

**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, Evening 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. Bill Coffas, pastor of Holy Cross and Our Mother of Sorrows

- 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

With our numbers of priests declining, why aren’t we getting priests from other areas and countries?

- We can’t rely on priests from other locations. Cultural differences can be hard. Our diocese brought in 10 men from Columbia and only 4 stayed. We have to focus here. Our diocese currently has 8 seminarians.
- Remember that Fr. Peter is here from Ghana.
- We in the U.S. got used to having a lot of priests last century. We actually have more priests than in the rest of the world. There are areas where people have Mass only every month or so.

When the final report is submitted to the bishop, is the work of the task force done?

- The task force will end, but there may be another committee formed to coordinate the collaborative work of the 7 parishes.

My thanks to the task force for doing this work. Will people in hospice be able to have priests visit them?

- We will work together to do our best so that those who are sick or dying receive the ministry they need from clergy and staffs. Please remember to contact us sooner rather than later for anointing of the sick, and be flexible with dates for funerals.

Are we still looking to educate our children and youth in faith?

- It is important that we prioritize children and teens.
- Several of our parishes share staff and programs for faith formation.
- As an example of how our parishes education children and teens, St. Charles has restarted Child Church. There is a children's choir called Charlie's Angels; teens serve as lectors; there is an active CYO program.
- Beyond youth ministry offered at individual parishes, Ignite at Holy Cross attracts teens from throughout our area. 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.
- We are blessed with two Catholic Schools—at Holy Cross and St. Lawrence. They offer an excellent education while also forming children in faith.
- We have to be aware of the culture we live in and the challenges it brings. Many families do not prioritize church and children are very involved in activities like sports.

When will we submit our plan to the bishop?

- We plan to do that in January after any final changes. Our recommendation and the response by the bishop will be shared with parishioners.

I enjoyed the presentation. Our diocese talks a lot about money—this inspires fear. Our children were not allowed to have pictures taken with the bishop after Confirmation or the Hands of Christ awards. We are being denied the blood of Christ in our diocese where other dioceses have resumed this practice since Covid. CMA goals are going up and up every year. Our parishes helped pay for the settlement to abuse survivors.

I concur with what she just said.

What was the criteria used for the proposed clusters of A, B, and C?

- Distance was the primary factor considered. The task force did not look at the finances of the parishes.

Comment from Fr. Peter:

- I come from Ghana where things are different. Here church attendance is way down. Every year I bury 60 people, and no one is coming to take their place. We no longer have many nuns and brothers to help us. We are focusing on where we are going as a church in the future. We have to build our parishes, and we need parishioners to support them.

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 Gina Reeder