

Bulletin Article Series on “Families of Parishes”

So, what on earth is this “**family of parishes**” that I’m hearing about?

At least, you MAY have heard about it, but I want everyone in our parish to start learning about this new initiative within the Archdiocese, because all parishes are going to be involved, and it has the potential for creating significant changes in how parishes operate. For this reason I thought to give a short series of articles explaining what’s going on.

First, in this article, a little background.

It’s no secret that over the last six decades or so the Catholic Church throughout the United States has seen a significant decrease in the number of Catholics who fully practice their Faith, as well as a significant decrease in the number of priests available to serve the Church. The reasons for these declines are manifold and complex. Certainly one of the big reasons for the decline in Church participation is the rampant secularization of our American society. There are far too many Catholics who need to be evangelized—or re-evangelized—if they are not to be swept away in the currents of the latest trends of our modern secular society.

So, to address this situation, our Archdiocese has been undertaking a renewal of our mission to be an evangelizing Church. “**To share Christ, in and through the Church**” is the mission statement framed by our Archbishop that summarizes what our diocese is to be all about. The good news is that we have begun the transformation of our diocese from one of “maintenance” to one of “mission”. A landmark moment that began this transformation was “Synod 16”, a large gathering of representatives of lay persons and clergy from across the Archdiocese who, after a year of study and prayer came together to discern the direction of the Holy Spirit for us. Subsequently, the Pastoral Letter, *Unleash the Gospel*, was released on the Vigil of Pentecost, 2017, which gave us our marching orders and outlined the steps that needed to be done.

More recently, there was a process in place to help each parish discern and implement its own Missionary Strategic Plan, always keeping mission foremost in mind as decisions would be made.

And then COVID19 hit

It became apparent to the Archbishop, that with the subsequent shutdown of our society and the huge economic impact on our parishes—a devastating impact for many—that some of the expectations for the Missionary Strategic Plans could not be realized at this time. We needed to adapt, but never losing sight of, or setting aside, the Mission.

It was also realized that old solutions, which tried to address the reduced number of clergy serving a dwindling population at many parishes, were simply not going to work. These solutions involved closing parishes, merging parishes or clustering parishes. Let me explain these terms.

“**Closing**” meant just that. The territory of the closed parish was absorbed by the surrounding parishes and presumably the parishioners joined one of these other parishes. Baptismal records and other records of the parish were sent to the Archives Office of the Archdiocese. “**Merging**” meant that two or more parishes were joined into a single entity, often taking on a new name and selling off one of the parish properties, although sometimes the former church was retained as a secondary worship site. Records for both parishes were retained by the merged parish. “**Clustering**” meant that two or more parishes retained their separate identities but were served by a single pastor. Sometimes, but not always, there were attempts to share some resources, like staffing or Parish Councils. Usually parishioners were unhappy with any of these occurrences and the priests found themselves “burning out” as they tried to continue to provide the same level of service that had been done when we had far more priests.

And the priest shortage is only going to get worse in the short term. We currently have a total of 246 Diocesan priests, including priests from other dioceses and Religious priests, serving at 218 parishes. Projections for ten years from now suggest that we will have only 2/3 that number of priests. Something had to be done, and the old solutions of closing, merging, or clustering parishes were, if anything, just making matters worse. Enter the concept of “Family of Parishes”.

This is an approach that has been tried in a number of other dioceses throughout North America, and offers the hope of increasing priestly ministry by more carefully utilizing the charisms unique to each priest, while relieving him of some of the burdens in those areas in which he is not gifted. (For example, not all priests are great administrators—and not all are great counselors, or preachers, or evangelists.) These areas could be addressed by sharing those responsibilities with other priests, or even lay people in the case of administration, who have greater abilities in specific areas. There is also the possibility of relieving some of the isolation that burdens some priests because they will be able to share ministry and life with priests in neighboring parishes. The idea is that the parish will continue to retain its own identity and its own “canonical pastor”, but will be served by more priests, while sharing other resources as well.

