

Collaboration Continues

The Catholic Review

Since the announcement of my new appointment as pro-grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem (and eventual departure from the Archdiocese of Baltimore), there have been many questions asked about how this news impacts my plans and priorities, specifically those related to the reorganization of parishes.

While much is unknown about the timetable for naming my successor one thing is very clear: the work we have begun to address the many challenges facing our parishes and thus the mission of this local Church, must continue. They are too great and too numerous not to act. I appreciate the enthusiasm of so many to address the urgent challenges that face us.

You will recall that I first wrote a column about the need for planning following a spontaneous and animated discussion at our priest convocation last fall. It was then that I asked for your careful attention to the issues that were of such concern to our priests, namely the rapid dwindling of their numbers. I also argued that now is the time to also address the other pressing matters that have been creeping in the ongoing development of our Archdiocese: the rapid growth of many of our Catholic parishes and the shrinking population of others; the plethora of half-empty churches (at best) and the need for facilities improvement; and the challenge of the New Evangelization, reclaiming disengaged Catholics and attracting new ones.

As I considered how best to proceed, based on the urgency of the needs before us, a preliminary consultation stage quickly emerged, with priests, lay parish leaders, Archdiocesan boards, committees and other groups being asked to weigh in with their thoughts about what should be the goals and process for parish planning.

Along with our auxiliary bishops, I traveled around the Archdiocese this summer meeting with lay parish leaders at regional consultations at parishes in Baltimore, Columbia, Frederick and Fullerton. We were so very impressed both by the

substance and by the passion expressed during those candid discussions. We continue to be buoyed as we, your bishops, develop an outline for how we can move forward together, including how the laity can play an active role in the parish planning process.

Among many messages I heard was the absolute need for better information and data to serve as the foundation of our planning. It is clear that research has to be a key area of focus if we are to better understand:

- The current status and needs of our own parishes;
- What other dioceses have done to address planning, the best practices that might guide our efforts and keep us from making needless and time-wasting mistakes;
- Critical insights into the allocation of priests and the promotion of vocations to the priesthood; and
- How we might best engage those who have left the Church to once again embrace our community of faith, in the spirit of the New Evangelization.

Not only will this information be critical to our planning, it will enable us to provide the kind of transparency our Catholic people so clearly desire and deserve.

To assist us in gathering the research that will be critical to any planning process, I have restructured the focus of the Central Services office that had been working with our Department of Schools on the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Catholic Schools. That office, now called the Office of Research and Planning and located within the Archbishop's office. Headed by Monsignor Bob Hartnett, Pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Essex, it will oversee the research and data gathering for our parish planning effort. While it will directly serve my office, it will offer a valuable resource to our vicar bishops who will continue to spearhead parish reordering in each vicariate.

The next step for me is to articulate the best planning process for us to move forward together to achieve our overall goal of creating vibrant, sustainable faith communities that most effectively and responsibly utilize those resources – human and financial – available to us today and tomorrow.

Throughout, I will do my best to keep the lines of communication open with all our stakeholders.

I will first share this plan, which will take into account all that I have heard from the various aforementioned constituencies, with our College of Consultors (body of priests established in Canon Law to advise the Archbishop/Apostolic Administrator) on Oct. 4. Then, I plan to announce it to the wider Catholic community through The Catholic Review and our parishes.

While my recent appointment means I will likely be unable to witness the conclusion of our planning efforts, I find joy and comfort in knowing I will be able to continue guiding you through these important steps along a journey of faith, mission and renewal for the Church in Baltimore.

On a personal note, though I might be traveling a bit more frequently in carrying out my new duties, I will continue to be rooted here, spending most of my time in Baltimore until my successor is installed as the 16th Archbishop of Baltimore. That means I will remain in the historic Archbishop's residence in Baltimore, celebrating regular Masses and special liturgies throughout the Archdiocese, and taking part in key meetings and events as usual. It also means I will have the pleasure of continuing to be united with our wonderful priests, deacons and religious and so many of you as I travel throughout this singularly blessed local Church in the months ahead.

I wish also to thank all those who have offered me their prayers and wishes of congratulations. I will cherish them and always hold affectionately in prayer the kind and faith-filled people of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.