



**St. Dominic's Rectory**  
4504 FRANKFORD AVENUE  
PHILADELPHIA, PA 19136

June 18, 1988

Reverend Monsignor Samuel E. Shoemaker, J.C.D.  
The Chancery  
222 North 17th Street  
Philadelphia, Pa. 19103-1299

Dear Monsignor Shoemaker:

A problem of many months has come to an impasse at St. Dominic's rectory. It involves Father Avery and myself, and the other priests, Father Smith and Father Fitzgibbons. It revolves around the meaning of being "on-call."

I am enclosing two copies of a papers which I prepared for discussion at a staff meeting of priests. They are dated, which gives some idea of how long the problem has existed. The papers were discussed but we could never reach any agreement. Father Avery was opposed to the arrangement as expressed on the papers. I was willing to make adjustments as mentioned in the April 26, 1988 paper, but still we could not reach an agreement. He could not see why a priest had to stay around and wait for calls.

The reason for developing papers on "on-call" was that it became apparent that an assistant would be "on-call" just two days a week, the rest of the time he was theoretically "off," which on many occasions meant that he was free to leave for parts unknown. If, the priest "on-call" had no appointments, he, too, was free to leave, as sometimes happened. Father Avery would respond to this that he has a car phone and he could be summoned. But he often was miles away or he was not in his car when called. Another priest would automatically be put "on-call." This would be fine if the other priest would have been told ahead of time, as was suggested in the paper. No such arrangements were made.

He holds that parishioners should come to the rectory to see a priest only with an appointment just as they do for doctors, dentists or lawyers. I remarked that sometimes people arrive without an appointment when they need a priest very much. I cited a few cases I had in recent months which were emergencies and I was able to do some very important pastoral work. But this made little impression. I just cannot imagine Our Lord receiving people only by appointment. Even doctors are "on-call" in emergency clinics.

I pointed out some of the emergency sick calls we have had recently. I referred to the last emergency sick call in which the person who received the last rites had been away from the

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church for some time. His remark to that was that he heard an old priest once say: "People die as they live."

We had another staff meeting about a week or so after April 26. Father Smith typed the third paper I enclosed. He wished to break the impasse by trying to clear Saturday evenings so Father Avery would have more time off on Saturdays to be a disc jockey. But even with this concession my paper was not agreed on, though I was willing to make some reasonable adjustments.

When Father Avery arrived at St. Dominic's, he stated that he had commitments to honor and when they were completed, he would not accept any more. This never happened. More than once he promised to cut down, but never did. Instead, the commitments increased greatly. One of the other curates remarked that Father Avery's weekend evening dates for next December are almost all filled. He made this statement in reference to planning a parish Christmas party and thought he might hire Father Avery to be the disc jockey.

My reason for writing the papers in the first place was to quiet some of the objections brought to me by the assistants. They resented called frequently to cover for Father Avery who was "on-call." Father Avery would respond that he was in touch with his car phone. But often he was miles away or he was not in his car. No arrangements were made for a back-up.

At one of the recent staff meetings, Father Fitzgibbons, full of frustration, shouted: "You give only 20 to 30 percent of your time and energies to this parish, the rest is for yourself." This was a slight exaggeration but there was a strong basis in fact. Yet, on occasion, Father Fitzgibbons has expressed his admiration for Father Avery's many talents and has praised his good work.

Father Avery is very popular with the people and this is a plus for all of us. But lately a few of the laity who work in parish programs began to ask, "Where is he? Is he ever at home?" He is in charge of the altar boys, no easy task. He is very good on scheduling them, but there were months when he did not train them. In fact, I took the sixth graders for an hour of instruction for several weeks last winter because a few parents complained about their sons being on the altar without proper training. But I must say that recently he has begun to train the fifth grade neophytes.

I believe Father Avery's attitude about being "on-call" is due to his many outside activities: his frequent commitments as a disc-jockey and some other enterprises in which



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he is involved. These would be fine if they did not interfere with his primary ministry of a parish priest.

His work with the Hmong Apostolate does not intrude with his work at St. Dominic's at all. He celebrates Mass for them at Incarnation or at St. Dominic's. He has used our parish hall for his gatherings. Neither here nor at St. Agatha-St. James was his Hmong ministry a problem.

This letter was prompted by an incident which happened last Sunday, June 12. Father Avery was "on-call." He left early afternoon after asking Father Fitzgibbons to distribute Holy Communion at the 12:30 Mass and to take the baptisms which followed the Mass. This was fine and good. However, he was not here for the rest of the afternoon and he was not here for a wake service in the evening. The other priests were out to dinner. Finally, about 9:00 o'clock the undertaker reached me and I rushed to funeral parlor. I do not mind taking wake services. But this fiasco should never have happened, if we had some policy of being "on-call."

When I met Father Avery on Monday morning I asked him to come to my room. I told him that I was serious about the paper about "on-call" because team work in the rectory depended on it. I reminded him that at the conclusion of the last staff meeting I said that since we could not come to any agreements about making adjustments to the paper, we would have to accept it as it is. If anyone could not agree with it, he should go to the chancery and say that he could not live with it or I would if it proved necessary. I wanted to discuss the problem with him one-on-one. I told him we would have to reach an agreement or he or I would have to take it to the chancery.