More next week.

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So, what on earth is this “**family of parishes**” that I’m hearing about?

At least, you MAY have heard about it, and as I explained in my article last week, I want everyone in our parish to start learning about this new initiative within the Archdiocese. All parishes are going to be involved, and it has the potential for creating significant changes in how parishes operate. This week I’m giving you a second installment of articles about the “Families of Parishes”. (Last week’s article can be accessed by clicking on the “bulletins” tab on our parish website.)

It might help to start by saying what a Family of Parishes is **NOT**. It’s not a merging or clustering of parishes, such as we have seen not only throughout our archdiocese but in many other dioceses during the past few decades. Along with closing parishes, merging or clustering tended to be very unpopular with parishioners, and—in my opinion—was even more unpopular with priests. When you try to be the pastor of two or more parishes at the same time, it’s easy to be overwhelmed and burned out. At the same time the level of specifically “priestly” ministry was often reduced as pastors tried to handle the increased administrative responsibilities that came along with running multiple parishes. Under Canon Law, i.e., Church Law, the pastor has ultimate responsibility for the temporal goods of the parish as well as being attentive to the spiritual well-being of his parishioners. I have heard any number of priests say that they were looking forward to “retiring”—not so that they could take it easy, but that they could be relieved of the administrative burdens and could finally focus on what they were ordained to do!

It is certainly true that people do their best work and are most fulfilled when their work is attuned to the charisms that the Holy Spirit gives. This is true both of priests as well as lay people. (It’s also why, in this parish, that we are making a greater effort to put people into various ministries according their gifts. Not only do they do a better job, they are more enthusiastic and don’t see their roles as a burden!)

In the same way, not all priests are great administrators. It’s also true that not *all* are great counselors or spiritual directors—or confessors or preachers or evangelists or celebrants [of sacraments]. The Holy Spirit has given diverse gifts for the build-up of the Church, and like lay persons, individual priests have their individual strengths. One of the hopes in adopting the concept of “families of parishes” is that the strengths of several priests could be shared with a larger number of parishioners throughout the Family, while relieving a priest of some of those roles where he doesn’t have great capabilities.

While each parish in the Family will retain its own canonical identity (and technically, its own pastor), it is expected that various ministries could be shared, and greater collaboration will occur than what we see now. For example, the parishes could schedule times in which several priests would be available at a single location to hear Confessions. How about greater collaboration among Evangelization Committees, or even a single Committee? After all, the Mission to evangelize is to be kept front and center in any Family of parishes. Special events, such as we had last February, would automatically have a larger audience since it would be truly sponsored by the Family, and not just by an individual parish. Personally, I’m kind of intrigued by the idea of sharing our RCIA process with a larger group of candidates and catechumens than we typically have.

A Family would generally consist of three to six parishes, and it is intended that priests, deacons, and lay staff from each parish would be able to share their gifts and talents with the whole Family of Parishes. There may be advantages to consolidating some positions, or even just having better collaboration among our various staffs, for example, among Business Managers or Youth Ministers.

We’re still in the early stages of exploring the possibilities, and even discerning which parishes should become members of a single Family.

More, next week.

Bulletin Article Series on “Families of Parishes”

This is the third installment of articles about the new initiative in our Archdiocese that will create “**families of parishes**”. Since all parishes are going to be involved, and since this new structure has the potential for creating significant changes in how parishes operate, I want everyone to be aware and informed. Previous articles can be accessed by clicking on the “bulletins” tab on our parish website.

The main thing to keep in mind while we migrate to this new model is that while various structures within the diocese may change, **our mission has not changed**. We are still called to unleash the Gospel, and any changes must be in service to that mission. I’ve often pointed out that God is able to bring good out of evil, in fact, good to the measure of the evil. (The most extreme example of that can be seen in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross: a *great* injustice that brought about the greatest good, eternal life!) Similarly, I believe the Lord is bringing a host of good things despite the evil of this pandemic.

