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Bishops discuss joys, challenges of shepherding rural dioceses

Editors: Reporter Mark Pattison and photographer Bob Roller recently visited a variety of farming operations in Iowa and Minnesota for this series, examining aspects of Catholic life in the rural United States.

By Mark Pattison Catholic News Service

ROCHESTER, Minn. (CNS) -- Demographics may be the biggest challenge to bishops in rural-dominant dioceses.

Dwindling priest numbers have a part to play in the struggle as well.

Bishop Bernard J. Harrington of Winona, who was ordained a priest 50 years ago for the Archdiocese of Detroit, said he fairly reveled in the ordination a year ago of four priests for the diocese in southwestern Minnesota.

"Four priests ordained for Winona is like 40 priests ordained for Detroit," he said during an April 23 interview with Catholic News Service at St. John Church in Rochester, where he is in residence. Bishop Harrington's move to St. John's was to allow for his coadjutor bishop, John R. Quinn -- another former Detroit archdiocesan priest -- to feel comfortable at diocesan headquarters when the time comes for him to assume complete leadership of the diocese.

Even so, the news is not all good. "I'm still a priest short" for the upcoming round of clergy reassignments, Bishop Harrington said. Many of the diocese's parishes are already in cluster arrangements, sharing the service of one priest.

Bishop Harrington said Catholics in his diocese must face the fact of a growing Hispanic presence in the diocese.

He said demographic data made available to him indicate there are some 36,000 Hispanics living in the Winona Diocese.

"Priests tell me, 'I don't have any Hispanics in my parish.' Oh, yes, you do. You just haven't found them yet," the bishop said.

He added that immigrant Hispanics are lured by the promise of work in the pork industry. Minnesota is third in the United States in hog production, behind neighboring Iowa and North Carolina.

Archbishop Jerome G. Hanus of Dubuque, Iowa, is also aware of the Hispanic presence in his northeastern Iowa see.

The 30-county archdiocese also has clustered parishes to account for the shrinking number of

priests and has also closed others deemed too small to stay open.

During an April 20 interview with CNS, Archbishop Hanus displayed demographic data showing population shifts. In many counties, the overall population is no different from what it was a century ago. More recent trends show only a handful of counties increasing in size. Some hold steady, but many are declining in number.

"The average family used to have eight kids before," but the average now is two, Archbishop Hanus said. Iowa has the largest high school graduation rate in the country, but 60 percent of its college graduates leave the state to find work.

"We export more college students than we do hogs," Archbishop Hanus said.

He also cited changes in buying habits and wages, using the pork industry as an example. "Back in 1980, the average wage at the meatpacking plant was \$20 an hour. That was a good job," he said. He added that wage-earners started "looking for cheaper products" so they could buy more things, which resulted in more imports and the loss of domestic manufacturing jobs.

Consolidation in the meatpacking industry drove down wages. The typical immigrant worker inside the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant in Postville "was making \$5 an hour" before it closed, Archbishop Hanus said. "Who today can live on \$5 an hour?"

Both Archbishop Hanus and Bishop Harrington had ready explanations for the presence of so many rural parishes seven to eight miles from each other. Before the invention of the automobile, seven to eight miles was the distance a team of horses could travel pulling a family in a wagon without getting overtired. The family would go to church and socialize while the horses rested for the return trip. But the trek consumed most of the day -- a far cry from the distances that can be traveled today by car.

Bishop Harrington credited a diocesan stewardship campaign begun 10 years ago, as well as continuing lay education, with keeping the Winona Diocese strong. "The (stewardship) pledges are still coming in," he said.

"But we'll have to see what kind of hit we may have to take when the crop and hog prices start to fall," he said. "We're not recession-proof, but we may not feel the full effects of the recession until this fall."

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