

Catholic Churches of Central City

Interim Report

October 6, 2011

Since March of 2011, the pastors of several parishes located in and around the center of Baltimore have been meeting regularly to discuss potential collaboration among the parishes. Since June of this year, five of these meetings have included lay representatives of the parishes' congregations. The parishes involved include St. Vincent de Paul, St. Ignatius, St. Alphonsus, The Basilica, and Corpus Christi. In addition, the Shrine of St. Jude participated initially; but they have chosen not to continue within this group.

Over the course of these discussions, pertinent information about each parish has been shared. This included information about each parish's founding and historical development; characteristics of its ministry and liturgies; demographics of its past and current congregation; financial information, including unique funding sources and annual budgets; staffing and personnel arrangements, and number, nature and condition of facilities.

Each of these five parishes has a unique identity and character that sets each apart from the other four as well as from parishes outside the downtown area. The parishes all identified themselves as intentional parishes, whose congregations are drawn as much from those residing outside of their immediate geographic areas as from within. While the parishes have recognized a commonality, because of the unique and strong identity of each, they do not believe that combining any of the parishes would prove workable.

Each of the parishes appears financially solvent and stable, with no precipitous drop off in Mass attendance, and sound infrastructure and physical plants, notwithstanding the age and historic nature of many of the buildings involved.

During these meetings, participants discussed the archdiocese's stated concerns about diminishing Mass attendance, about the vitality of parishes and their liturgies, and about the aging and declining numbers of priests in the archdiocese. The consensus among the parishes is that there exist currently opportunities for collaboration in several areas and that future coordination among the parishes will allow them to mitigate the challenges stated.

First priority must be given to the developing clergy shortage. At present there are six full-time priests assigned to the five parishes: one archdiocesan priest each to Basilica, St. Alphonsus, Corpus Christi and St. Vincent de Paul, and two Jesuit priests to St. Ignatius. The Jesuit provincial, queried by St. Ignatius' pastor, assures us that the Jesuits intend to keep two of their priests there for the foreseeable future. The number of available archdiocesan priests, however, is likely to diminish over time. All of the four current pastors are over 60 years old, and in view of the current projections of archdiocesan clergy availability over the next fifteen years it is unlikely that they can be replaced on a one for one basis as they die or retire or are asked to move on to other

assignments.. Prudence suggests, therefore, that a plan be developed to maintain these parishes and their ministries with a reduced number of clergy.

This in turn will necessitate a revision of weekend Mass schedules, as it will be impossible to maintain the current schedules with a reduced number of priests.

To deal with these realities in a way that will be both mindful of the needs of the Church and understood and accepted by the people, it is essential that plans be developed at the local level, with full participation of the clergy and laity of the parishes involved. Critical even in the early stages of this collaboration has been the involvement of the laity. While still nascent, this involvement is expected to grow in the immediate future, with information about the parishes' intended cooperation to be shared with parish/pastoral councils and the congregations. The ready dissemination of information about the group and explanation of the rationale for the steps it intends to take should facilitate cooperation among the congregations. This model will also make future accommodation among these parishes more likely and more readily implemented.

The Coordinating Committee of the Catholic Churches of Central City therefore met on October 6th with our Vicar Bishop, Most Rev. Denis Madden, and proposed to him the following:

1. That the five parishes of the Catholic Churches of Central City be recognized as a planning cluster, even though some of them are in different Regions,
2. That these parishes develop a plan that will preserve their identities and unique ministries while recognizing and adapting to the diminishing number of clergy,
3. That the plan should provide for the clergy staffing of these parishes when four, three and a half, three, two and a half, and two archdiocesan priests are available for the cluster (where a "half" represents a retired or semi-retired priest, or a priest with substantial other duties),
4. That the plan should provide for adjustment of weekend Mass schedules for all five parishes in light of the declining number of priests,
5. That the plan should be formulated in full communication with, and with the participation of, the clergy, staff and laity of all five parishes,
6. That the plan should be completed, approved by the parishes, and submitted to the Vicar Bishop by Easter, 2012, and
7. That the Coordinating Committee should then turn its attention to the numerous opportunities for ministerial improvements and resource conservation that can be attained by sharing of staff, volunteers and programs among the five parishes.

The Bishop responded that such a plan would be very much in keeping with his hopes, and those of our Apostolic Administrator, Archbishop O'Brien, for realistic planning at the grass roots level, and he encouraged the Committee to proceed. The Committee therefore agreed to disseminate this plan-for-a-plan to the councils, staffs and parishioners of the five parishes, and to meet again on Thursday, November 3, at St. Ignatius.