

By now you have heard about “Beacons of Light,” the planning process for Archdiocese of Cincinnati that will redistribute our resources throughout the 19 counties that comprise our local church. These resources include the use of archdiocesan properties, priests that serve the parishes, finances that support ministries that each parish carries out, and outreach endeavors that connect the parish with the wider community.

Additionally, Catholic populations move and relocate for jobs, housing and family needs. Though the number of Catholics is increasing in many parts of our archdiocese, the number of people attending Mass continues to decline. And we all know by now that the number of priests continues to dip dramatically for the celebration of sacraments. In our region this may not seem to be much of an issue since we have three priests that are present on a regular basis. We are at a point when, if one priest gets sick, quits, or dies, we have nobody to replace him. So, I think the reasons for this planning are obvious.

My own reflections on the situation in which we find ourselves is that the church is not dying, but needs to be reorganized so that all the baptized can work together with pastors to meet the needs of our members, and those of our surrounding areas.

There are many levels of this planning that are taking place. The most obvious change is going to become clear in September when the proposed “Family of Parishes” is introduced throughout the archdiocese. These are groupings of churches that will be overseen by a pastor, with parochial vicars and retired priests, along with lay leaders who will have significant oversight of ministries that are vital to the life of Christ’s church.

In September we will learn the recommended Family of Parishes scenarios for the entire archdiocese. No parish will be a “stand alone” parish when this process is completed. This process will affect every parish, hopefully, in a positive, exciting way.

Since 2017 St. Veronica and St. John Fisher have been functioning as a Collaborative Pastoral Region. Actually, very little has changed in the life of each parish; the only real change has been for the priests traveling between the churches. In the coming years this, also, is going to change as other parishes are added to our Family of Parishes.

This process entails total resources, not only the resources that we have in priests. Part of our future is to have an ongoing promotion of vocations of every kind, rooted in baptism. For now, it is important to note that there are 149 active diocesan priests, 102 of those are pastors, 23 are vicars, 21 have other assignments (teachers, hospital chaplains, etc.), and three are on leave of absence.

- 25 of our 149 Priests are 70 or older
- 9 of the 149 Priests are 75 or older
- 19 of our 102 Pastors are 70 or older



- 7 of our 102 Pastors are 75 or older
- 3 Ordinations in 2020
- 8 Retirements in 2020
- 52 Possible Retirements 2021-2025

Currently there are about 210 parishes. This process will configure 60-70 Families of Parishes, with a pastor for each family. Pastors will be assisted by parochial vicars and retired priests who will serve the sacramental needs of Families of Parishes.

We can do this. It is not going to be easy, but our primary focus is, as it always has been, on Christ, who is the head of the body, the church. More to come next week.

If you did not read last week's column regarding *Beacons of Light*, the planning process of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, I recommend that you go back and read it as the foundation for these columns in the weeks to come. I believe it is important to give you as much information as possible so that implementation of this planning process can be made as smoothly as we are able. In most cases, resistance is a cry for information.



Last week I focused on the declining numbers of priests and Catholics attending Mass on a regular — weekly — basis. In the past few years we have seen the number of priests being ordained increasing, but even with the blessing of more ordinations, it is still not enough to cover the priests who retire, are sick, or die. We now have priests, like Father Alex, who have left their homeland and become priests of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. We also have extern priests who are those who leave their homeland to serve in our archdiocese, but will one day return to their home diocese to serve there again. And, we have our retired diocesan priests who serve us generously, as well as religious order priests who help fill in the gaps at our diocesan parish (Jesuits, Franciscans, Marianists) Mass schedules.

It is good to see people coming back to Mass again after eighteen months of being careful with our health. We should, of course, still be careful with our health, but at least we are able to get together to celebrate the Eucharist. People who are unable to be in person for the Mass, due to health concerns or confinement to home, continue to state how grateful they are to be able to watch the Mass online. Still, for those who are able to attend in person, we have all learned that *watching* Mass is just not the same as *gathering* with others to celebrate the Eucharist.

One of the challenges is in the future for all parishes will be following the archdiocesan guideline that has been in place for decades: any church building that does not have at least 50% of the pews filled on Sunday will need assess the viability of that Mass. So, encourage families and friends to attend church, not only because we need one another and the sacraments, but because it will make a difference for planning in the future.

In his letter to all Catholics throughout the archdiocese, Archbishop Schnurr has noted the challenges that we are all going to face:

This process will naturally bring with it much anxiety and trepidation as you wonder about the future of your beloved parish. This is a testament to the deep affection parishioners have for their parishes, for which I am very grateful. *Beacons of Light* will challenge each of us to place the best interests of the Church and our future generations at the forefront of our planning. It will require us to be open to solutions with which we may not immediately feel comfortable.

We all love our parishes. As we read from the sixth chapter of John's Gospel in the weeks ahead, it is important to remember that it is Christ who gathers us to share at His table. As Catholics, being gathered by Christ is our most important reality. Everything else will take care of itself.