He became visibly upset and said "Then it is better that you do that." He was not open to discussion. He rose and continued, "It is far better that you do that." Then, he remarked that he had not had a full day off since February. I was rather amazed by that statement. I said that there were days we did not see him at all. He responded by saying that he spent all his nights in his own bed. I answered that I was not referring to the nights but to the days when he was gone early and returned late in the evening. He then left the room. Our meeting did not last longer than two or three minutes.

That evening he left a note for me which read: "Make sure you send your letter downtown as soon as possible for sure before your vacation." Nonetheless, I waited to see if he would come to resume our discussion but although we met in passing and greeted each other, there was no attempt to see if we could have



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a meeting of minds.

The main issue is a resolution of the meaning of "on-call." Only the acceptance of the agreed upon concept will bring harmony to the rectory for real team work.

Father Avery is a good priest; he likes people and they like him. But he over-extends himself in outside work which interferes with his work in the parish.

I am not asking that he be changed. All I wish is that we have a standard for team work among the priests.

Father Avery and I had good years together at St. Agatha-St. James. The problem there was not nearly so evident as it is now. I am sorry that we could not resolve the differences at our staff meetings or one-on-one. Communication on this point comes hard with him.

If I have been in error about the concept of a priest being "on-call," I am willing to make adjustments as I stated in the paper.

Please call if I can be of further assistance. I apologize for the length of this letter but I wanted to present as much of the facts as possible.

I shall go on retreat this week and then two weeks of vacation. I shall be back on Saturday, July 9.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*Joseph G. Sikora*  
Joseph G. Sikora  
Pastor

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ON CALL

Being "on call" means that a priest is available in the parish to take phone calls, respond to parishioners' office calls, and in emergencies to be ready to take sick calls.

If the priest on call is responding to a call, then the back-up man is automatically "on call", until the first man is available again.

If the priest on call has a legitimate reason to be absent, he must arrange for a specific priest to cover for him until he returns and the office staff must be aware of this arrangement for obvious reasons.

Leaving a phone number by the priest on call is ok but only if he is within the parish bounds. The back-up priest should be informed to be ready to answer routine phone calls and office calls. A phone number does little good if the priest on call is miles away and an emergency arises or if no priest is available for routine rectory calls.

All of the above has been the standard according to a long-standing arrangement of being "on-call" and "off-call" and the two days off a week. Note that "off-call" does not mean "day-off." It used to mean "back-up" man.

(First draft - December 13, 1986)



### TEAM WORK

In the interests of better team work among the priests and for a happier parish family and rectory, team work among the priests is very essential.

To state the obvious, we are in parish work to serve God's people. To do so effectively at St. Dominic's we must collaborate.

Also, it is necessary for the priest to have his time off for his own well-being. That is why at St. Dominic's each priest is assured of an over-night each week. The schedule is to be worked out mutually.

The other priests should work as a team. The other two assistants should be available. Five days a week is a normal work week anywhere. Lately, it seems that a priest was to be around only when he was "on-call." As far as I know, this was never intended in rectories which had several assistants.

One assistant is "on call" while another is a "back-up" man. If the "on-call" person has a funeral or is called for an emergency, the "back-up" man is "on" until he returns. Communication, therefore, between the priests is very necessary here.

Being "on-call" and leaving a phone number is fine if the priest is only a few minutes away. It does little good if the priest is miles away, say a half-hour or longer. We have had some emergency calls in the last month or two which needed a priest immediately. Also, if a parishioner comes to the office and asks for a priest, one should be available. Being miles away is hardly "available."

If this rule is not followed, what usually happens is that the pastor is summoned to handle a call or the person is told that no priest is available. This does not create a good impression when four priests are assigned to the parish.

Also, on many days in the last few months, the pastor was called to the office several times in one afternoon or evening because the man "on-call" was not available and no "back-up" was set. He does not mind being of service once in a while but when he cannot do his own work for several hours because he is doing the assistant's work without being notified that he is the "back-up" man is not fair.

I would be willing to discuss this policy to refine it and make it better. But I do think that many of the 'gripes' that we hear from the priests and people would be lessened and would make for a happier parish and rectory.

J.G.S.

April 26, 1988



FATHER SMITH'S SUGGESTIONS:

SATURDAY CONFESSIONS

Two Assistants would hear confessions every Saturday afternoon.  
One Assistant would hear confessions every Saturday evening.

The Assistant "ON CALL" on Saturday would be required to hear confessions on Saturday afternoon and Saturday evening; the other Assistant would not be required to hear confessions on Saturday evening. He might be required to celebrate the 5:00 P.M. Mass on Saturday evening, however, or assist with Communions at that Mass, but he would be free for the evening after the 5:00 P.M. Mass on Saturday evening.

The third Assistant, of course, would not have any parish obligations, since each of the assistants is free on Saturday every 3rd week.

This would be the policy, then, for the hearing of confessions each Saturday - WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE THREE SATURDAYS IMMEDIATELY PRECEDING BOTH CHRISTMAS AND EASTER WHEN CONFESSIONS BECOME VERY HEAVY AND MORE PRIESTS ARE NEEDED TO HEAR CONFESSIONS. ON THOSE SATURDAYS, ALL THREE ASSISTANTS WOULD BE EXPECTED TO HEAR CONFESSIONS.

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