

Charlotte/Greece/Hilton Pastoral Planning Task Force Meeting Notes

Wednesday, May 31, 2023 - OMOS Parish Hall

ATTENDING: Holy Cross/Our Mother of Sorrows: Fr. William Coffas, Holy Cross: Joseph DiVincenzo, Ryan Snyder, Our Mother of Sorrows: Marc Boeh, David Witkoski, St. Charles Borromeo: Gina Reeder, David Steklenski, St. John the Evangelist: Nick Verdino, St. Lawrence: Fr. Lee Chase, Steve Amico, Jeri Rombaut, St. Leo's: Father Joseph Catanise, David Jones, Barbara Surash, St. Mark's: Deacon Frank Pettrone, Peter Blind, Kimm Wesley, **Facilitator:** Karen Rinefierd, **Minutes Scribe:** Maryanne Sutton

GUESTS: David Cataline (seminarian), Donna Petrella (Holy Cross/Our Mother of Sorrows staff), Shannon Kilbridge (Associate Director of the diocesan Department of Pastoral Services)

EXCUSED: Holy Cross/Our Mother of Sorrows: Fr. Joseph Martuscello, St. Charles Borromeo: Fr. John Firpo, St. John the Evangelist: Fr. Peter Enyan-Boadu, Paul Parkman

- 1) **Opening Prayer:** Prayer to the Holy Spirit, faith sharing, intercessions
- 2) The 7-parish evangelization committee has now met twice, and the shared website committee, once. We still need some parishes to name members to the vocations committee which will not begin its work until the fall.
- 3) **Conversation with Shannon Kilbridge:** Welcome to our guest Shannon Kilbridge, Associate Director of the diocesan Department of Pastoral Services.

Shannon: the overall context of what we are working with:

- It is critical for these conversations to be happening.
- Many things have impacted us; the pandemic has greatly affected Mass attendance which was declining even before Covid started.
- 35,000 are coming to Mass every week in the diocese after Covid; before Covid attendance was 46,000.
- The older members of the community came back first, we are still working on getting families back.
- Our Bishop is 76 and submitted his resignation letter to the Pope when he turned 75. We do not know when the Pope will accept the resignation and appoint a new bishop.
- The bankruptcy is still ongoing. Some parishioners have hard feelings and emotions surrounding the bankruptcy. We must acknowledge them and keep working.
- Vocations are a challenge as the numbers have declined.
- We have 137 diocesan priests; this number does not include order priests or extern priests.
- There are 8 diocesan priests in their 90's, most of whom are still celebrating Mass.
- The community needs to prepare for what will happen when we start losing priests.

Q: How do we get people who left the church to come back?

Shannon: All kinds of methods are on the table to brainstorm. **MOST IMPORTANT** are paying attention to individuals' personal experience and building relationships. When someone comes to one of our churches for the first time or returns after being away, will we be ready to receive them and welcome them back? If people come to one of our parishes, their experience must be positive. It is important to prepare the congregation to receive them. There is no silver bullet program. In using any program, we need to pay attention to how we form relationships with those who come.

- a) **Q: What models for parish leadership and parish configuration are possible depending on the preferences of a Bishop?**

Shannon:

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- A “family of churches” model is a popular approach being used now in Buffalo and Detroit, but there are similar models in other dioceses. Parishes are clustered under one pastor, with parochial vicars and sometimes senior status priests supporting sacramental life. Deacons can also be appointed to multiple parishes, and other staff can be shared.
- One is the primary location for Sunday Mass. The churches do some things together and others separately.
- When Bishop Matano asks priests coming here from Africa how many parishes they would have back home, he hears that they oversee an average of thirteen parishes and travel between them is difficult. Sunday Mass and the celebration of other sacraments may happen as little as four times a year. A local person oversees the life of the community.
- Some parishes are led by Pastoral Administrators such as our own Deacon Frank Pettrone.
- Parish leadership is just not the pastor but deacons, parochial vicars, and the staff. Do we need a team of volunteers? Bringing on volunteers is not an easy thing to do. It takes more work as they usually do not have the academic background and experience needed for their area of ministry. They need training and ongoing support.

b) Q: What insight would you have on how parishioners/lay ministers can best support and assist our priests and deacons as we begin to see additional decreases in numbers across our seven parishes?

