

**Parishioner Meeting to Give Input on the Draft Recommendation
Parishes of Holy Cross, Our Mother of Sorrows, St. Charles Borromeo, St. John the Evangelist,
St. Lawrence, St. Leo the Great, St. Mark's
November 20, 2024, Afternoon Session**

Notes

Welcome and Introduction of Task Force Members

Opening Prayer: led by Jeri Rombaut

Introductory Remarks: Fr. Lee Chase, Pastor of St. Lawrence

- Fr. Lee Chase gave an overview of the genesis of this Task Force. The pastoral leaders looked at what other places in the diocese were doing and wanted to prepare for the future. They formed a pastoral planning task force with representation from our 7 parishes—2 people from each parish plus clergy—21 in all. They asked Karen Rinefierd to facilitate, and in March 2022 the task force began to meet. This task force came from us, not the bishop.
- The question before the task force was “How can we best meet the needs of the Catholic community in the Greece Hilton Charlotte area in the future?” This is a very broad and big task. When we gathered initially, we decided early on that we would pray and pray earnestly as a group; we would listen to one another, and our conversation would guide us. To look to the future, we first said we needed to look at statistics, which can be depressing at times – fewer priests, aging clergy, fewer seminarians than we once had, fewer parishioners. Buildings and infrastructure are getting older and financial resources getting smaller. How do we best meet the needs going forward?
- He described the creation of an evangelization committee to help bring others to Christ. Among their work has been creating Advent and Lent flyers that include activities/events from all 7 parishes—a new one is coming out this weekend.
- A second committee was created to encourage vocations to the priesthood, permanent diaconate, consecrated life, and lay ecclesial ministry. A few weeks ago, they held a Holy Hour at St. Mark's to pray for vocations. It was nicely attended and followed by a meeting for those who might have an interest in the permanent diaconate.
- Finally, the task force met to discuss what future pastoral leadership we might recommend to the bishop, being clear that we recommend, but the bishop decides. A smaller group of 4 task force members created a suggestion of what clusters of parishes we would propose if the bishop is unable to fill every pastoral leadership position in the future.
- With a draft recommendation, we then met last February at St. John's with the seven parish staffs to receive their response and comments. They gave us fruitful input.
- The task force took that input, reviewed the suggestions, and revised the draft.
- In July, the task force met with the Bishop at St. Lawrence Church, and he shared with us his vision regarding pastoral planning and vocational planning. He said you are on the right path (taking the time, reviewing, praying), and he looks forward to the proposal.
- Last month, we met with all of the pastoral councils and finance councils to share with them the recommendation for their input and questions.
- We kept broadening the circle of individuals, and that brings us to today, to reach out to you, the parishioners.

- Let me make clear. We are NOT about recommending the closing of churches. We have 7 very active and vibrant parishes, so what we need to do is plan for the future and changes we expect. Coming together and being together both in prayer and spirit, we look to the future.
- Once the plan is done being reviewed by all groups with any additional changes, we hope to give to the bishop our recommendation. There is an important caveat at the end. The bishop may need to consider or employ other options which are not included in this plan. We have a proposal. The bishop may have his own ideas.
- The task force has been very hopeful and the collaborative work of our 7 parishes has already borne good fruit.

The Purpose of these Parishioner Meetings--twofold: Karen Rinefierd

- 1) Today is an opportunity for learning: to give all of you 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 the majority of you who have never belonged to a parish led by a pastoral administrator to learn about this model also being employed by bishops.
- 2) The task force needs your feedback about this latest draft of the recommendation. After an opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the draft you received, we will ask you to give the task force your response to two questions.

Panel presentation on clustering and the pastoral administrator model

Fr. John Firpo, pastor of St. Charles Borromeo

- In 2013, Bishop Cunningham, then the Apostolic Administrator of the diocese after the retirement of Bishop Clark, asked Fr. Firpo to become Pastor of Holy Name of Jesus in addition to his pastorate of St. Charles. He was asked to start the process of considering the viability of Holy Name of Jesus parish, which was 1.3 miles away from St. Charles. He was to guide trustees, pastoral councils, and parishioners via open communications, honest discussion, daily prayers for guidance in making a wise decision, listening sessions, accuracy of facts, and an open mind to differing views. He gratefully received guidance from the Diocese and from St. Bernard's School of Ministry and Theology.
- Those involved in this process asked, "What parish configuration would best sustain and grow discipleship?"
- All of the above efforts led to a conclusion to recommend the closure of Holy Name. Fr. Firpo cited a decline in the following areas: Mass attendance, new parishioner enrollment/engagement, faith formation (there were only 19 children enrolled from a previous number of 200), sacramental preparation programs (4 children received 1st Eucharist and one Confirmation; there was one person in RCIA, now known as OCIA, in 2013). It was determined that only 66 households with an average age over 60 contributed 62% of the parish weekly collection. The parish of Holy Name had worked hard to eliminate any parish debt. However, it became clear that the parish could not continue as it had, given financial responsibilities (major maintenance needs and ongoing expenses).
- Fr. Firpo and those leading this process worked intentionally to receive the parishioners of Holy Name at St. Charles. Holy Name parishioners were not an appendage; they were welcomed brothers and sisters, received into the parish of St. Charles. Fr. Firpo asked the

