

Archbishop Lori's Remarks: Pastoral Staff Day

Pastoral Staff Day

"Portals of Evangelization"

St. Joseph Parish

Eldersburg, MD

September 27, 2017

I am always grateful for the opportunity to address this important gathering and to thank all of you who staff parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore. As I have noted before, you are on the front lines and for many people you are the face of the Catholic Church. So please accept my warmest thanks for the ministries in which you are engaged and for your dedication to the mission of the Church to spread the Gospel. Thank you for building up the Body of Christ in our local communities, throughout the Archdiocese, and as part of a world-wide communion of believers united under the Successor of Peter, Pope Francis.

Let me also thank you, Fr. Neville, and your staff for so warmly welcoming all of us this morning and throughout the day. We are very blessed to have with us today Msgr. Michael Heinz, a priest of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend and a member of the faculty of Mt. St. Mary's Seminary. Msgr. Heinz will be officially introduced moments from now but I wanted to express our thanks for serving as our keynote speaker.

As you know we are in the midst of evangelization-based parish planning as we seek to form in an intentional way, over a period of years, pastorates throughout the Archdiocese of Baltimore. No one imagines that this process is easy or simple. Indeed, it is all too easy to get caught up in the mechanics of pastoral planning and along the way to lose sight of its animating spirit as well as its goal. It is also easy to rush ahead, to anticipate future steps, and thus to short-circuit the process that is meant to engage our faith communities, to bring about an honest assessment of where we stand with regard to mission – how we are living or failing to live the core mission priorities that go to the heart of what any active parish should be. So I

would urge you to engage the process prayerfully, a step at a time.

Let me stress that we're engaging this process gradually. Right now we are in a pilot stage with nine diverse parishes. They are not nine isolated parishes going through a lonely process but rather we have brought together their pastors for prayer and reflection. In the coming weeks we will bring together the staffs of these parishes for prayer, reflection, and ongoing formation in evangelization. We will learn a lot from the experience of these pilot parishes and it will help refine the process as we enter in successive years each of the three phases of parish planning - phases that take into account likely retirements and other changes of personnel. The important thing is that we don't give into the temptation to make this an administrative task of merely condensing our parishes. It is and must be a process truly rooted in the Church's mission not merely to maintain itself but to spread the Gospel, to help as many as possible to encounter Christ, to walk with people in their life's journey, to go to the peripheries in search of the poor and those who feel disconnected.

The task before us may seem overwhelming. We might take a look at the culture with all its hot-button issues and ask how we could ever convince a lot of skeptical people that the Church has something important, life-giving, to say on those issues. Or we might say to ourselves that the theology of evangelization is complicated, that we never studied it in school, or that it remains a vaguely "Protestant" term. Or we might just feel uncomfortable with engaging people at a level that is deeper than usual, that is very personal. Or we may feel that because of past scandals the Church has an uphill battle in advancing its mission of evangelization. And we might feel that with declining Mass attendance and sacramental practice the challenge is just too great, so it's best just to do our jobs, hoping for the best but perhaps expecting the worst.

Statistics on church attendance and sacramental practice are important but sometimes they may leave us feeling helpless. We may be tempted to see a downward spiral as inevitable. The numbers are, to be sure, challenging. We cannot miss the fact that many of our people are missing on Sunday. Nor can we underestimate the challenge of evangelizing young people and connecting them to the life of the Church. And there is a growing number of non-affiliated persons in our country, many of them, our former parishioners. At the same time, let us not forget

that, for the past number of years, Mass attendance is holding steady and that even those who come to Mass rarely – Christmas and Easter Catholics – continue to self-identify as Catholics. They may well be less unsympathetic to the Church’s mission than at times we are led to believe. Some who rarely come to Church nonetheless continue to respond to appeals from their pastors and from their bishop for support. Many of them do not think that the Church is wrong on every issue. In fact, some studies show – including our own survey – that it really isn’t so much the hot button cultural issues or anger against the Church that prompt people to stay away . . . Those things cannot be discounted, yet for many it’s a matter of being preoccupied on a Sunday morning, often with sports or with work; some feel it’s too much of a hassle to bring the kids to church, and some just got out of the habit of coming and find the prospect of coming back more than a little daunting.

