Father Labbe to leave Notre Dame

By Jacqueline Cochran
St. Martin Bureau writer

ST. MARTINVILLE — Leaving will not be easy for the Rev. Clifton Labbe.

"I am going to dearly miss the people of St. Martinville and Notre Dame," the priest said.

Labbe, 55, will move to Bay St. Louis, Miss., this June to become U.S. provincial superior for his religious order, the Society of the Divine Word.

Replacing Labbe will be the Rev. Thomas Mullaly, pastor of St. Peter's Catholic Church in Pine Bluff, Ark.

"Father Mullaly served here as a young priest from 1974 to 1976," Labbe said.

As pastor of Notre Dame for 12 years, Labbe said he anticipates the heartache of leaving.

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The church creates specific ethnic offices, he explained, to better identify and serve those communities.

"There is ministry to the Hispanic, the Chinese," he said. "This particular office was giving a little more emphasis to the African-American community.

"It was giving me an opportunity to really go out into the parishes more and listen to people and see what their needs are," he said.

As provincial superior, Labbe said he will also face the challenge of redefining his role within the order.

He said his new position will be an administrative one, and he will no longer have the daily contact with parishioners.

"All I've done is pastoral ministry since my ordination in 1969," he said.

Now he will administer over the personnel of his religious order. His flock will be the men who serve church parishes throughout Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas and Mississippi.

Labbe said one of his goals will be to bring the men under his charge closer together in fellowship and community. "We need a closer bond," he said.

He said that within the next year, he will work on plans for a retirement community to serve the men of the Southern Province.

Labbe said he will also be busy planning for a general visitation in 1997 by the province's superior in Rome and this fall, he travels to Medellin, Colombia, for three weeks of meetings with all provincial superiors.

"This will be the first time I will go in this capacity," he said.

Labbe said looking back on these past years at Notre Dame, he is most impressed with the changes he has witnessed within the people themselves.

"The people have become involved in church decision-making," he said.

Lay leadership grew within these past years, Labbe said.

"The parish council, altar service, ministry to the sick, stewardship program, school board—these were all being done but not as involved as it is today," he said.

He said when he first arrived at Notre Dame a true lack of communication existed.

"The person in charge was not carrying out his responsibilities," he said.

He said unresolved issues were permitted to fester and attitudes developed. "Those in administration were not talking with the people and listening." Labbe said Trinity Catholic Elementary School, which is the responsibility of both Notre Dame and St. Martin De Tours parishes, experienced a loss in enrollment due to difficulties which existed at that time.

He said St. Martin De Tours pastor, the Rev. Keith De Rouen worked with him to address those issues and today enrollment has increased by at least 25 percent since he came to Notre Dame.

Labbe said he is pleased with the changes and he leaves Notre Dame knowing the parish stands firmly within the grasp of its people.

"And they are truly kind and generous people—rich in Christian faith," he said.

The Rev. Clifton Labbe will soon be saying good-bye to Notre Dame Catholic Church and the community of St. Martinville.

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