



Discussion Draft

Energizing Our Vibrancy By Father Jim Connell

A review of church history reveals that from the start Catholics in the United States cultivated a vibrant practice of the Christian faith that eagerly has been passed on from generation to generation. As the first Catholics arrived from various European settings centuries ago, clearly visible Catholic communities arose that became well rooted in their religious traditions. Then, as the years went on and more Catholics appeared, our ancestors overcame many struggles to preserve the faith within the context of an ever-changing American culture. Now, we Catholics of today embrace that same faith-filled spirit as the twenty-first century accelerates us into an uncharted future.

Yet, we Catholics of today also recognize that our faith-related vibrancy is not as energized as it was decades ago. We have lost the spark and now we search for new and fresher communal energy. We especially want to prepare the way for the young people of today and for the children who are not yet born.

Manifestations of diluted vibrancy are obvious, and ones that require immediate and prayerful attention. Over the past many years the Catholics within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and throughout the country as well, have experienced significant changes. We have seen a decline in the Sunday Mass attendance; a challenge to attract and engage people, especially the youth; a deterioration of many of our buildings; fewer students in our parish schools; a reduction of persons who are willing to volunteer and participate in church activities; the presence of fewer priests and nuns; and more limited financial resources. As a result, much of the vibrancy of the Catholic community that was present in the past has been diluted.

While the shortage of priests stands as only one of the factors concerning the vibrancy of the Church, it is the factor that the news media frequently mention because the presence of priests is so essential. And the news in this regard keeps getting worse. After a review of the “ins and outs,” current projections are that by the end of 2012 (only five years in the future) the Archdiocese of Milwaukee will have 25-30% fewer diocesan priests available for parish ministry than we have in 2007. Moreover, in ten years those ranks could easily be one-half what they are now. At the same time, of course, there will be plenty of people in the pews needing spiritual leadership. But how do we provide it?

I suggest that our efforts within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee to energize the vibrancy of our faith community be structured within an open and comprehensive dialogue (archdiocesan wide) that engages as many people as possible. Although some persons feel that planning is best done on a smaller basis, perhaps cluster-by-cluster, I believe that a piecemeal effort will not produce the desired end. Rather, **the policy**

questions that concern the entire archdiocese must be answered first, followed by the construction of a plan that focuses on the spiritual good of all the Catholics in the archdiocese. Then, while developing the plan calls for a comprehensive archdiocesan-wide approach, implementing the plan might be achieved best by means of a more gradual and phased approach that allows for flexibility and alterations to the plan as the theoretical encounters the pragmatic. In addition, the creation of the plan might be accomplished in less than one year but its implementation could consume an additional two or more years.

Of course, archdiocesan planning is not something new. In fact, in the past years there have been many fruitful and informative planning initiatives that have contributed to an archdiocesan restructuring concerning both parishes and the central offices. So, wanting to capitalize on these undertakings and based on information that I have been able to ascertain from those planning results, I now present my thoughts along with some related questions that I hope will provide a catalytic starting point for further decision making. I address what I consider to be the four central points: parishes, schools (K-8), organization of personnel, and finances.

Parishes

For Catholics, the Eucharistic celebration stands at the center of their practice of the faith. Indeed, the celebration of the Mass is a necessity for Catholics, not a luxury.

Most Catholics experience these moments of faith and worship within the context of a parish, a specific community of the faithful that has been established within a diocese and whose pastoral care has been entrusted by the diocesan bishop to a pastor. (In this paper the term “pastor” also includes parish administrators and parish directors who work with sacramental priests.) The people are the parish. So, while the members of a parish might use buildings, those structures do not constitute the parish. Rather, they have value only in so far as they contribute to the spiritual wellbeing of the parishioners.

Parishes and churches have names and frequently the same name is used for both the parish (the people) and the church building. However, this naming practice can have exceptions. Indeed, in 1999 the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued a Notification concerning the title of a church (*Omnis ecclesia titulum*). This document teaches that if several parishes are joined together so that a new parish is established, for pastoral reasons the new parish may have a name that is different from the name of the parish church(es). Thus, we should distinguish the parish (people) from the church and the other buildings that the people choose to use.

Organizing the people into parishes should be deliberate and with forethought so as to **recognize clearly the “identifiable communities” where the faith can flourish because the practice of the faith celebrates the actual daily life experience of the people.** In the late 19th and early 20th centuries “identifiable communities” frequently were based on ethnic, language or geographic considerations. Today, other factors provide the key, such as common places of employment, stores, restaurants and places of

entertainment. Actually, as I reflect on this I cannot help but wonder if the location of public high schools might indicate how people have organized themselves in society, thus indicating how **we should organize parishes so the faith life would both reflect and celebrate the common ground of the people's daily lives.**

This “identifiable communities” approach would lead us to fewer yet larger parishes. The new parishes, at least to start, could have more than one church building, school and rectory. But they would have one parish structure (one pastor or team of priests, one parish council, one committee structure, one set of trustees, etc.). Then the new parish with one leadership group would determine the parish life: building utilization, Mass schedule, faith formation matters, etc. As mentioned above, this new grouping of people could have a name different from the names used by the former, now merged, parishes and churches.

