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SISTER ANNE CHESTER, RSM Steward for Siskiyou Communities Welcomes the Challenges

By Christine Vovakes, Special to the Herald

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For the second time in three years, Bishop William K Weigand has appointed a parish steward to minister to the spiritual needs of Siskiyou County parishioners in the northernmost part of the Diocese of Sacramento.



Sister Anne Chester, RSM

Sister Anne Chester, a member of the Auburn regional community of the Sisters of Mercy, will serve at Sacred Heart Parish in Fort Jones and Saint Joseph Parish in Yreka, where she will reside. She will work collaboratively with Father John Lawrence, who has been appointed assisting priest for Eucharist and the other sacraments.

Father Lawrence will continue to reside at Fort Jones where he has been serving as the parochial administrator for Sacred Heart Parish.

Sister Chester joins Mercy Sister Nancy McInerney and Deacon Gerald Pauly as the only parish stewards in the 20 counties of the diocese.

In 1999, Sister McInerney was appointed parish steward for Saint John the Evangelist Parish in Dunsmuir and Saint Joseph Parish in the mountain community of McCloud. She works collaboratively with Father Aidan O'Reilly, pastor of Saint Anthony Parish in Mount Shasta.



Parish Steward
Sister Nancy McInerney, RSM

Deacon Pauly has been parish steward at Immaculate Conception Parish in Sacramento since 2001 and works together with Father Ricardo Giraldo, who is parochial administrator. "It's a real compliment to the church and to Bishop Weigand to be so forward thinking about the principles of collaboration, partnership and mutuality," Sister Chester said, noting that she also will consult with leaders from Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph Parishes as she eases into her new ministry. "As with all ideas, you need to explore how they'll be integrated into a particular culture and particular location."

Those locations thread through several mountain and river communities, including mission churches in Happy Camp, Sawyers Bar, Etna and Hawkinsville, in addition to the two main parishes. On the first weekend of October, Sister Chester was introduced to the six congregations that she will serve. "I knew they were far-flung, but I didn't realize just how distant they are," she said.

Parish Steward Deacon Gerald Pauly



In 1999 Bishop Weigand accepted policy guidelines for the appointment of deacons, laypersons and religious as parish stewards in the diocese for the pastoral care of parishes. The guidelines reflect canon 517.2 of the Code of Canon Law, which describes a parish steward as a person to whom “a participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish is to be entrusted” whenever the bishop judges it to be useful.

The parish steward works with a supervising priest and collaborates either with him or an appointed deacon to provide for the spiritual and temporal needs of parishioners. When a priest or deacon is not available, a parish steward may conduct wake and funeral services, and perform baptisms in emergency situations. In addition to coordinating liturgies, the parish steward, in collaboration with the supervising

priest, works with the pastoral council, the finance committee and other committees of the parish.

Although a relatively new position in the diocese, parish stewards (or administrators) are a familiar part of parish life in parts of the country where the priest shortage is more severe. And there numbers are likely to grow as dioceses grapple with the dwindling roster of priests to assign as pastors.

According to statistics kept by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University, 2,928 out of a total of 19,093 parishes serving America’s 62.2 million Catholics had no resident priest in 2002.

Most of the 98 parishes and numerous missions in the diocese are served by pastors. But 28 of those men are 65 years or older and working past retirement age, said Mercy Sister Eileen Enright, Vicar for Pastoral Ministry and director of the Office of Research and Planning for the diocese.

Sister Chester’s extensive work in education and parish ministries for five decades has prepared her for this new role in collaborative service and leadership. A Santa Rosa native, she graduated in 1951 from Saint Francis High School in Sacramento and then entered religious life with the Sisters of Mercy in Auburn.

She taught elementary and secondary school students throughout the diocese and Jamaica for over thirty years. At Bishop Manogue High School, she taught English, religion and chemistry. Her

parish assignments included Saint Anthony in South Sacramento, Saint Joseph in Elk Grove and Saint Anthony in Winters where she was a pastoral associate. As the director of the research and planning department during the 1980s, she was instrumental in developing the Diocesan Pastoral Plan which assessed the future needs of the diocese at that time.

When Bishop Weigand called with his request that she become a parish steward, she was on assignment in Jamaica developing education ministries for the Sisters of Mercy. She asked for time to consider her decision before calling back with her answer.

During prayer and discernment, she thought of many reasons why she should not accept, but told the bishop that in spite of them, “my heart is drawn” toward the ministry he was offering her. “In all simplicity, I must say that I felt this would be a growth in my relationship with God,” she said. “I hope the people realize that they are God’s reflection to me, and that I hope we can walk together in our search for God.

In preparation for initial comments to parishioners she began as she always does before an important event by meditating on the Scriptures of the day. “In that Sunday’s gospel, one messenger was stoned and another was beaten,” she said. “Not finding much consolation in that, I went to the second reading from Philippians.” She then read Saint Paul’s entire letter and focused on verses from the second chapter. “It’s amazing how Paul outlined what a Christian could and should be.” She said.

The challenge facing her, and the communities she will serve, is to explore that definition together and to discover, as Saint Paul advised, “how each of us should care not just for ourselves but for each other,” she said.

After her introduction during the weekend liturgies, requests and errands filled her first Monday as parish steward. Plus she had met with Father Lawrence, and the Madrone Hospice House in Yreka had just called about a patient, she said during a phone interview.

Although she was uncertain of all that her new ministry would demand of her, she was sure of one thing: “I’m not going to be bored,” she said.