Holy Name parishioners what would make them feel at home in the worship space of St. Charles. They responded, “the crucifix.” The parish of St. Charles now uses as its primary crucifix the Holy Name crucifix. St. Martin de Porres artwork—from Fr. Reddington, the founder of Holy Name—was installed in the St. Charles rectory. Previously, a similar pastoral planning process led to the closure of Our Lady of Mercy, and its parishioners became part of 3 parishes in our area. A statue of Mary was moved to the campus of St. Charles.

- Members of the Holy Name Finance Council and Pastoral Council were invited to join the respective councils from St. Charles. Members of the Holy Name choir joined the choir at St. Charles.
- A comment Fr. Firpo frequently heard from Holy Name parishioners who joined 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.
- This change was helped by accuracy of facts, transparency, listening, and being open to diverse views of how changes could best happen. Fr. Firpo did not set out to close Holy Name, but to work with the two parishes to accomplish the mission of Jesus, and to do so as one family.
- The work of the Task Force is very different from this—closures are not part of the draft recommendation or on the horizon – but our parishes can collaboratively work together and have great success if we remain hopeful and prayerful and listen.

Fr. Justin Miller read the words of Fr. Bill Coffas, pastor of Holy Cross and Our Mother of Sorrows, since Fr. Coffas could only be present at the evening session

- Five years ago, Fr. Coffas 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 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 and Comments from Parishioners with Responses Made

What evangelization specifically is the 7-parish Evangelization Committee doing? How might we collaborate among the 7 parishes to evangelize these communities to show that the Catholic Church is alive and growing and ready to welcome new people, and to collaborate in service to the community’s needs?

- Karen Rinefierd: The 7-parish Evangelization Committee has started to address evangelization—what can be accomplished across our parishes. The best evangelization is 1:1, you to family members and neighbors; living and witnessing the love of God to them, reminding them that Jesus is our savior. Hearing their concerns, being open to their own journey of faith, that is the best place. A second level is what parishes can do. People come to the parishes as Father Coffas remarked in his talk. Sacramental movements, when people come--for the first time or after being away for a while--for a funeral or baptism, these are places where we can demonstrate to others how faith can enrich their own life, and we can send them out as disciples of Christ to do things in his name. It is trickier at the seven-parish level. The members of the Evangelization Committee are some of the most

amazing people I've ever worked with. Their work has been in several areas, such as the Lent/Advent flyers and the Digital Library you can find on the Roc Catholics Northwest website. If life is crazy and you have young children, a busy life, how do you have time for prayer? There are all kind of resources in the digital library such as podcasts, YouTube videos, courses, a wealth of things. There are suggestions for ways to pray which you can even do in your car. We can encourage these things for people to do to enrich their faith. That is where we are currently. Several of the parishes have designated evangelization committees which are also doing wonderful things. The other thing the evangelization committee is focused on right now is having parishioners at the beginning of every committee/council meeting share where have they found God that day. Then hear what other people have to say. They are hoping to expand this to parishioners everywhere – they are early in this project. We are also hoping to look at concentrated ways that we can reach out to those who are no longer connected to us at church; people who have stepped away during Covid or those who have left for whatever reason.

- Fr. John Firpo: Evangelization is the responsibility of ALL of us, as God's people. How do we welcome people into our church? Do we introduce ourselves, do we offer a helping hand? Very simple things, such as directing them to the restrooms. When families come in with their children, we can't give annoyed looks implying "get your family to the crying room!" The way we welcome them into our church is the greatest form of evangelization and that word spreads. How are the homilies relating to the people who are in front of us? How do we take the Word of God and put it in a way to make sense to them, that they can relate to? Wonderful programs, but also what is in our hearts and giving people a sense of belonging.