Shannon: Effort, people engaging in new ways. Identify the spiritual gifts of people. (There is a Spiritual Gifts Assessment on the diocesan planning website (<https://oprp.dor.org>) which parishioners can use to identify their skills/interests and match them to needs within their parish.) We need to support the pastor, deacons, and leadership when they have to make hard decisions. Everyone takes on the burden together.

c) Q: What are some of the pitfalls that other groups have fallen into?

Shannon:

- Not communicating enough.
- Rushing.
- Not understanding the things that we can't do—e.g., Canon Law issues, which decisions are reserved to the bishop, when we have to get permission from the diocese.
- Not understanding New York State laws, tax laws, county, city, town laws.
- Who are the decision makers who need to be a part of conversations?
- Leading with financial decisions instead of leading with mission.

Q: Is there a lesson learned page from diocese?

Shannon: The diocese offers a number of Continuous Planning Resources on the planning website—e.g., a suggested process to guide making Mass schedule changes. These are based on the experience of other planning groups.

d) Q: As we plan ahead for communications with our individual Pastoral Councils and broader Parishioner Town Hall Meetings, do you have any general recommendations about how these can be the most beneficial?

Shannon:

- Communication has to be continuous and expansive using every means available. There is no such thing as too much communication. Share data, the reality, the why of things, why it is important to be ready for change, personal testimony (e.g., why my faith is so important in the midst of change?).
- Having written materials is important. Videos can be useful.
- Use many ways to communicate with people—e.g., smaller coffee hours after Masses at individual parishes, larger town hall meetings, meetings with pastoral councils. Hold these regularly.
- Beforehand role play answering questions from parishioners.

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- e) **Q: One of our next steps is to create a recommendation to the bishop for clustering among our seven parishes for the time when one of our priests cannot be replaced. Since there is more than one approach to this, we would love your opinion/recommendation. Does it make sense to determine the number of optimal clusters up front and frame our recommendations around this number or is it better to determine which parishes fit best together as a cluster - allow this number to fall organically from this process?**

Shannon: In our diocesan history, there have been from two parishes up to six parishes under one pastor—right now no more than three. Other dioceses are trying a larger number of parishes under one pastor—called by different names: a family, a network, a pastoral care group. The dioceses trying this approach are getting a lot of feedback from the priests involved.

Look at resources and see connections. Geographic boundaries are important. Rolling clustering is a gentler approach. What are natural affiliations? What makes the most sense for clustering? We must communicate to our parishes frequently and the task force is doing that. We must balance the need for new ministries as well as consider which ministries no longer are needed. Help parishioners to understand and articulate why we exist.

- f) **Q: What is your best estimate of when we might need to change—additional clustering in a year? two years? a month? How immediate is our work?**

Shannon:

- She doesn't know.
- When preparing recommendations to go to parishioners at large and later to the bishop, consider which parishes might best affiliate with one another and be able to say why. Consider sacramental life and preparation for the sacraments, the impact changes will have on ministries.
- What are the pluses and minuses of each potential combination of parishes?
- Ask parishioners if they agree.
- A change in Mass schedule will likely be the hardest change. Put a lot of energy into considering this. What are the factors we have to consider when the time comes? When a Mass schedule change is needed, use the resources on the diocesan planning website. Consider the factors that are important in creating a new Mass schedule and communicate those to parishioners.
- Remember that things will keep changing.

Comments from task force members:

- We have to take action now to prepare for emergencies. **Shannon:** Use technology and incorporate that as much as possible. Get feedback from parishioners on your emergency plans.
- It is hard to change Mass schedules. One small parish juggled Mass schedules and lost a lot of parishioners. **Shannon:** You can plan now by doing the work to determine the factors that come into consideration relative to Mass times but not choose Mass times until it is necessary to adjust the Mass schedule.
- Not all the questions on the Spiritual Gifts Assessment pertain to spirituality. **Shannon:** The questions help determine how to get people to engage better.

Q: In your experience, have you seen the type of planning process that this group is engaged in (i.e., generated at the local level rather than being directed from the diocese)? How are we being perceived?

Shannon: She hasn't seen this before. Others have been directed from the diocese and often connected either to a lack of priest availability or financial issues. The diocese isn't saying that you need to do this right now. Locally we are saying that we need to do this. We are taking responsibility for something that everyone knows is happening. It is not easy work. There is no bad guy. There is a recognition at the diocese that we are being proactive.

4) Setting Future Task Force Meetings

- **Monday, July 10th at St. Lawrence (main room in Deacon Hall)**
- **Tuesday, August 29th at St. Leo's**