

5-21-08 - A Sudden Transfer of 40 Priests Brings Egan Unrest From Within
By DAVID GONZALEZ, NEW YORK TIMES

Cardinal Edward M. Egan has reassigned almost 10 percent of the active priests in the Archdiocese of New York without adequately consulting the personnel board that has traditionally advised him and his predecessors, according to members of the board and other clergy familiar with the developments.

While canon lawyers said the cardinal was not bound to consult with the six-member board, two of its members said that the number of transfers in the last three to six weeks was so unusual and damaging to morale that the board sent him a letter on Monday requesting a meeting to discuss how priests are being reassigned. Forty priests are involved, out of about 470 active Diocesan priests.

"This is 10 percent of the diocese, and that is monumental," said one priest familiar with the transfers. "There is nothing like this before. I am a priest in one of the major dioceses of this country, and they cannot put together a fact sheet to tell us what is going on right now. I'm getting news of this through phone calls, rumors and e-mails. It is unprofessional."

News of the moves - which started circulating among local priests over the weekend - was seen by various priests as either a much-needed shift, a settling of scores or last-minute changes before the cardinal leaves his current post. Although he is 76, one year past the mandatory age to submit for retirement, the Vatican has yet to name his successor.

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the Archdiocese, said in a statement that of the 40 transfers, 10 were decided directly by the cardinal in response to "particular pastoral needs," as provided for under personnel guidelines. He also contested the assertions of critics, saying that the 30 other transfers were "based on the recommendations of the board." The moves go into effect July 1.

He said that six more appointments would soon be decided.

"In the coming weeks, the personnel board will be making recommendations to the cardinal about six pastors; and, as usual, their recommendations will be carefully considered," Mr. Zwilling said in a statement.

Almost no one interviewed for this story would speak without anonymity. Many of them said they were reluctant to risk running afoul of the cardinal.

Interviews with nine priests - including several who have served in significant administrative roles under previous archbishops - revealed continued dissatisfaction with the cardinal's management style. They said Cardinal Egan had not only disregarded the personnel board in recent years, but had also failed to provide any guidance on how to handle the transition for those priests and congregations affected by the transfers.

Many priests said that had ultimately affected morale - a precious commodity among an increasingly aging and overworked clergy.

"There are some priests who are hurting right now and are devastated," said one priest who has been fielding calls from colleagues. "And no one is officially reaching out to them. That I emphatically know. There is no outreach right now."

Calls to three pastors known to have been reassigned were not returned. Another declined to comment, saying he hoped to appeal the decision. Some of the pastors - who under church rules are assigned to six-year terms - were reassigned before their term was up. It is unclear how many of them have informed their congregations of the moves.

Some of the priests interviewed said several of the moves were overdue in the case of long-serving pastors or necessary to make room for newly ordained

priests. Still, many priests noted that in recent years, Cardinal Egan had ended the practice of sending notices of parish openings to all clergy who might either be interested or know of someone who would be good for the job.

In previous years, the board would review applicants for each job and send to the archbishop a list of three names with reasons favoring each one, said Msgr. Thomas P. Leonard, the pastor of Holy Trinity Church on the Upper West Side, who was involved in personnel decisions under Cardinal Terence Cooke.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time, he chose one of the three."

Two canon lawyers, in New York and Washington, said church law did not oblige the cardinal to consult with the personnel board, which was advisory in nature. And the cardinal, they said, is also free to reassign pastors before their terms ended if there is a pressing need elsewhere or if the priest in question agrees to the move.

One priest who is active in regional pastoral matters said the current moves would do little to ease the challenge faced by the dwindling number of local clergy. In addition to the active Diocesan priests, there are also priests belonging to other religious orders who run Roman Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese.

"They have not faced the strategic issue of priests in parishes," said this priest, who spoke on the condition of anonymity since he was not authorized by the Archdiocese to speak on the transfers. "This is putting out fires. I guess they're waiting for the next guy to go in to develop a strategic plan."