In short, I believe that more goodness can be accomplished when more people gather together than can be accomplished when the people remain in smaller groupings, no matter how strong their faith might be. Consequently, joining two or more parishes into one new parish most likely can provide the resources that would be necessary to serve the needs of the people of all ages than would those parishes have been able to provide on their own. I suppose that a parish could become too large for it to be effective and vibrant, but I doubt it. In any event, as of right now I would choose for larger rather than the smaller faith communities.

However, questions arise regarding identifying and locating “identifiable communities” whose Catholics should be formed into a single parish.

1. Does the projection of the number of diocesan priests for the years ahead impact the number of parishes that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee can operate effectively (significantly fewer priests = fewer parishes)? Consider:
 - quantity of priests in active ministry
 - quantity of senior priests available to serve as an assisting priest working with a parish director
 - quantity of qualified persons available to be parish directors
 - workload considerations (e.g., age, health, other extraparochial responsibilities)
 - quality of worship vs. quantity of Masses in a parish.
2. If the number of available active and senior priests is a key factor, what would be the actual limitations on the number of parishes we can operate in 5, 10, 15 and 20 years?
3. What data exists regarding population projections and demographic changes for the 10 counties of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee? How would this data impact the quantity and location of parishes?

4. Even if priesthood vocations increase significantly, would we want to return to having many parishes or would fewer but bigger communities, perhaps with multiple priests per parish, be better for parish life in the 21st century?
5. Are there any evangelization considerations that should influence parish locations? If so, what are they?
6. Are there any socio-economic factors that should / should not influence the location of parishes? Examples might be:
 - wealth / lack of wealth
 - rivalries (schools, neighborhoods, etc.)
 - long histories and traditions
 - high visibility and well known community
 - racial, ethnic, or language factors.
7. Does the location of public high schools (including plans for building new ones or closing others) indicate the possible existence of “identifiable communities” whose Catholics should be formed into a single parish?
8. In deciding the location of parishes for the future, do the current clusters of parishes provide any indication of appropriate locations?
9. In deciding the location of future parishes, should the existing 16 districts be a factor or should these boundaries be ignored for planning purposes?
10. Are there any existing parishes that should be excluded from merger considerations because of their size and already healthy vibrancy?
11. To what extent and specifically how should the John Paul II Institute, and / or other archdiocesan initiatives, contribute to or influence parish planning?
12. How should planning for future parishes link with planning for schools, organization of personnel, and finances?

Schools (k-8)

The primary responsibility for the education of children rests with their parents and Catholic parents are to see that their children are well trained in the faith. Moreover, the Catholic Church sees the entire Catholic community as having a most serious duty to assist the parents in this regard because to do so serves the overall mission of the Church. In fact, wisely the community holds as a goal that all children have access to a Catholic school education. Thus, the Catholic community values highly its investment in the Catholic schools.

At the same time, however, in recent years many Catholic schools have fallen on rather difficult times, to the point that many of them have been closed, with financial

limitations being the primary cause. For most schools, the rising costs of operations (85% or more of the total being personnel costs) constantly challenge the school's ability to raise sufficient revenue, be it from tuition, parish subsidy or fund raising events. But the problems are more than just financial. Our schools also suffer because seemingly fewer parents reinforce at home the faith experience of the children in school. A growing number of parents do not attend Sunday Mass each week, and many parents do not participate in school or parish activities. Moreover, as priests become fewer and older, the role of the pastor in the management of the school is becoming more problematic.

All things considered, and if I may use the analogy of gardening, we need to resolve how best we can "repot" Catholic schools so that our youth can become grace-filled "blossoms" for the good of the Church and the society at large.

Consequently, driven by a desire that we not compromise in any way the value of Catholic education, my personal recommendation would be substantial in scope. I suggest that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (not individual parishes or collections of parishes) operate a system of k-8 schools to assist parents in their responsibility while also serving the Church's mission. Under this approach, the Archdiocese would operate the schools (set policies, collect revenues and pay the bills). Thus, **schools would be a vehicle to be used when and where schools are needed, not necessarily for those who can afford them. Thus, all the parishes would sponsor all the schools.** The pastor's responsibility would spiritual (sacramental, teaching, etc.).

