

## **Renewing Community in the Post-pandemic Parish**

What are the challenges facing the Church in our Archdiocese and in its parishes after the pandemic runs its course? Where do we go from here? I have my own ideas. But I'm not the only one with half a brain. I'm not the only member of the assembly of believers. And so, I'm not the only one with input about those challenges. But here's what I for one think:

Some challenges are practical, for example, when and how to resume our special appeal, ArchdioceseOne, which was put on hold by the inability to gather people safely during the pandemic.

Other challenges are more visionary, like, how to deepen unity, humility and charity in our country and in our Church after a contentious election cycle, a contested election, a failed insurrection, brutality from and to police, race riots, gun violence, fights over whether the virus is real, wearing masks, getting vaccinated, and who should receive Communion, all of which have highlighted and heightened our civic and ecclesial divisions.

Another visionary challenge is pastoral planning regarding the number and location of parishes, and even about what constitutes a parish. During the pandemic, not being able to access parishes, and parishes unable to function fully, inspired questions on the nature of a parish, especially the question about which is more important: the holy community, or Holy Communion?

1. Is a parish like a Casey's store, a place to satisfy a need quickly and conveniently, like the Sunday obligation, or receiving Holy Communion?
2. Or is it a community of the Catholic faithful, that gathers together to help the poor, to learn and teach the Gospel, and to pray and worship (even if a priest isn't present or available)?

The answer will help determine the number and location of parishes, as well as how they will be led.

Related to the issue of parishes is the visionary challenge of how to retain present Church membership after such a long absence from parish activities and Sunday Mass in church, and how to attract new members.

How's that for challenges? But an even bigger challenge, is: What the Church needs to do to address these challenges.

It can't be a return to business as usual. People talk with hope about "returning to normal." I get that, I want that too, but it shouldn't mean we go back to the same people doing the same things in the same way.

With regard to ArchdioceseOne: We're in the planning stages of resuming the public events to promote our special appeal in support of retired priests, seminary education, immigration legal services, and the upkeep of our crumbling mother church, the Cathedral of St. Raphael. We have to change up how and when we do certain phases of the special appeal, with fingers crossed that a new approach won't negatively affect the outcome.

For a deeper unity, humility, and charity in our country and in our Church: We've been praying a Novena of 19s: on the 19<sup>th</sup> of each month, from March until November, asking the intercession of St. Joseph, terror of evil spirits and patron of the Church. It's hoped that a monthly reminder, and praying over that need, will inspire us to be the change we want to see.

To lead the discussion about the number and location of parishes, and what constitutes a parish, we've hired Jeff Henderson as the Director of Pastoral Planning and Leadership Development. And he'll begin that discussion as part of our participation in the Pope's Synod on synodality.

A Synod is the gathering of people for the process of synodality, which is a fancy-pants way of saying that all the baptized have a *right* to speak, be heard, and be taken seriously, and that it isn't only a bishop, priest, or deacon who can discern the movement of the Spirit. We might not use the word, but we practice synodality when we ask for counsel from councils, like the Priest Council, Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, parish council, etc.

To be clear, while synodality certainly involves outside-the-box thinking about the way forward, it's not a free-for-all, advocating for our favorite additions, deletions, and/or modifications to Church teaching and practice. Put simply, the Spirit that inspired Scripture and Tradition can't at the same time direct the Church to move in a contrary way.

Synodality also says that all the baptized have a *duty* to be co-workers in mission, and that means more than just pray, pay, and obey. In fact, bishops, priests, and deacons are tasked with matching the needs of ministry with the gifts of the baptized, like all y'all, and then preparing the people in the pews to succeed in ministry.

Basically, the Pope wants us to talk about talking, listening, and decision-making in the Church. But that's a little abstract, don't you think, and hard to get people interested. It needs a concrete, practical context. So, we'll pray, talk, listen, proceed to decision-making about the general topic of the parish community, and then help everyone own the results.

Our synodal process isn't about determining which parishes to close, or merge, or keep open, and who will lead and feed them, protect and correct them, edify and sanctify them. Rather, we'll talk, listen, and decide what questions to ask, what criteria to use, how to measure the vitality of a parish (beyond just numbers of souls), and what we need to do to identify, train, and authorize lay ecclesial ministers for our remaining parishes.

All the baptized bear a share of responsibility to continue the mission of Jesus in the ministries of the Church, if for no other reason because of the nature of the Church: the family of God, the mystical Body of Christ, the assembly of the faithful, the community of believers. Those are all terms that signify an organism with individual parts that work together for the benefit of the whole.

One priest, who is pastor of 5 parishes! told me that he can arrange for Mass to be celebrated in each parish on a regular basis, but it's impossible for 1 priest to form and build up a *community of believers* in 5 places.