I know, for instance, that at our parish the idea of livestreaming Masses for the sake of our homebound and as an evangelization tool was an “idea” that may have remained just that, an idea—until the shutdown pushed us to make it happen overnight! AND the Lord provided us with skilled people and resources that truly were heaven-sent! It reminds me of the situation described in the *Acts of the Apostles*, when a great persecution broke out after the death of the first martyr, Stephen, with the result that “all except the apostles” fled Jerusalem. But that pushed the Church to spread the Good News elsewhere. The Mission could no longer be contained within Jerusalem. Under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Philip started proclaiming the Good News in *Samaria* of all places. But wait...that’s exactly what Jesus had instructed his witnesses to do! And it worked! And there were signs and wonders to affirm the message.

I strongly suspect the same kind of thing is happening now, in our time and place. The Spirit is moving us away from a measured and comfortable approach to our Mission, and is challenging us to respond to the difficulties brought on by the pandemic with a more radical response that will allow us to better fulfill our Mission. Over the next two years, all parishes of the Archdiocese of Detroit will join other parishes in new groupings called “Families of Parishes”. These Families, generally three to six parishes, will share resources to advance the mission, including having multiple priests and deacons serving the Family. This new model will allow the priests, deacons and lay staff associated with each parish to better share their gifts and talents with the *whole* Family of Parishes.

While the parishes within a Family will remain canonically and financially distinct entities, there is the potential to realize savings through economies of scale, the use of common tools and resources, as well as the sharing of some staff positions. It is also to be hoped that we will retain more priests who might otherwise retire, because they will have greater fraternity and collaboration with other priests, and may be relieved of some of the administrative duties that, for some, have been overly stressful and kept them from doing the ministry for which they were ordained.

In a major change like this, careful discernment and planning must take place before launching. That process has already begun. The priests and bishops of the Archdiocese have been meeting “virtually” once a month, and that will continue. (Welcome to the wide world of ZOOM.) The first step is to discern which parishes should be in which families. These groups will not necessarily have to adhere to vicariate or regional lines. Rather, they will be formed with attention given to the best interest of each community. It must be noted that each Family groupings *will* consist of parishes that are geographically contiguous, meaning they border at least one other parish in the Family. The diocese does not intend to create “islands” of parishes grouped with distant parishes.

The Archbishop wants to move this process forward as expeditiously as possible. The initial proposal for which parishes are to be in which families is expected to be presented to the Archbishop for his approval **by Advent of 2020**. (Everybody, start praying!) The actual implementation of the Families will come in two waves after that. The first wave will begin **preparation** in January of 2021 and will launch in July of 2021. The second wave will begin preparation in January of 2022 and will launch in July of 2022. These waves will be announced at Advent of 2020. This timeline was designed to allow for over a year of collaborative discernment before our first Families of Parishes officially come together.

The preparation phase will involve training and dialogue for priests and laity, focused on what is changing and how to restructure operations to support the necessary changes. During this phase all parishes within a Family will discuss among themselves the practical ways in which clergy, staff, and the parish as a whole will interact within the Family. Each Family will need to finalize its new leadership structure, as well as decide upon any adjustments to Support Staff positions.

Each Family will also need to explore and establish any needed changes to Mass schedules, confession schedules, etc. Each Family needs to work together, with assistance from the Archdiocese, to make decisions in the best interest of all the parishes in the Family. All decisions need to be done with docility to the Holy Spirit, and rooted in prayer, so, like I said above, everybody start praying!

More next week.

Bulletin Article Series on “Families of Parishes”

This is the fourth installment of articles about the new initiative in our Archdiocese that will create “**families of parishes**”. Since all parishes are going to be involved, and since this new structure has the potential for creating significant changes in how parishes operate, I want everyone to be aware and informed. Previous articles can be accessed by clicking on the “bulletins” tab on our parish website.

