

# We Hear You

Last week, I updated you on the consultations that have taken place this summer to guide the development of a process for parish planning in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Bishops Denis J. Madden and Mitchell T. Rozanski and I found the four consultations with lay parish leaders to be very revealing, as parishioners from across the Archdiocese responded with their perceptions and ideas about a host of related issues.

In furtherance of our commitment to transparency throughout this process, I provide this summary of the prevailing themes to emerge from these very helpful sessions. It should be noted that the format of these meetings precluded any discussion. We were strictly there to listen, an enormously beneficial exercise given the wealth of ideas, passion and enthusiasm in our parishes.

## **Vibrant and Sustainable Parishes**

A number of broad categories emerged from the discussion on what constitutes a vibrant and sustainable parish with clear consensus that the following elements are essential: Mass/Liturgy; Sacramental Life; Sense of Community; Encouragement of Diversity; Evangelization; Faith Formation; Youth and Young Adult Ministries; Community Service/Outreach; Parish Leadership; Communication; and Stewardship.

Participants emphasized the importance of having good Mass attendance, as well as an inspiring liturgy with full participation, relevant homilies and a strong music ministry. Access to the sacraments is seen as a key component of any parish. A vibrant parish must have a welcoming atmosphere that fosters communication and relationships among parishioners, and should celebrate and encourage diversity by offering a variety of liturgical styles, activities and ministries, as well as Masses in different languages when necessary.

Lay leaders said that evangelization efforts need to be visible both inside and outside the church, with a special focus on how to engage inactive Catholics. A vibrant parish has robust religious education, Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)

and continuing adult formation programs, as well as active service ministries in the form of pastoral care for parishioners and in outreach to the surrounding community. Participants urged parishes to recruit and train laity to form an active volunteer base – another important measure of vibrancy – and suggested developing a database of parishioner skill sets. Additionally, youth and young adult ministries should be active and engaging with solid leadership, and should be treated as core ministries of the church.

In addition to the various ministries and services that are integral to parish life, lay leaders stressed the necessity of effective leadership, communication and stewardship at the parish level. Parishes need pastors to be strong spiritual leaders as well as have adequate management, leadership and interpersonal skills. To this end, participants suggested priests and seminarians should be trained accordingly and reviews should be conducted to help balance how priests are performing and how their time is spent.

Effective leadership also encompasses an active pastoral council and committees, and a parish mission statement providing a shared vision and common goals. It was also recommended that parishes proactively identify strengths and weaknesses by performing internal assessments, and that they develop parish strategic plans. Some suggested that the Archdiocese of Baltimore could help these efforts by developing guidelines and providing support for strategic planning at the parish level.

Open lines of communication between the Archdiocese, pastors and parishioners are likewise important to good parish health. It was recommended that communication efforts on the parish level include an engaging web presence – specifically utilizing the various social networking tools currently available.

Participants acknowledged that good stewardship requires a sense of ownership among parishioners and that a sustainable parish must have adequate resources – including facilities that are well-maintained, safe and updated, and sufficient collections and revenue to keep the parish financially sound. Some expressed concern about Cathedraticum (the assessment each parish is required by Canon Law to contribute toward the operation of our Central Services offices) and it was suggested that the Archdiocese consider forgiving past Cathedraticum debt for poor

parishes.

## **Priest Shortage**

Participants also addressed questions and voiced concerns about the number of available priests and about the allotment of spiritual versus administrative duties being performed by them. Many believe that there is a need to maximize the time priests have for sacramental and catechetical duties. At the same time, parishioners felt that parishes should focus on the recruitment and training of lay leaders, recruitment to the permanent diaconate, and inter-parish sharing of personnel, such as business managers and directors of religious education, to help minimize the administrative burden on pastors and priests. Some said there is also a need to better define the possible roles of the laity and provide clarity about limitations as well as measures to enhance their involvement.

Understanding that priests perform many duties that are not visible to parishioners, it was recommended that the Archdiocese raise awareness of behind-the-scenes work of pastors and what those responsibilities are beyond Sunday Mass. It also became clear in the discussion that there is a need to increase the understanding among the laity of priest assignments, particularly non-parish priests and their roles in the Archdiocese.

## **Vocations**

Connected with the discussion on numbers of priests and their workload is the question of how best to increase their numbers. Lay leaders had numerous thoughts and suggestions related to this issue, including:

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