

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK



VILLA AND VOCATION...

I was walking outside the rectory the other day enjoying a bit of sunshine which felt so good after ten days of sub-freezing temperatures. All of a sudden, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a woman waving at me and saying, "Have you heard the news-the terrible news?" For a moment, I didn't know what to think. The lady then explained what caused her distress-it was the announcement that Saint John Villa Academy was going to close after 94 years of educating children here on Staten Island.

This certainly was bad news and some of our graduates from Saint Charles who currently attend Villa congregated on the street Tuesday afternoon and poured out their distress. The closing of any Catholic institution be it a school, a church, or a monastery is very upsetting. The question naturally comes to mind, "Why does this have to happen?" Well, Sister Claudette, the Superior of the Order, gave three good reasons why the school would have to close. Two concerned declining enrollment and the aging physical plant of the buildings. But the first and the most important reason that Sister gave was this: "The Sisters of St. John the Baptiste have experienced a considerable decline in religious vocations over the years. This reduction in critical Sister personnel in the congregation has severely diminished our capacity to maintain an adequate teaching staff at Saint John Villa."

Sister Claudette used the word "decline" in speaking about religious vocations. In many orders that would be too soft of a word. "Collapse" would be a better description! For example, in 1965 in the United States, there were 180,000 Sisters who were the backbone of our Catholic schools and our hospitals. In 2002, there were 75,000 sisters, with an average age of 68. In two years (2020), it is estimated that the number of sisters will be about 40,000 and of these, only 21,000 will be aged 70 or under. So obviously this is not "good news" for the sisters and the Church.

But the same is also true for us priests. According to one statistic, in just two years the number of priests in the entire country will be slightly above 30,000 and only half of them will be under 70 years of age! Here in the archdiocese, we have only 364 active diocesan priests to staff 296 parishes. Obviously, we have a crisis in the Church. How can it be fixed?

Well, one necessary thing to do and something that is in the range of all of us is to pray for vocations! It is so important to ask Jesus to send us dedicated sisters and priests so that the work of the Church here in our country can continue.

Secondly, it is important to be encouraging when a young person expresses a desire to follow Christ in the religious life or the priesthood. So many of us instead of being ministers of encouragement actively discourage our young people to even consider a vocation.

Many years ago, Bishop Edwin Broderick told me a little story. He said a good friend of his had invited him over to his house for dinner. Relaxing a bit before the meal, the bishop took off his clerical collar and vest and placed it over a chair in the hallway. Well, during the meal, the little son of the bishop's friend, put the collar on and waltzed into the room. At this apparition, the host lost his cool and yelled at his son, "You get that damned thing off immediately!" That comment might put a doubt in anybody's mind!

Let's pray for all the staff and students of Saint John Villa during this difficult time. Let's ferociously hope that the Church's mission to our young people can continue in the future as it has in the past!

*Sincerely in Christ,
Father Jerome*