

Final Thoughts on Our Church

It seems like only yesterday that I was soliciting names for my column in this venerable Catholic paper, so quickly has the time passed. Given the volume and variety of the suggestions I received, it was quickly evident that our exchange would be a special one and that I would need to use this coveted space thoughtfully and sincerely. And that is what I tried to do.

Since October 2007, I have greeted you on page 4 of your Catholic Review and shared my thoughts on our Church. I've appreciated the responses they've prompted, whether letters to the editor or phone calls and emails, as well as the suggestions for column ideas. I also am grateful to those who offered "guest columns" during the off weeks of summer.

Any bishop's primary role is that of teacher, and these columns have been an excellent opportunity to impart the teachings of our faith in a way that I hope has been clear, relevant and applicable. And, I've tried to use my column to share with you - members of this Catholic community - information about the current and future state of our local Church.

As I prepare to sign off and relinquish this page to our new shepherd, I thought I'd share some final thoughts on a few topics that have appeared frequently over the past four-and-a-half years.

Vocations

The future of our Church depends on our ability to promote vocations, especially those to the priesthood. As with all things, God will provide ... but we have a part to play too, and play it we must!

As a community of faith, it is our responsibility - collectively and singularly - to pray for an increase in healthy vocations, to challenge our young people to give themselves to God in this unselfish and radical act of charity, and to treat vocations to priesthood and consecrated life as a gift worthy of our sons and daughters. Much like our Nation relies on the generous service of women and men in the Armed Forces, so too does our Church rely on that same selfless service in the form of

priests, deacons, brothers and sisters to enrich and sustain the faithful of our Church. And I continue to believe that those parishes that encourage devotion of private Eucharistic Adoration are most likely to reap the harvest of vocations as a result of this special and holy effort.

Schools

Clearly the most painful time in the recent life of our Church occurred with the consolidation of 13 of our Catholic schools in March 2010. Since then, the strategic plan that emerged from the study of our school system has put our schools on track to stem the enrollment declines that led to that painful step. We have begun to see signs of improvement, as declines have been cut in half, but we must remain diligent in implementing the recommendations of the strategic plan and in our collective efforts to support Catholic education. We must continue to try to make Catholic education affordable and accessible for all our families, as well as those of other faiths who wish for their children the same academically-excellent, Christ-inspired education. As Catholics, we are each responsible for the evangelization to which we are called through baptism. Catholic education is an integral part of this responsibility, whose ultimate goal is, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, to create a society “worthy of the human person’s dignity.”

Parish Planning

Much has been written in these pages in recent months regarding the need for a comprehensive, grassroots planning initiative to create more vibrant communities of faith reflective of the demographic and personnel realities present today and projected in the future. The parish is the heartbeat of our Church and must be strengthened through the necessary internal and external review, as well as the resulting expansion and contraction that may be required due to such factors as shifts in Catholic population and declines in available priests. However, as has been pointed out in the past, we cannot make these decisions based purely on numbers – financial or personnel; we must also take into account the overall health and vitality of the communities involved so that the result are centers of excellence: excellent liturgies, communities of service and beacons of hope.

Thank you, dear readers, for taking time to read my thoughts on our Church these past years, and for considering them with open minds and hearts. I pray you’ll offer

my successor the same courtesy, and I hope he enjoys sharing his own thoughts half as much as I have!