

## Pastoral planning calls for realistic look at archdiocese

### Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan

Anyone familiar with the challenges of Catholic life today realizes how crucial it is to engage in careful, prudent, patient, prayerful, pastoral planning. The church's sacred mission, faithful to the mandate of Jesus, to teach, serve, and sanctify, requires such ongoing, purposeful, professional planning.

This archdiocese has done so, in a very concerted way, for at least the last 15 years. Credit must go to Bishop Richard J. Sklba, our priests, deacons, and pastoral ministers, our parish councils and staffs, and our archdiocesan planning commission, served so well by Maureen Gallagher and now Noreen Welte and our parish consultants, for the advances we have made.

We have done a lot of planning and many of the recommendations for our parishes and schools have already been implemented or are in process. Other recommendations await implementation. In some cases, the implementation involves tough decisions, feelings of sadness or loss, and difficult choices.

All of this is a reminder that pastoral planning and its implementation are never over. Today I want to talk to you about a heightened, more energetic effort to re-commit ourselves to the process of pastoral planning.

What is this all about, anyway? Well, for one, it's about fidelity to the church's primary duty of evangelization. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI all remind us that evangelization in the third millennium calls for new, creative ways to respond to pastoral urgencies that engage us today.

The church faces challenges she did not a generation ago. You know some of them: people leaving the church; the gift of thousands of new immigrants, from countries other than western Europe, who look to the church for spiritual sustenance and care; the need to carefully steward our strained number of priests; societal influences that undermine marriage and the family; the large number of young adults who at times feel less-than-at-home in our parishes; catechetical illiteracy of children and adults; a decline in regular Sunday Mass attendance; a demographic shift from the urban to the suburban and ex-urban regions; the advances of the Culture of Death and significant moral, bio-ethical issues; and the problems of violence and poverty in our homes, schools and communities. I could go on, but you get the point.

People are looking to the church to be a light to the world, to be proactive, not passive, in dealing with contemporary challenges, and to meet the spiritual needs of her people today as she has in the past. Are we evangelizing and living our faith? Are we meeting the spiritual needs of our people? How effectively do we live Jesus' mission in today's world? Are we good stewards? These are the questions that pastoral planning confronts.

Two, pastoral planning demands we take a realistic, hard look at our parishes, priests, and buildings. Simply put, we have too many parishes, priests, and buildings in areas of southeastern Wisconsin where our Catholic population has shrunk, and not enough where big numbers of Catholics now live.

One priest recently observed that in one area of the archdiocese there were four parishes, each with its own pastor, serving fewer people all together than his one mammoth parish served by him alone! In other areas, our people and pastoral leaders struggle to fill the pews, to heat and tuck-point their aging buildings, while in other places, the church and parish facilities are way too small for the growing population. Simply maintaining the buildings we have, with no energy or resources left for the mission of Christ and his church, is no way to run a railroad!

Three, pastoral planning considers the wise, equitable distribution and use of our priests, and their collaborators, our deacons, parish directors, administrative staffs, and pastoral ministers.

Thank God, the number of our vocations and anticipated ordinations are on the upswing. And, again praise God, we benefit from the gift of generous priests from Latin America, India, and Africa who are with us as parish priests. But, we still must be realistic: while the number of Catholics is going up, the pool of priests to serve them is going down.

It would be a serious neglect of duty if we did not now thoughtfully project how and where our priests can best be of service, how our committed deacons can minister most effectively, how God's people can exercise their own talents in serving our communities, and how parish staffs can be prepared and better equipped to collaborate in the shepherding of the flock. And, no doubt about it, our pool of qualified, well-trained and educated, lay ecclesial ministers is growing. They are an invaluable resource, as are our senior priests, who, although "retired" from a formal pastoral "assignment," still serve our parishes, schools and God's people in many different and generous ways.

Does this pastoral planning mean some parishes and schools might merge, move or be served by creative new styles of leadership? Yes. Does this mean that some new parishes, or re-configurations of current ones, might appear? Yes. Does this mean that new ministries, new models of schools, catechetical programs, and fresh outreach in evangelization and charity might arise? Yes. Does this mean every parish and school will be affected in some way, shape or form? Yes, because we are all inter-connected as part of a larger diocesan church.

