

**Meeting of the 7 Parishes' Pastoral Councils & Finance Councils  
to Give Input on the Draft Recommendation  
October 15, 2024  
Notes**

**Welcome and Introduction of Task Force Members**

**Opening Prayer:** led by Jeri Rombaut

- Those present prayed together the Prayer for the Synod on Synodality which is being prayed this month as this year's Synod meets in Rome. Every session of the Second Vatican Council began with this prayer.

**Introductory Remarks:** Karen Rinefierd, facilitator

- Unlike other earlier planning efforts directed by the Diocese, this one was initiated by our six local pastoral leaders.
- We know that our beloved Church faces many challenges. We also know that ours is the Church of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who promises to be with us until the end of time. Therefore, in faith and hope, we are focused on the mission of his Church: the goal of our planning is that the Church's mission of Word, Worship, Community and Service continues in our area in a vibrant way despite changes in the demographics of our parishioners and the financial resources and priests available to our parish communities.
- The task force has already gone through many drafts of the document that was shared with members of the pastoral councils and finance councils of the seven parishes earlier this month. The most significant changes thus far came from input received from parish staffs last February
- Tonight is not an opportunity for dialogue among those present. Rather the purpose is twofold:
  - 1) First, it's an opportunity for learning: to give those who have not directly experienced clustering or belonged to parishes sharing the same leader an opportunity to better understand this model which is being employed by bishops as they do not have a sufficient number of priests to replace those who are aging. Likewise, the task force wants to provide an opportunity for those who have never belonged to a parish led by a pastoral administrator to learn about this model also being employed by bishops.
  - 2) Second, the task force needs feedback from council members about this latest draft of the recommendation.

**Panel presentation on clustering and the pastoral administrator model**

Fr. John Firpo, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo

- Fr. Firpo, when he came to Greece as pastor of St. Charles, served with the E. Greece/Charlotte pastoral planning committee. He brought 4 binders of the work done by that group. In 2013 Fr. Firpo became Pastor of Holy Name of Jesus in addition to St. Charles. He was asked to start the process of considering the viability of Holy Name of Jesus parish, which was one mile away from St. Charles. He had experience with Our Lady of Mercy parish in Greece which had previously closed, with its territory dispersed among three parishes. It became clear that Holy Name of Jesus was no longer able to be a viable parish at its own site. Through much communication, much listening to the parishioners, it

became evident that a recommendation to the bishop to close Holy Name was warranted, and the bishop relegated it in 2014. The parish was blended into St. Charles. Fr. Firpo noted that this change affected both communities.

- Pastoral leadership worked with both communities to integrate, starting with common liturgies. In early days, Holy Name parishioners sat all together in one area of St. Charles, but that gradually changed.
- Fr. Firpo invited the council members and liturgical ministers of Holy Name to serve at St. Charles.
- Since closing any parish is like closing a home, the statue of St. Mary from Our Lady of Mercy and the crucifix from Holy Name were incorporated into St. Charles. This reminded parishioners of former sites that this is now their faith-home.
- He sees wisdom, communication, and listening as key pieces of the process of bringing communities together. Now we are not looking at closing or seeking to close any parish sites among our seven parishes, but the same practices can make any future changes healthy for parishioners. Fr. Firpo found becoming pastor of Holy Name of Jesus gave him the opportunity to meet the needs of parishioners who were losing a church to be welcomed into another parish community. He admits that it was at times a heated process, but a needed one, given the demographic changes in the community. The one comment he always heard from Holy Name parishioners who joined at St. Charles was how nice it was to have a Mass with a full church, with lively music, with active participation of the congregation, and a place to be with their neighbors. In conclusion, the work of the receiving parish and the work of the parish to be received are equally important.