As mentioned in previous articles, but deserving of being highlighted once more, is that in all the changes that will be brought about by becoming a member of a Family of Parishes, the one thing that absolutely will NOT change is our commitment to Mission. Mission, more and more, must drive our decisions, and is in fact the reason why we are attempting this new paradigm: that it may help us address our Mission. We are sent by Jesus Christ to make disciples. All we do is in service to unleashing the Gospel.

Another re-cap from previous articles is the *timeline* for making the transition. By Advent of this year (November 29 is the First Sunday of Advent), the proposed groupings of parishes to create each Family is to be presented to the Archbishop for his approval. The actual implementation of the Families will come in **two waves** after that. The first wave will begin preparation in January of 2021 and will launch in July of 2021. The second wave will begin preparation in January of 2022 and will launch in July of 2022. Which Families will be in which waves will be announced during Advent of 2020. This timeline will allow for over a year of collaborative discernment before our first Families of Parishes officially come together.

I don't know which wave St. William Parish will be in, although I would not be surprised if we are asked to be in the first wave, since our parish and the other parishes that are likely to be in our new Family (as far as I know at this point) are already well-functioning. That should allow us to focus on how we can better address our Mission by sharing unique strengths with each other, rather than having to deal with various crises such as financial insolvency or a lack of leadership. Leadership, by the way, does not simply mean “pastors”, but also means that each parish has in place a Leadership Team (we call ours my “Pastoral Advisory Team”) that meets frequently with the pastor to help him stay focused on Mission. Another area of leadership is that there is a high-functioning Finance Council. Each parish should also have a Parish Pastoral Council that oversees the activities of various Commissions, whose job it is to keep the main areas of parish life vibrant. All these Councils and Commissions are mostly made up of parishioners, with a Staff person or two to help. And yes, a parish needs committed and talented Staff members, as well. In the new Family of Parishes, each parish will keep its own Finance Council and Parish Council.

In each Family one priest handles administration for all parishes in the family with help from a Parish Finance Officer. (That's a new position.) Other priests in the Family are largely freed from administrative tasks to be able to focus on other areas of pastoral ministry. This one priest may be a “moderator” of the other pastors in the Family—or it might even be that he would be appointed as the canonical pastor of more than one parish, and the other priests would function as “assistant pastors” (who, officially, are called “parochial vicars”).

While the details must be worked out during the discernment phase, it is hoped that Finance Councils will work as a team to advise the pastor/moderator as well as the one Finance Officer who works for all the parishes in the family. It is similarly hoped that the Parish Pastoral Councils will work as a team. It is anticipated that there will be one staff for the parishes in the family. (At this point, I don't really know what that means, other than I expect that it would have to involve more people than typically staff a single parish. Perhaps some roles could be efficiently handled by a single person or even a team. For example, one bookkeeper might serve several parishes, and there could be a team of two or more Youth Ministers.)

Big question: Which parishes might be in our Family? The diocese proposed initial groupings for consideration, which I think had the value of instilling a sense of urgency: “This is going to happen, let's get serious and talk about it!” Initially, Prince of Peace Parish and Our Lady of Refuge Parish were proposed to become a Family with St. William Parish. However, after discussion with my Pastoral Advisory Team, it seems that we would have a more effective Family if, instead, we were to be grouped with Holy Family Parish and St. James Parish, both in Novi. It was later noted that St. Joseph Parish in South Lyon would probably need to join the group due to their relative isolation, being a parish that geographically borders the next diocese. At this point I am only in preliminary discussions with the pastors of the other parishes, who, in turn, will want to discuss the advisability of this grouping with their own leadership teams.

In addition to offering monthly online meetings of priests and bishops, the Archdiocese is offering our priests the opportunity to have online panel discussions with priests from other dioceses who have already adopted this new approach to ministry. I intend to participate in the next one, and I look forward to gaining some insights from their experience. I'll keep you posted as I learn more. Keep praying!

In Jesus,
Fr. Michael