

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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TO: Clergy, Pastoral Center Staff, and others

FROM: The Most Rev. Andrew H. Cozzens, Bishop of Crookston

DATE: January 23, 2024

RE: The Companions of Christ

Dear Brother Priests, Deacons, Staff, and others,

I write to share some good news of how God is blessing our diocese.

Over the last two years I have spent time listening to the presbyterate and laity and learning about the needs of the diocese. This has occurred in many forms: individual meetings with priests, Synodal listening sessions, our strategic visioning process, staff and Curia meetings, and meetings with many consultative bodies (Priests Council, Deans, Ongoing Clergy Formation, Priests Pension Plan Board, Finance Council, Priests Personnel Board, the Diocese of Crookston Catholic Community Foundation, etc.). I have come to know that our clergy and laity are dedicated and hard-working, and deeply desire that the Diocese of Crookston thrive and be positioned for mission.

The reality we find ourselves in at this moment, however, is that our presbyterate faces some critical challenges. Our mostly rural diocese consists of more than 17,000 square miles across 14 counties, with 33 active priests serving 66 parishes. Many are pastoring three parishes. Almost half of the priests of the Diocese of Crookston will reach retirement age in the next ten years, with two men retiring this year and the next ordination still four years away. We are severely stretched to serve the pastoral needs of our communities.

I have prayed about this a lot and began to think of practical solutions. I spoke to the Priests Personnel Board during the summer of 2023, and with their encouragement I reached out to Archbishop Bernard Hebda of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis to ask him to consider loaning to us a small number of priests from the priestly fraternity The Companions of Christ who might feel called to a time of missionary service in the Diocese of Crookston. The Companions of Christ is a fraternity of priests and seminarians (of which I am a founding member) who live in community and follow an approved rule of life to support each other in holiness. They have provided Christ-filled and faithful service to the Archdiocese since its founding in 1992.

In a spirit of fraternal charity and solidarity, Archbishop Hebda spent considerable time in deep prayer and discussion with his Comprehensive Assignment Board and others. I am extremely grateful to be able to share that Archbishop Hebda has agreed to a temporary assignment of three priests of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis to the Diocese of Crookston for a three-year period. The three men who will receive July 1 assignments here are:

- **Father David Blume**, current director of the Archdiocese's Office of Vocations
- **Father Thomas Niehaus**, current pastor at Saint Patrick in Shieldsville and Most Holy Redeemer in Montgomery
- **Father Josh Salonek**, parochial vicar at Saint John Neumann in Eagan

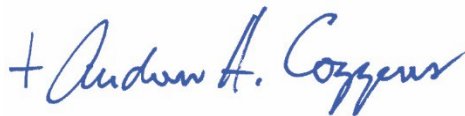
Father Bill DeCrans, current pastor at St. Philip, Bemidji, and St. Charles, Pennington, will retire June 30. **Father Michael Arey**, current parochial vicar at St. Philip and St. Charles, will receive a new assignment in the Diocese of Crookston, which will be announced this spring. **Father John Kleinwachter**, current senior associate at St. Philip and St. Charles, will become a senior associate at another Diocese of Crookston location, which will also be announced this spring.

Father David Blume will become the pastor of St. Philip and St. Charles (and superintendent of St. Philip's School); Fathers Niehaus and Salonek will become parochial vicars for St. Philip and St. Charles. Fr. Niehaus will also be the chaplain for the Newman Ministry at Bemidji State University.

It is my hope and prayer that this arrangement not only helps the pastoral landscape here in the Diocese of Crookston in the short-term, but in the long-term inspires men to discern diocesan priesthood.

Please join me in praying prayers of gratitude for Father DeCrans, Father Arey, Father Kleinwachter, Archbishop Hebda, Father Blume, Father Niehaus, and Father Salonek. Their generosity in this circumstance helps to position the Diocese of Crookston for mission in new ways.

Sincerely in Christ,



The Most Reverend Andrew H. Cozzens, S.T.D., D.D.
Bishop of Crookston

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