#### Fr. Bill Coffas, pastor of Holy Cross and Our Mother of Sorrows

- Fr. Coffas opened and concluded his portion with a prayer from St. Teresa of Avila: Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing frighten you, All things are passing away: God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.
- He recounted how five years ago he was asked to pastor Holy Cross, concurrent with his appointment as pastor of Our Mother of Sorrows. It was a huge undertaking. Through much prayer, effort, collaborating, sharing, and communicating, God has (and is continuing to bring together) two communities.
- A “cluster” is a grouping of two or more parishes under one pastoral leader. Some do not like this wording. After a while, he shifted to calling the parishes “The Community of Our Mother of Sorrows and Holy Cross.”
- Some staff and parishioners struggled with the pastoral realities facing our local church. Some chose to step away if they could not understand why the parishes had to share resources, including a pastor, with another church. Yet, shared services and shared leadership are the reality in today’s American church. We need communication to proceed well; communication is essential to the viability of our parishes.
- “Making the trains run on time” is a significant effort, coordinating various parts.
- Some highlights in his community:
  - one daily Mass, not one at each church, in addition to funeral Masses;
  - shared staff with two offices and a single pastoral council;
  - shared office-hours (one full day per week per site);
  - effective ministry, including funerals where volunteers from both sites help at either site.
- He sought to build a bridge to Christ, noting that a bridge goes two-ways.

- There have been some missteps. Fr. Coffas wanted to have one joint St. Joseph's Table, but, with a year's experience and feedback from parishioners, realized that it worked better for this community to have two separate St. Joseph's Tables, one per site. It is more work to do two events like this, but it creates pride in one's parish.
- As much as possible he seeks to keep the unique identity of each parish.
- Initially, they had two separate Triduum services during Holy Week. Now one parish has Holy Thursday and the other the Easter Vigil to avoid burning out the priests and staff. There is one Mass on Thanksgiving which rotates between the two parishes.
- He shared the words of a former pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church in Rochester, who was pastor from 1932-1942. When he was being reassigned, he shared with the congregation, "My whole mission has been to lead people to Jesus Christ and to His Church. If I have led people not to primarily follow Jesus, but to follow *me*, then I have failed as a pastor." This priest brought Christ closer to his people, and his people to Christ. This is what we are called to do as leaders, volunteers within our local church – to bring Christ to this particular pastoral challenge. This is the opportunity we have in our seven parishes, the time for us to live and share our faith.

#### Deacon Frank Pettrone, pastoral administrator of St. Mark's

- When he was ordained to the diaconate in 2006 and while he still worked at Kodak, he was assigned to serve at St. Mark's. He became a pastoral associate for St. Mark's parish in 2014 with Fr. Lou Sirianni as the pastor. It was very well received when, in 2019, he was named pastoral administrator with Fr. Sirianni as parochial vicar. Leadership and administrative skills used at Kodak were valuable for leading the parish. He was reappointed after four years in 2023 and will stay in this role as long as the bishop needs him.
- In a sense, a pastoral administrator has most of the same duties as a pastor, i.e. pastoral care, sacramental care and oversight, administrative oversight. He or she works with the councils and supervises staff. Essentially, he functions as a type of "non-priest pastor," a dynamic that is outlined in canon law for deacons and laypersons appointed by their bishop when there are insufficient numbers of priests.
- Deacons in this role proclaim the Gospel, preach, and assist as an ordinary minister of Holy Communion. They also celebrate baptisms, witness marriages, and preside at funerals.
- Deacon Frank wants to support his priests and not interfere in their ministry. He views pastoral care in the parish as a team effort.

#### **Questions from pastoral council and finance council members**

##### Do the panelists think it is possible to provide sufficient pastoral care in clustered parishes vs. one pastor, one site?

- There is no need to assume that pastoral care and parish life would suffer or diminish just because of shared services or the change to one pastoral leader overseeing multiple sites; we are already seeing positive signs from certain shared services. It is important for the pastoral leader to make connections and form relationships at both parishes.

##### How many new priests will there be in the next few years?

- The diocese currently has 8 men in the seminary which is more than we have had in the past several years.

How many priests will be retiring soon within our 7 parishes?

- We do not know. Priests can move to senior status at the age of 75. The diocese currently has two priests over the age of 80 in full-time ministry--one is the pastor of two sites and the other of five sites. Those priests who have reached senior status are often very active in parish life, such as Fr. Pius Pathmarajah at St. Charles and Fr. Bob Schrader at Our Mother of Sorrows and Holy Cross.

Many parishes in the Diocese of Buffalo are clustering. Are we contacting Buffalo to see what worked and what did not?

- Our diocese actually has a lot of experience with clustering which has been happening for the past 25 years. First it was mostly parishes in rural areas and inner-city Rochester, then smaller cities like Elmira, Geneva, Corning, and Auburn. Three priests in our parishes have experience with clustering.