For a parish to be a community of believers, it needs a person or a team of people to organize the essentials of a parish: outreach to the poor, learning and teaching the Gospel, and prayer and worship in church, even on a daily basis. But you don't need to be ordained for any of those purposes, really, even to lead prayer and worship. For example, the Church regards the Liturgy of the Hours, and Eucharistic exposition and benediction, as expressions of its public worship, which anyone can lead.

In the diocese where I was ordained, the ministry of the Church is done mostly by priests and men. And that was pretty much the same situation when I worked in the Vatican. Where I was bishop before coming here, there was a greater presence of laity in ministry, women included, which was credited mostly to their commitment to stewardship as a way of life.

We have a similar commitment here. We know biblical stewardship too: I don't own anything. Everything is on loan from God, entrusted to me as a steward, to manage according to God's good pleasure. And it's God's good pleasure that I use it to provide for myself and my dependents, and also to share in support of the poor and of the mission of the Church. I am wowed by the honor and bowed by the responsibility.

As the Bible teaches, God loves a cheerful giver, and so we mustn't feel coerced by a threat if we don't share, or enticed by the promise of a reward if we do. That being said, the Bible also teaches that God will always give us an abundance of what we're willing to share with others. So, if we're willing to share nothing, God will give us an abundance of nothing. And if we give generously, our cup will runneth over - the more we sow, the more we reap.

And what we share in support of the Church's mission is most certainly, without apologies, money - no money, no ministry - but not only. We also share the time and the abilities or talents that God has entrusted to our stewardship, using them to assume a role in the outreach to the poor, or to serve as a teacher for those who want to learn the Gospel, or as a liturgical minister in the Sunday assembly for Holy Mass.

Priests needn't do everything, can't do everything, shouldn't do everything. Don't get me wrong: we need priests in order to practice fully our Catholic Faith. And so, I beg people to pray for more vocations to priesthood, and invite young men to consider priesthood as God's plan for life for them, and talk up the vocation, and acknowledge priests for what they offer, the importance of it, and the sacrifice it entails.

And it's true, we belong to a hierarchical Church, which comes from the Latin, meaning ruled by priests. Which is not the same as a clerical Church, which gives bishops, priests, and deacons deference and preference, power and perks. They are instead supposed to be the last of all, and the servants of all, especially, as mentioned earlier, and you can't repeat it too much, to help unfold the grace of the baptized for the sake of continuing the mission of Jesus in the ministries of the Church.

Maybe we're experiencing a temporary shortage of priests here because in the past there were too many, and they were doing everything, such that nobody else had to bear a share of the responsibility. A decline in the number of priests has forced us to think about the role of the priest and of the laity, with the lay faithful taking responsibility for roles that don't require ordination.

Another factor to think about, in addition to the decline in the number of priests, is the decline in the number of parishioners, without a corresponding decline in the number of parishes, resulting in a decline in the spiritual vitality of parish life. As another priest put it: we don't have too few priests; we have too many parishes.

People fear change, especially when it threatens their parish, even when change is happening all around them, with fewer people in the general population, people moving to live elsewhere, and people choosing not to identify with or actively practice the Catholic religion.

As a result of change, we now have parishes that reflect the past, not the present, certainly more than we need, and which can sometimes even be a burden on future growth.

And in some of those parishes, people won't serve on councils, or as liturgical ministers, or give financially, and the focus is more if not mostly on having Mass where and when they want it.

In some of those parishes, there's often also a focus on keeping the church open, and if it's closed some parishioners refuse to become members of another parish, or go to Mass anywhere else.

Parish churches are buildings, consecrated, yes, but like a school or a social hall, they're buildings that serve the needs of the parish, not the other way around; we don't preserve museums to the past.

A parish is a community, with a base of operations, and the corresponding buildings, to coordinate the basics of a parish: outreach to the poor, learn and teach the Gospel, gather in church for prayer and worship. If all three of those activities are not present on both a personal and communal level, then I don't know what it is, but it's not a parish, and the parishioners - not the old, fat and bald archbishop - have determined that it be closed.

Finally, retaining and attracting Church members: Two archdiocesan ministry priorities are closely related to this concern, namely, enhancing the experience of the Sunday assembly for Holy Mass, and teaching stewardship as a way of life, how to be a Church of the poor, for the poor. So, more on that this afternoon. By the way, to promote our ministry priorities, we have developed a catechesis for each one, posted on the archdiocesan website.

So, that's what I think about the challenges facing the Church in our Archdiocese, and in its parishes, after the pandemic runs its course. It would be great, no, it will be necessary to hear from and consider the ideas of all who are members of the assembly of the believers. What do you think?