We saw data showing the age distribution of priests in the diocese and the priests currently in our area. I saw no projections for the next 3-5 years. 58% of diocesan priests are over the age of 70 and, if you assume that this distribution is similar in our area, that means we will lose 4 or 5 priests in our area. Wondering what this would mean in 5 years? If you look at Mass attendance of the parishes, 35% declined since Covid. I ask the question what quality tools are being used for analytics for the root cause of this? One area of concern in the task force recommendation is evangelization, which isn't a real new topic. What have we done wrong? None of our adult children continue as members of the Catholic church. Have we looked at the root causes? We are still trying to heal from the clergy abuse crisis. Is it an embarrassment to present this question to the bishop?

- Karen: Projections of the future are difficult. At one time our diocese had 5 people doing pastoral planning and we now have zero. One diocesan director has responsibility for pastoral planning, but he also has responsibility for cultural, migrant, prolife and other ministries. So that's a big difference. We don't have local projections for priest numbers, so what we have is what we have. The one thing that is not on the Roc Catholics Northwest website is that we do have 8 seminarians right now, an uptick from the recent past. We have the bishop and members of the diocesan vocation awareness committee to thank for that.
- I do not find it helpful to ask, "what did we do wrong?" There are probably things we could have done better, but this is part of a larger trend—it's not just us, or locally or just the U.S. This trend is most apparent in the northern half of the world, and first happened in Europe. People are walking away from regular participation in church. The big pockets in growth are in the southern hemisphere--South America, Africa, and Asia. Talk with your children, listen to them, do the best you can, and pray for them.

- Fr. Justin Miller asked to speak as a member of his younger generation (he is 39). He stated that a change in the culture began to emerge in the 1980s and 2000s that, reinforced in schools and in media and on the internet, made public expression of faith and truth less normal. Prior to then, the culture was predominately Christian. Now, to be a Christian is to be different. There are forces in society that suggest that it's better not to be different, but to be like everyone else. A child raised in this environment--people who are 40 or younger--must be inspired to consider the practice of the faith in a way that will make them wonder how this "being different" can also be a good thing for their real lives. We cannot "tell" people about the faith; we must "show" people that they can find real help in their real lives by the practice of the Catholic faith, and we do that by our own authentic witness.

I would like to add that I have a great faith but know a lot of people with spiritual beliefs. Evangelization happens on Sunday morning or Saturday evening, because that is what Vatican II said. I was Protestant, and then Catholic. I have been evangelized through the Vatican II liturgy. No one came knocking at my door, but I have been evangelized through music and liturgy. My adult daughter is rebelling against the misogyny against women in the Catholic church, so what do you do when you have three educated, professional, spiritual women, but they are not religious people? My fear is that the church will become too small, too pure. Liturgies are stale. I came to a funeral with a most beautiful liturgy, came back here, and everything was great. We each have a spiritual journey that is between our God and us. Are we becoming too restrictive as a church and narrowing our numbers in an unhelpful way?

- Karen: Thank you for sharing.

After reading through the information and the challenge of the group to work on options if there will be fewer priests for our church: How probable do you think it is that there won't be a candidate to replace one of our priests in the future? Is this a high level, medium or low?

- Fr. Lee Chase: priests can request senior status or retirement at 75 years, but we currently have approximately 5 pastors in the diocese who are over the age of 80. So, it's hard to project. We do know that the bulk of active priests are over the age of 60. When a pastor requests senior status, dies, or is transferred, it will be increasingly difficult for the bishop to replace him--not impossible, but difficult. The bishop may want to employ other options beyond those in our recommendation. Sometimes a priest is available from another diocese or a religious order accepts an invitation from the bishop to send priests here. So we really don't know the probability. The task force was trying to say that if there is a triggering event and there is no replacement, what possibilities might there be and to consider those. We looked at a number of things, such as distance. Hilton to Charlotte is far, so it did not make sense to cluster Holy Cross and St. Leo's. St. Lawrence and St. John are very close. Last year we did a joint Lenten retreat. People came in from all over and they knew each other! Going to the same schools, kids on sports together, seeing each other at stores. There is already a lot of interchange going on. We are trying to anticipate where we can go with what we have.

It seems like Holy Cross in Charlotte stands out as unique in that it has a food pantry and two large high-rises in the area. If we are thinking about evangelization, a food pantry is a great possibility for evangelization, and the residents in those high-rises are possible future Catholics.

- Fr. Lee Chase: \$4,000 was raised recently at St. Lawrence for the Holy Cross food pantry.

- Fr. Justin Miller: Every parish has untapped resources. There are a lot of people who live in Greece, and God can do miracles.

