

Unpacking the Vatican 'pastoral planning' document

By FATHER DAVID ESQUILIANO

The Vatican released "The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the church" of the Congregation for the Clergy July 20, which has been referred to as the "pastoral planning document" amongst many in the church.

However, if you take a closer look at the entire document, readers will find that it is more than a blueprint to pastoral planning. My hope is to help the faithful "unpack" this document and its true purposes whether or not you have read all 29 pages. (You will notice reference numbers within parentheses, which refer back to paragraph numbers in the original document throughout this article.)

Summary of the document

If you want to summarize the purpose of this document, it is not how to go about pastoral planning. It is a call to conversion for our parish communities. "Parish communities will find herein a call to go out of themselves." (2)

Unfortunately, a few paragraphs from the document have been used repeatedly to oppose change within the church without taking the entire work into account. To do so would be to take the sections out of context.

This document does remind bishops that there are procedures that should be followed when merging parishes. However, there is much more to reflect upon in this written work from Rome.

Examination of conscience

I personally see most of the document as an examination of conscience for our parishes. Unless we first understand where we are lacking as parishes, we will not be able to start the conversion process that we are being invited to in this document.

This is not something that the pastor has to do by himself, but the whole parish should as well. We should all be ready to roll up our sleeves and be ready to work for this conversion for our parish communities.

True places of worship

The document starts at the beginning with the definition of a parish. A parish is "a place of worship, a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his people." (7)

I'd propose that the first question we need to ask in our parish examination of conscience is – are our churches truly places of worship? In other words, is worship really our priority as parishioners?

One of the things I've often heard from pastors, and sadly experienced myself as well, is how hard it is to get parishioners involved in the celebration of the Mass. Is worship in our churches the duty of a handful of volunteers, or is the whole parish involved?

After the pandemic shut down our parishes and we had livestreamed Masses for a time, a call has been made by some people to allow parishioners to gather around a television and watch Mass being celebrated at another church.

With the resurgence of pastoral planning in our diocese, others are asking about allowing deacons or lay people leading Communion services on Sundays, but that is not the proper Eucharistic celebration.

This document explains that these kinds of celebrations are “considered an exceptional eventuality, recourse to which is made only in circumstances of true impossibility.” (98)

We need to be honest, if we are going to drive to the next town over for dinner after Mass, or to purchase groceries - is it truly impossible to go there also for weekend Mass?

Parish - a place of mission

An unfortunate current reality of several parishes is that the scope of their action is limited to their territory. There is much value in addressing the local needs of our parish – the roof, the budget and local programs. After all, most parishes are territorial. But “any pastoral action that is limited to the territory of the parish is outdated.” (16)

So, we as parishes need to ask what are we doing to continue the work of evangelization outside of our walls, even outside of our parish boundaries? The document challenges us to think outside of ourselves and our parish’s needs.

Parish, a welcoming place to the poor

This should lead our parishes to another challenge. The parish “should remember that the poor and excluded must always have a privileged place in the heart of the church.” (32)

Yet sometimes the parish is more concerned with having lots of money in the bank for its own needs, without asking what they can do for others. When we think of the poor, we should think of it in the broader sense.

If the poor members of our parish cannot enroll in our own Catholic schools without great personal sacrifices because we as parishes don’t want to support them, we are not really welcoming them.

“The Lord taught his disciples to have a generous spirit of service, to be a reciprocal gift for the other.” (40)

Courageous conversion

Conversion requires courage especially when that conversion requires change. When we ask parishes to reconsider themselves beyond the “outdated” convention of a territory, it will take courage if it wants to flourish and grow.

“Any pastoral action that is limited to the territory of the parish is outdated, which is something the parishioners themselves observe when their parish appears to be more interested in preserving a nostalgia of former times as opposed to looking to the future with courage.” (16)

Change is never easy, but sometimes it is needed. “If the parish does not exude that spiritual dynamic of evangelization, it runs the risk of becoming self-referential and fossilized” (17) We do not want our parish to die, to become a fossil.

This will not be done just by the pastor, as noted earlier. It will take a team effort of the entire parish. “It does not pertain to the clergy alone, therefore, to carry out the transformation inspired by the Holy Spirit, since this involves the entire people of God.” (37)

Everyone has a role to play for the parish to grow in its mission of conversion and growth.

“The mission required of the parish, as a central driving force of evangelization, concerns the people of God in its entirety: priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, and the lay faithful, each according to their respective charisms and the responsibility that corresponds to them.” (41)

The parish priest to lead

Thinking outside the box is sometimes necessary, but we need to be careful not to go too far from the box. The document notes the person responsible for the Catholic parish is the pastor or parish priest, preferably with one single parish. In our diocese with so few active priests, this is difficult. “Ordinarily, it is good that the parish priest, where possible, have the pastoral care of only one parish.” (70)

This document also explains other ways in which a parish could be administered, namely by a deacon, or even a lay person, but any of these measures is to be considered “a temporary and not a permanent measure” (89) “not for reasons of convenience.” (89)

Moving forward for exciting change

“The parish must constantly face changes taking place in today’s culture and in the existential reality of persons, in order to explore creatively new ways and methods that allow it to be at the height of its primary function, that is, being a force of evangelization.” (122)

As parishes merge or cluster, and as the number of Masses diminishes because the faithful have stopped going to church and as there are fewer active priests, our parishes need to examine their consciences, parishes can start their process of conversion. That exciting conversion will be reflected in the parish’s pastoral activity, which “needs to go beyond merely the territorial limits of the parish.” (123)

Again, this is a rich document, which can be used as a starting point for our parishes. I’d invite pastoral and finance councils, parish staffs, and parishioners in general to reflect upon this document with parishioners.

Change is unavoidable, but we can use this opportunity to ensure the change is for the growth of our parishes and the entire church.

Father David Esquiliano is rector of the Cathedral Parish in Sioux City and is a judge for the diocesan tribunal.