practicing the faith in our diocese, which means there is a smaller pool of possible candidates for the priesthood and subsequently a lower number of seminarians.

The reality of our diocese mirrors national trends. From 2014 to 2021, the total number of seminarians in the USA decreased 22%.<sup>2</sup> Vocation directors cite many contributing factors that go beyond the obvious rise in secularization and the priority shifts of a generation

averse to lifelong commitment and riddled by “fear of missing out” (FOMO). The tense and confusing ecclesial climate seems to be discouraging young men from answering the priestly call. The scandal of priestly sexual abuse has also caused hesitation about entering seminary. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact: the inability of the vocations office to host typical in person events, and the rise in anxiety for young adults, were obstacles to healthy discernment.

So what should we do? With the tide rushing forcefully in the wrong direction, should we just give up? St. Paul’s words come to mind: “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Do we believe that He can and will curb the tide? Do we believe that He can make the difference? Do we believe and hope in Him to draw men to the priestly vocation? We believe!

Salvation history teaches us that whenever humanity moves away from God, an abundance of divine grace is available to the faithful who are open to it. The Lord uses the service of his prayerful people to lead humanity back to God. Here and now, we are the people the Lord is depending on to open the eyes of hearts and minds to see the reality of our situation and to address head on our need for priests. It takes the joyful, faithful witness of priests themselves coupled with the support and encouragement of all the lay faithful.

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery. On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination*, Doubleday, New York, 1996, p.77-78. See also: “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Priests for Holy Thursday”, 28 March 2004. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_let\\_20040406\\_priests-holy-thursday.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_20040406_priests-holy-thursday.html)

<sup>2</sup> Vocation Ministry, *The State of Priestly Vocations in the United States*, 2023, p. 23. Available online at: <https://vocationministry.com/stateofpriestlyvocationsreport/>.