



January 23, 2024

Dear Brothers,

Last summer, Bishop Andrew Cozzens, Bishop of Crookston and one of the founding members of the Companions of Christ, asked if I would be willing to pray about the possibility of loaning a few of the Companions of Christ—who might feel the call to mission—to assist him in ministry in the Diocese of Crookston. His hope in particular was to welcome a few Companions to begin to live as a community at some central rectory in his diocese, with the priests serving in nearby ministries.

Knowing our own substantial need for priestly ministry, I let Bishop Cozzens know that I did not consider an affirmative answer as being very probable, but I promised to pray about this request. I also asked our Comprehensive Assignment Board (CAB), led by Father Michael Van Sloun, to begin to give the matter some consideration—both prayerful and practical. When I learned that the CAB expressed an initial willingness to consider the proposal, I reached out to Father Peter Williams, the Moderator of the Companions and asked him to test the idea with his leadership team and eventually to see if there would be any interest among the Companions for a temporary mission of this sort.

After much discussion and prayer, and after a number of Companions volunteered for a missionary experience of this sort, I want to share with you that Bishop Cozzens and I have agreed to a temporary assignment of three priests of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, all members of the Companions, in the Diocese of Crookston for a three-year period. The priests heading north will be:

- Father David Blume, presently director of the Archdiocesan Office of Vocations, who will become the pastor of St. Philip in Bemidji, St. Charles in Pennington, and the superintendent of St. Philip's School;
- Father Thomas Niehaus, presently serving as pastor of the communities at Most Holy Redeemer in Montgomery, Saint Patrick in Shieldsville, and St. Canice in Kilkenny, who will become parochial vicar for St. Philip and St. Charles and chaplain for the Newman Ministry at Bemidji State University; and
- Father Josh Salonek, presently serving as parochial vicar at Saint John Neumann in Egan, who will become parochial vicar for St. Philip and St. Charles.

I am inspired by the priestly generosity of each of these three men and am grateful for the many signs that the Lord has called each of them to this service.

I realize, Brothers, that this will require a sacrifice from all of you as well. I'm trusting, however, that the Lord will bless that sacrifice, just as he has blessed us when we have sent brothers to Venezuela or to the military Archdiocese. Our God is never outdone when it comes to generosity. Please allow me to share with you a few of the factors that I took into consideration when making this decision.

First of all, the need for assistance in the Diocese of Crookston is real. Covering a territory nearly three times the size of our Archdiocese, this mostly rural diocese has only 33 active priests, many of whom are pastoring multiple parishes. Moreover, nearly half of those active priests will reach retirement age in the next ten years. While the Diocese of Crookston has a number of seminarians, the next ordination is still four years away.

Secondly, I am mindful that God has consistently blessed our Archdiocese with excellent priestly vocations. This year alone, we are anticipating the ordination of 13 new priests. We also have a considerable number of brothers who generously serve well past the age of retirement. As a result, in the short run, the Archdiocese would be able to absorb even the loss of three excellent priests.

Thirdly, I am mindful of the generosity that other bishops have been showing to us in the Archdiocese. I have had to approach some of my brother bishops to request the release of qualified priests for our seminary faculties and, in spite of their own pressing personnel needs, a number of them have generously responded in the affirmative. They remind me that we must have solicitude for the needs of the broader Church.

Finally, it seems particularly fitting to support the generous missionary aspirations of the Companions. Approximately half of the Archdiocesan members of the Companions have moved here from other parts of the country to be a part of this clerical association of the faithful. In many ways, these men have already been missionaries to our local Church. Our numbers have been augmented in excess of the three priests that we will now be sending to Crookston.

It is my hope and prayer that the temporary assignments announced in today's letter will not only bear fruit for the faithful of Crookston but also, in the longer run, for the Archdiocese and for the individual priests involved. We all benefit from the powerful witness of brothers selflessly committed to following the Lord Jesus, the one who had no place to lay his head.

Please join me in prayer for Fathers Blume, Niehaus, and Salonek, as they prepare to embark on this new adventure. I'll be placing this topic on the agenda for the next meetings of the Archdiocesan Presbyteral Council, so please be sure to pass on to your dean any questions or comments that you may wish to share. As always, moreover, you would be welcome to contact me directly with your feedback. In the meantime, please be assured of my prayers.

Faternally in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Bernard A. Hebda". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Bernard A. Hebda
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis