

COVER LETTER:

Dear _____,

We write regarding our concern that as we move from the present into the future the church in the United States assure pastoral presence to the people of God. Our pastoral experience together with the well-known and worsening shortage of priests convinces us that our dioceses and all of us need a plan which we can adapt to our local situations [and] develop to meet the emerging needs.

To that end we have prepared the attached proposal regarding *Lay Pastoral Ministers in Priest-less Parishes*. In preparing it we have relied on the USCCB's 2005 document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, as well as the 2015 Tenth Anniversary Reflection on that document. *Co-Workers* welcomed Lay Ecclesial Ministry and addressed the wide field of ministries that involve laity. It explained our dependence on these baptized Catholics to continue the mission of the Church in collaboration with their pastors. Both *Co-Workers* and the 10th Anniversary reflections affirmed that they were not the final word on this critical area of Pastoral Care.

Our proposal is a new and more specific exploration LEM. It addresses a dimension of great concern to priests pastoring more than one or even many parishes: adequate and effective pastoral care and presence to the people of God. It urges that dioceses nationwide begin developing lay pastoral leaders now. Consider:

- The present state of most Dioceses in the USA, Canada, Western Europe and Australia shows aging clergy (average over 60 years old) often pastoring consolidated parishes or multiple parishes. Actuarial tables show that in five more years some dioceses will lose half their active priests through retirement or death. (cf. attached table from the Diocese of Evansville)
- These figures tell us that much of the pastoral leadership and work that Catholics received from priests in the past will no longer be provided. The Catholic Church USA urgently needs pastoral ministers who know the faithful, guide and accompany them in the journey of faith via the parish community. Statistics show that:
 1. 30% of baptized Catholics in the USA have left the Church;
 2. Church marriages have declined 60% since 1980;
 3. apart from Hispanic members, Catholic total membership is declining.

Obviously, the hard work of passing on the faith demands more, not less, personal presence of authorized pastoral ministers, ordained or non-ordained, working in collaboration and within the principle of subsidiarity. This proposal invites our leaders, the US Bishops, that we need nationwide to provide a firm and uncontested basis for dioceses to employ lay pastoral ministers to lead parishes. Our proposal is attached.

We respectfully submit it and hope it will spark our bishops' collective attention to this critical issue.

Fraternally in Christ,