When a parish is run by a pastoral administrator instead of a priest, how do sacraments happen?

- A priest is assigned to the parish. He presides at Masses and hears confessions. When anointing is needed, he does that as well. The pastoral administrator also visits the sick. We would contact the priest from another parish to anoint if needed.

What would you do differently with the clustering of Holy Cross and Our Mother of Sorrows?

- I already mentioned the St. Joseph tables. I would take things more slowly. Moving to a single pastoral council was not received well by some parishioners, but that change was advantageous—the pastor could hear from both parishes' leaders at the same meeting and, more important, they could hear from each other.

What are things our 7 parishes can do together?

- When the Task Force considered possible collaborative ministries, it chose to form three sub-committees: one to focus on Evangelization, a second to promote Vocations, and a third to develop a shared website. The Evangelization Team has prepared fliers of the activities our 7 parishes sponsored during Advent and Lent, and they are now working on one for this Advent. There is a Digital Library of apps, podcasts, and other electronic resources—these might especially appeal to busy younger parishioners and will be supplemented on a regular basis in the future. The Vocations Committee recently sponsored a holy hour to pray for vocations followed by an informational session about the permanent diaconate. The website lists programs and ministries from all 7 parishes that are open to people from the other parishes. If someone is looking for a particular ministry that is not currently offered at their own parish, such as a bereavement group, they can learn of other opportunities in our area. The task force is a group that is already working together to bring more people to Christ and to collaborate in effective ministry.

When parishes are clustered, how do you as pastors help parishioners who are grieving what they lost or uncertain about the future?

- It is important to have great sensitivity and listen compassionately.
- The situation was different for former parishioners of Holy Name of Jesus since a while after the two parishes clustered, Holy Name closed and was sold. When that happened, the crucifix from Holy Name was hung at St. Charles. There were community building activities.

Like with any change time, patience, and prayer were valuable. Former Holy Name parishioners are now very active in various ministries at St. Charles, and many are helping to plan the upcoming St. Charles' Centennial Celebration.

Comment: The draft recommendation document was wonderful. Thank you to the Task Force. I'm happy with all the ways our parishes are sharing resources.

#### How should we respond to fellow parishioners who have questions about clustering?

- Tonight was a first attempt to give key people in leadership positions information about both clustering and the pastoral administrator model.
- Take down the questions you hear, share them with your pastoral leader, and encourage parishioners to address questions directly to your pastor/pastoral administrator. Parishioners are also welcome to contact Karen Rinefierd by email or phone.
- If you have friends or relatives who have undergone a clustering process in another location, ask them what worked well and what didn't work well. Learn from their experiences and share with those at your own parish.

#### Would closing churches make better sense than clustering?

- The Task Force was not asked by the pastoral leaders to look at finances or possible closures of churches. Indeed, it is only the bishop of a diocese who can close churches after a consultation process with the parish involved.
- And sometimes when what seems to make sense is investigated further, it ends up not being the right path forward. When Karen worked for the diocese in pastoral planning, she was asked by the bishop and the finance office to work with 3 very small churches in the Southern Tier (in Addison, Bradford, and Campbell) to look at their reality and determine which church should close. With distances between churches, the small size of each congregation, and the likelihood that those from a closed church would not go to the remaining churches, a different path was chosen. Showing parishioners their financial reality, asking for increased giving, and cutting expenses where possible led to all 3 churches remaining open which they still are today.
- Our goal is not to have churches close but to strengthen our communities and their ministries through sharing and collaboration.

#### **Next steps**

- Karen asked those present to respond to the questions given ahead of time after the closing prayer. Council members could respond through hard copies handed out, but they were encouraged instead to submit their input via email to Dave Steklenski so it would be easier to compile.
- The task force meets again on Tuesday, October 29 to review the input received from council members and make any additional changes to the draft recommendation.
- Then the draft will go to parishioners. The task force will host parishioner meetings the afternoon and evening of Wednesday, November 20 for their feedback. Times and locations are still to be determined.
- We expect to send the final recommendation to the bishop sometime in January.

**Closing Prayer:** led by Barb Surash

- Those present again prayed the Prayer for the Synod on Synodality.