While some school families and other parishioners might be very upset with this refocusing of our Catholic schools, I believe that the Catholic community as a whole would be better served.

However, before significant school planning can take place various questions must be addressed.

1. What is the mission or purpose of Catholic schools now and into the foreseeable future? How would each of the following groups respond to this question:
 - clergy, religious and parishioners
 - parish councils
 - parishioner families that use the schools
 - non-parishioner families that use the schools
 - parishioner families that use public schools
 - the "average" older parishioner
 - the "average" younger parishioner
 - non-Catholic citizens of the community
 - members of public school boards
 - members of local government
 - members of state / federal government?

2. What contributions do Catholic schools make beyond classroom learning:
 - for the students

- for the Church
 - for the civic community at large?
3. What limitations / challenges do Catholic schools present?
 4. Does the Catholic community have the responsibility to educate poor, minority, and immigrant children whose families cannot afford the tuition? If so, by what means and to what extent?
 5. How should Catholic schools help the Catholic Church fulfill its evangelization responsibility, if at all?
 6. How far would parents be willing to travel (miles and minutes) in order to transport their children (using the family automobile or by bus) for access to a Catholic school?
 7. Would regional Catholic schools be a viable approach for all grades (k-8)? For some grades?
 8. Although regional k-8 schools might mean fewer schools than we now have, would they be better Catholic schools because the families taking the effort to use the regional schools would be those families that are more dedicated to Catholic schools and more willing to volunteer to enhance the school life?
 9. Would regional k-8 schools be better Catholic schools than we now have because the families using the regional schools would be more willing to cooperate with requirements for further faith formation of the children beyond the classroom hours?
 10. How should school buildings be used, just for k-8 programs or also for life-long faith formation programs in which many parishes might participate?
 11. What should be the responsibility of the pastor vis-à-vis school administration and programs?
 12. How should Catholic schools and other faith formation programs be funded?
 13. What should be the priority of Catholic schools vis-à-vis other parish and archdiocesan priorities?

Organization of Personnel

The question here is: what needs to be done and who should be responsible for doing it?

“This is how we do it” and “We’ve always done it this way” do not appropriately approach the question because so much has changed, both concerning what is needed as well as who should be responsible.

Furthermore, as the planning process unfolds new and helpful insights easily could surface that might better **define our true priorities at the archdiocesan and parish levels. In fact, a deliberate reassessment of what is necessary and helpful for now and for the future** regarding sacramental life, faith formation, schools and overall administration most likely would generate new visions about how we should serve the mission that Christ gave to the Church.

Actually, until substantive decisions are made about parishes and schools (the two major gatherings about what needs to be done), few, if any, conclusions will surface about the organization of personnel (the focus on who should be responsible).

Yet, one very important topic that can and should be addressed now concerns existing directives of church law regarding the organization of personnel and assigned responsibilities.

Canon 1276 of the Code of Canon Law establishes that the ordinary (Archbishop Dolan, in our case) is to exercise careful vigilance over the administration of all the goods that belong to the public juridic persons subject to him (parishes and diocesan schools would be examples). In addition, this same canon says that the ordinary is to take care of the ordering of the entire matter of administration of the ecclesiastical goods. Hence, the archbishop is the person who determines the ways to administer the ecclesiastical goods. Moreover, while canon 532 sets forth that in all juridic affairs the pastor represents the parish, this canon immediately qualifies this reality by saying that the pastor's administration must be conducted according to the norm of law. The pastor is not an ordinary but is to administer the goods of the parish according to law, including the directions of his ordinary. Hence, the pastor would exercise his responsibility to represent the parish in all the juridic affairs of the parish by means of the norms established by the diocesan bishop. Consequently and for example, if Archbishop Dolan were to establish that certain organizational structures and administrative procedures would become the responsibility of the archdiocese and no longer be that of the pastor, parish or school, such a proclamation would become particular law for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

In short, therefore, Archbishop Dolan decides the organization and administrative matters, and I trust that he would do so in response to and in light of the pastoral plan that develops.

Finances

Until there is a solid vision about the parishes, schools and organizational needs, finances cannot be addressed with any clarity. Yet, it does seem certain that the parish and school assessment formulae will require reworking.

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No one possesses a perfect vision about how to handle the future of the Church in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. As a result, while our plans must be clear, concise, practical, firm and engaging, they also must be flexible and adaptable so as to serve the actual needs of today, as well as the new needs of the years to come.

At the same time, we must appreciate that to decide not to plan or prepare for the future is unfair to those who will have to handle our future when it becomes their present reality.

Most importantly, we must not fear nor avoid investing the time, talent and treasure that are needed to provide the church structures necessary for the future.

Finally, if we do not use the planning vision and approach presented above, what should we do?

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