I'm a member of Our Mother of Sorrows but also go to St Charles as it is one of the warmest parishes I have been at, and people go out of their way to make others feel welcome. I feel so good when someone next to me is genuinely glad that I am there. What a great way to come to church. If we need priests, as we obviously do, why not have Josh Allen come and sign autographs to meet and greet--and then use that to transition to another hero: Jesus.

- Karen: We have some of our own great people, including our youth ministers. Ignite is a monthly youth ministry endeavor which has sports, a meal, and an hour of prayer in church during Eucharistic Adoration with an opportunity for Confession. The program is growing, and families love it. Joywave is a band that originated in Rochester and is now nationally popular. One of their band members is a volunteer at Ignite.
- Fr. Firpo: I would like Taylor Swift to come to St. Charles to help with evangelization efforts! I often encourage young men to be a priest, doing so in front of their parents or grandparents. But a grandparent said, "He can't become a priest, because I want grandchildren." We are up against a culture that is not conducive to celibacy and priesthood, which makes it harder for young men to consider being a priest.
- Karen: Twice-a-year the diocesan vocations awareness committee sponsors a Fisher Dinner where young men interested in the priesthood come together for a Mass, a meal, and a few guest speakers. The next one is going to be on Monday, December 30 at Our Mother of Sorrows, with much of the set up, serving, and clean up provided by our 7-parish vocations committee.

We don't want to close the churches, so my question is did the task force discuss the Mass schedule at the seven parishes? Many have the same times—for example a Saturday Mass at 4:00 PM. If we aren't going to close churches but utilize our priests at more than one location, how can we manage the time better for our priests and parishioners? Maybe Mass schedules could be adjusted to add Masses at times not currently being offered.

- Karen: No, the task force did not discuss Mass schedules, but if you could list that as a suggestion on your comments at the end of the session, we will have it to discuss.

On the 8-page document, on the bottom of page 7 it states, "Administrative tasks, especially those requiring specific expertise (e.g. finance, facilities, human resources) can be shared with or delegated to staff." We need to ease the burden on ordained clergy and hope that the same clergy can become generous in their delegation and trust in lay leadership within their parish to take some of the burden off of them. As a member of the 7-parish evangelization committee, many times we have to wait for approvals from the 6 pastoral leaders for our initiatives. We wonder if everything needs to be approved by them. We ask them to consider and pray how much they can delegate and trust the decisions of lay leaders. Also, do I train those leaders on what I am delegating to them? What needs to come back to me for individual approval? So, I leave that to your consideration.

With the census that is going on throughout the diocese, is there going to be anything that the task force is looking at from the census data to help refine the recommendation for clustering? I wonder if the demographics of where people live went into the decision of the proposed clusters. Specifically, if people worship at one parish but are registered at another, is the physical location of the parishioners' residences a factor in the draft recommendation?

- Karen: At one point someone in diocesan IT could create these geo-coded maps but we don't have those now. Therefore, nearness of parishes rather than where parishioners live was the primary factor leading to the proposed future clusters. One of the pastoral or finance council members noted in their feedback that there is a local street where neighbors attend three different parishes.

I notice that the draft document states, "we are concerned about the health and wellbeing of our priests." My question is How can we, the parishioners, help? The toughest part of delegating is letting go—we are here, so how do we go about helping?

- Fr. Chase: Practically, here are two things that immediately come to mind that would relieve my stressors. First, when someone you love dies and you need to schedule the funeral, don't insist on one date but give us two or three possible dates. Sometimes we already have a funeral scheduled for the date you want. Second, with the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, please do not wait until your loved one is having their last gasping breath. Call us earlier...let us journey with them.

I see that in the draft document when we only have 5 pastoral leaders, the proposed clusters include possibilities A, B, and C – but I don't understand what this means.

- Karen: We don't know which parish's leadership position would be open first without the bishop being able to name a replacement. If it is the leadership of St. Leo's or St. Mark's, we suggest that those parishes share a leader. If it is St. Lawrence or St. John's, we propose those parishes share a leader. And if it is the Community of Holy Cross/Our Mother of Sorrows or St. Charles, we propose these three parishes share a leader.

Next Steps

- Karen asked those present or by livestream to respond to two questions. Parishioners could respond through hard copies, but they were encouraged instead to submit their input via the form on the Roc Catholics Northwest website so it would be easier to compile. Deadline is December 1.
- The task force meets again on Tuesday, January 7 to review the input received and make any additional changes to the draft recommendation.
- We expect to send the final recommendation to the bishop sometime in January.

Closing Prayer: led by Nick Verdino