Another area of pastoral planning concerns the internal governance of the archdiocese. How can the central offices of the archdiocese best serve our people, parishes, projects, schools, programs, and community? What do our pastors and people look to the central office staff of the archdiocese to do for them? Where can we trim costs, realistically admitting that this year alone we are facing a budget deficit of \$1.5 million? How do we do an effective examination of the breadth and depth of the services provided from our centralized structure? Can we continue the mushrooming of central office services that began 15 years ago after the archdiocesan synod?

Have we kept pace with changes in our parishes and reflected those changes in our central structure designed to support those very same parishes? Have we focused on what's most important, most helpful, most needed? Or, have we continued to try and be all things to all people, as our world and our culture changed around us?

All good questions, I hope. Another good question is how can we better tap into the expertise of the consultative bodies that serve the church – the priests' council, college of consultors, pastoral council, finance council, school advisory board, resource and development council – perhaps even re-vamping them, to make sure that the wisdom of the wider church is a cherished part of archdiocesan decision-making. And how can the leadership of the archdiocese – me, Bishop Sklba, the vicars, the office directors – run our operations in a smoother, more accountable, efficient manner?

One consultative body that is knee-deep in alligators is our finance council. With a budget deficit and other looming financial challenges, clearly, one part of our planning has to be financial planning. The timing is good for financial planning because we have a new chief finance officer, John Marek. John began this spring, replacing Wayne Schneider who retired after faithfully and effectively serving the archdiocese for 29 years. The finance council has charged John with developing a short-term and long-term strategic business plan to curb the deficit, as well as improve efficiencies in our operations, financial management and resource development.

A national consulting firm, OFK Consultants, specializing in diocesan finances has also done a study of archdiocesan financial operations, structures and governance and offered its expertise on options available to the archdiocese to relieve the mounting financial pressures. This study was underwritten and was provided to the archdiocese at no expense.

But implementing some of these initiatives takes planning. To assist John in his charge, I have asked a respected lay member of the archdiocese, Steve Graff, to lead a small group of volunteer consultants to assist our finance operation in making sure we craft sound financial management strategies. Steve is a member of St. Mary Visitation Parish in Elm Grove, and was the managing partner of Arthur Andersen before retiring a few years back. Besides his professional credentials, Steve has served the archdiocese in various volunteer capacities, including as a current member of the archdiocesan resource development council.

All of this work is especially important as we move toward a capital campaign. We want people to know that our own financial house is in order and well managed, and that there is no doubt in people's mind that the monies donated will be designated specifically to help advance Catholic education and faith formation.

Well, have I made my point? All this planning is crucial! So crucial that it also needs to be full-time.

Thus, I have appointed a much respected pastor, Fr. James Connell, as archdiocesan vicar for planning. Although he will remain pastor of Holy Name Parish and St. Clement Parish in Sheboygan, I have asked Fr. John Radetski, pastor of St. Dominic, Sheboygan, and Fr. Roy Mateljan to care for the daily needs of the parishioners there, so Fr. Connell can give at least a year to the full-time demands of pastoral planning. We know from experience the aggressive planning I have described will take more than one year, but I believe Fr. Connell's full-time attention, along with the consultation and support of our priest council and pastoral council, will allow us to make great progress and set the course for future implementation.

Fr. Connell is a canonist, a seasoned pastor, and, prior to his ordination, was a successful businessman, management consultant and CPA. He is articulate, perceptive, witty, admired by priests and people – he's a natural for this critical and crucial duty. He is also known by the archdiocesan staff and is familiar with central office operations from his time as full-time vice chancellor, and, yet, as a pastor, he has been on the front lines of parish ministry, enough to bring critical, creative thinking to the challenges we face.

Fr. Connell was also just elected chair of our archdiocesan priest council on a "single-issue" emphasis – you guessed it: pastoral planning! With their election of Fr. Connell, our priest council sent a clear, resounding message – we must boldly renew our commitment to pastoral planning, to new models of administration and to new approaches to serving the people of God in southeastern Wisconsin.

We need to dream of what could be and "cast out to the deep," while still facing up to our responsibility as good stewards of the gifts God has given us to address the immediate issues that provide challenges. I've asked Fr. Connell to "drive me crazy" with ideas, questions, dreams, reports, and, ultimately, concrete recommendations for our future. I'm afraid he has taken that request seriously!

Thank you, Fr. Connell!