

Cumberland town meeting addresses need for parish restructuring

CUMBERLAND - In an April 28 town meeting marked by a combination of hopefulness, apprehension and anger, approximately 250 people gathered at St. Mary in Cumberland to ask questions about a proposal to create a new area parish out of five existing ones.

The plan, developed by the Mountain Maryland Regional Catholic Planning Commission, would establish a single parish with a new name. It would have one staff, one pastoral council, one finance committee, one set of corporators, one religious education program and one youth ministry program.

The new parish would have four worship sites where Mass will be celebrated: St. Ambrose in Cresaptown and Cumberland's St. Mary, St. Patrick and Ss. Peter and Paul.

St. Patrick in Mount Savage would become a "station" available for prayer services, baptisms, marriages and funerals. Regular Masses would no longer be celebrated there.

The new parish would be led by three Capuchin Franciscans, a religious community that has long headed Ss. Peter and Paul and St. Ambrose.

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski said the drop-off in the number of clergy is a major reason for the need to combine the parishes. There are currently four priests serving five parishes in the area - down from 13 in 1979.

"Our priests are retiring at an older and older age," said Bishop Rozanski, noting that the oldest active priest in the archdiocese is 84 and that others are still serving well into their 70s.

"It's a matter of trying to have the priests who are in active ministry do what they

can without being stretched to a limit where we burn them out and have less priests," he said.

The bishop pointed out that in the last year and a half, four priests under 50 were treated for stress-related symptoms.

"Like all of us, we have limits," he said. "Part of my responsibility and part of the archbishop's responsibility is to help the men we have - who are very dedicated to pastoral ministry - to do the best they can in service to our people, without wearing them out."

Father Edward Hendricks, chair of the planning commission, cited statistics that showed a drop in population in the Cumberland area to 20,859 - down nearly 11,000 from three decades ago.

"There are more than twice as many funerals as baptisms," he said. "One-third of registered parishioners are 60 or older."

The new model would provide a period of stability and would create a "vibrant sacramental and religious education ministry for all members," he said.

"It would minimize duplication of parish administration," he said, "and consolidate expenses and resources."

During a question-and-answer session, a few parishioners from St. Patrick in Mount Savage expressed deep disappointment in the proposal. One suggested that one of the parishes in the City of Cumberland should become a station instead of Mount Savage.

"We have given up 100 percent," another Mount Savage parishioner asserted, "and the other churches have given nothing. Where is the shared sacrifice?"

Another Mount Savage parishioner said he "couldn't believe" there wasn't one more priest who could come to Western Maryland to assist in the parishes. Bishop Rozanski responded by noting that he just spent four days in a Howard County parish made up of 16,000 members and led by just two priests - a pastor who is 68 and an associate who is 66.

"The pastor said, 'Is there a hope of getting another priest?'" Bishop Rozanski said. "I can't say yes to that."

During the meeting, other parishioners were optimistic that the plan would bring a new sense of life to the community. One man pointed out that this year's Holy Thursday liturgy at St. Mary was celebrated for all five parishes. It was well attended, prayerful and joyful, he said.

"If this is what consolidation is about," he said, "we are all for it and we need to get on with it."

Another man suggested that the proposal did not go far enough. With changing demographics and the worsening clergy shortage, he said, "a bigger step" is needed.

"We can't snap our fingers and get more priests," he said. "We're going to have to make more satellite churches. I don't think Jesus cares what building we're in when we go to church. I think the sooner we make these tough choices, the better."

Bishop Rozanski said the Cumberland proposal remains to be approved by Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien. He noted that it may become a model for other areas of the archdiocese and that pastors elsewhere have already begun to study it.

Capuchin Franciscan Father David Nestler, provincial of his religious community, said Capuchins are happy to expand their ministry in Cumberland. Last summer, he said, eight young friars who are studying theology visited the area and said Cumberland was one of the places that "most excited them."

"They imagined themselves here one day in the future," Father Nestler said. "We Capuchins love this city and we want to stay. I am very happy to say Archbishop O'Brien has asked Capuchins to continue working in Cumberland."

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