It turns out that the evangelization might not be as complicated as we think and the steps we need to take to evangelize effectively are not out of reach; nor are the people we are trying to evangelize as tough to reach as we might think. The good news is that many of the reasons why Catholics stay away are in our control. So, let us not be fatalists who succumb to the tyranny of the inevitable. Rather let us lift up our hearts and open them to the Holy Spirit who says, “Be not afraid” and who helps us do those things we may sometime regard as impossible.

In my pastoral letter, *A Light Brightly Visible* – (I do ask you to read this letter or read it again if you already have) you will see a section called “Portals of Evangelization”. It includes practical steps every parish can take to up its evangelization game, practical steps that can be taken to help a parish undergo what Pope Francis calls ‘a missionary transformation.” These steps have a lot to do with creating a welcoming and accessible parish: a user-friendly phone system a friendly greeting on the phone or at the door of the office a dynamic, evangelization oriented website an engaging presence on social media a warm welcome at the door of the church pastorally engaging new and returning parishioners, inviting them to be a real part of the worshipping community convenient and ample opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation an accessible and engaging RCIA process. In these and other ways, we can strive to make our parishes places of welcome and encounter.

These days, of course, a lot of people are using Pope Francis’ lingo to talk about the

Church's pastoral life and that's a good thing - words like "encounter", "accompaniment", and "going to the peripheries". Pope Francis has helpfully expanded our pastoral vocabulary and prompted us to reflect again on the quality of the pastoral life in our parishes. But his teaching on the joy of the Gospel cannot remain in the realm of ideas. The words, ideas, concepts the Pope has given to you and me are meant, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to transform our actual flesh and blood encounters with the people we are privileged to serve, ranging from our most devoted and engaged parishioners to those who feel themselves to be the most removed from the life of the Church.

So it is not wrong to ask what it is like for a young couple to contact the parish for a baptism. Suppose this couple doesn't go to church with much regularity, has never registered, and doesn't give much in the collection basket. If those are the first things that this couple is confronted with when they contact a parish for a baptism, or if the first thing they are told is that they are required to attend formation sessions before their child can be baptized, well, I'm not sure that's getting off on the right foot. I would imagine the conversation would go better if the couple were congratulated on their new arrival, if we asked how the baby is doing, if he or she sleeps at night, and simply make an effort to express the fact that we are interested in this couple and their child as persons.

It's also not wrong to ask what an engaged couple experiences when they contact our parishes for a wedding . . . or a parent who is not really practicing the faith experiences when she asks that her child receive Holy Communion. I'm not suggesting that we don't need to have some requirements but only that we need first to build some very human bridges. This is what the Pope calls "a culture of encounter" - and unless that exists at a very human level in the daily life of the Church the encounter with Christ may not happen in an awful lot of cases. After all, the Son of God assumed our humanity and the saving love of God reached us through his human nature. In the same way we must think of ourselves as bridge to Christ and a bridge to the Church.

Or what if someone moves in and goes online to our parish website. Will this newly arrived potential parishioner find himself back in the 1990's looking at a website with outdated information, with little sense of what's happening in the parish now,

or will this potential new parishioner experience a welcoming website, a site that speaks of the church's mission of evangelization, a site that is not only easy to navigate but also engaging? For many, a visit to the parish website is their initial "encounter" - so we must ensure that they receive a digital welcome and embrace.

And when we hear the word accompaniment, I think we are being told to walk with those we are to serve, to be interested in them, to listen to their story, and, like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, look for the opportunity to share with them the light and love of the Gospel. The same is true when we hear about 'going to the peripheries' - it really means that we are about forming a community of faith that is committed and equipped to go out and gently engage those who, for whatever reason, are away and to reach out with special love to those who are poor or vulnerable. This is more than a program of service. It requires that somehow, at some level, we actually get to know those with whom we walk on this journey of life, this journey of faith.

I address these words not only to you but also to myself. After 40 years as a priest and 22 as a bishop, there is never a day I do not need to examine not only my personal conscience but also my ministerial conscience as a survey my many interactions in the course of a day. And I would also say that as you reflect on those important mission priorities in the planning process and find that your parish could make substantial improvements - take heart, be of good cheer, do not imagine you are alone. This is something we are doing together as an Archdiocesan family of faith, something that will require ongoing prayer, formation, reflection, and yes, ongoing critical self-examination in the light of the Gospel.

Allow me to close once again by thanking you for your ministries and for the sacrifices you make to engage in the work of the Church. May the Lord bless you for all that you do and may the Lord keep you always in his love!