Most of us, understandably, think of the *local church* as the parish to which we belong and attend. And why wouldn't we? Our parish is the place where we give our time serving others. These are the people we know, some on a very deep level. This is the place where we celebrate sacraments with generations of our family members. Parish communities are our second home, with our second family. And that is how it should be, and that's why most of us think of our parish as our *local church*.

We all know that the church to which we belong is much larger than we often think. Our parishes are not merely a loose conglomeration of church satellite branches with people who "sorta believe the same stuff." No, we are world-wide Body of Believers with Christ as our head. In this understanding the local church is our (arch)diocese.

The local church of Cincinnati is made up of 19 counties in southwest Ohio, with 12 deaneries, 210 parishes, 109 pastors and regions, and 475,000 Catholics who call the local church of Cincinnati their spiritual home through the life of the parishes they attend. Most of those who serve the church in professional and service ministries are lay Catholics who teach, evangelize, carry out liturgical roles, administrate and lead one another in being the living Body of Christ.

Beacons of Light is that consultative and participative process by which our local church is attempting to address the current situation of the Catholic church today.

I have been serving on three different bodies that are engaged in this planning. On July 26 the deans met with the consultation team who is leading the project. These consultants have worked with a number of different



(arch)dioceses who are at various stages in implementing strategic plans to address the realities that I have outlined in the previous two editions of Points to Ponder.

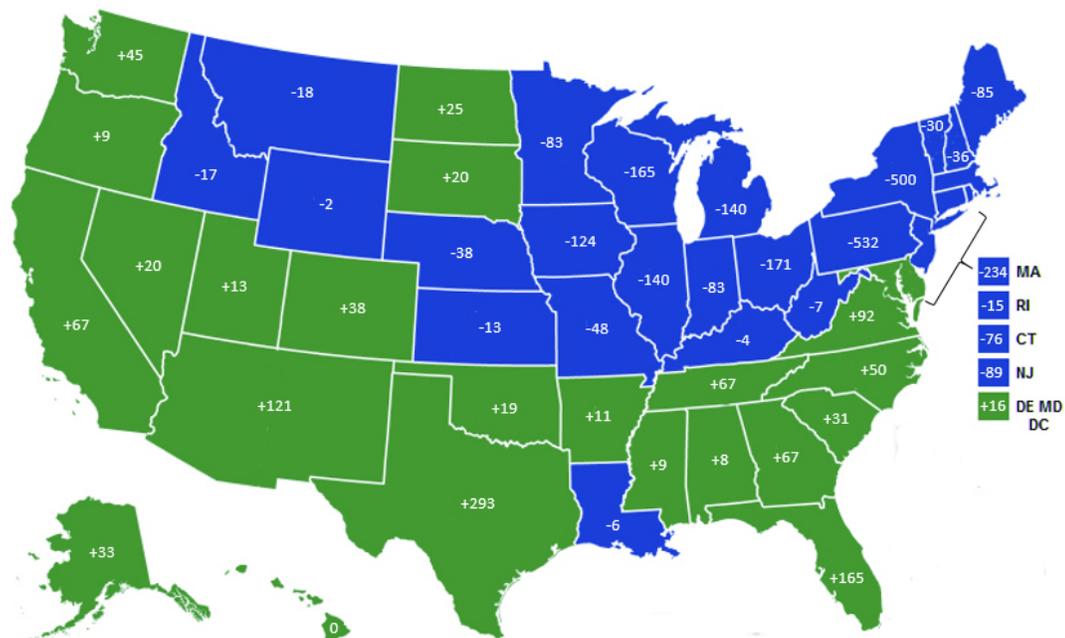
What we know at this stage of the planning process — and this is fluid, and can change — is that we will have six deaneries with about 60 Families of parishes, about 52 of those being led by diocesan priests, and about 8 being led by religious order priests. All priests are meeting for a day of work and recommendations in September, and these numbers could change after their input.

What you can see by these numbers is that there will be less pastors leading families of parishes, and many more parochial vicars (assistant priests) who will be involved in the sacramental ministry of the church. The number of lay ministers who presently serve the church is going to be more important than ever as we move forward in this reorganization.

Our parishes are also going to be as important as ever in making up the local church of Cincinnati as places of hospitality and belonging. Our parishes are going to look differently than they have before, taking on more parishioners and larger geographical areas in most cases, but still vital in the local church. More to come next week.

I know it does not seem like it, but not everything about *Beacons of Light* is a loss. In previous columns about *Beacons* I have noted fewer priests, fewer active Catholics, fewer parishes (in Ohio, since 1971, 171 parishes have closed. In the 200 year history of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati over 300 parishes have been opened; we now have 210), and fewer children being born today. In many states the number of Catholics and parishes have increased in that time. Those are all factual statistics that can easily be proven.

Net Change in Catholic Parishes by State, 1971 to 2018



are many answers to these questions, but maybe the best indicator is that we experience a sense of fulfillment by what we are doing.

Last week I had the opportunity to go back to the parish in Dayton where I served immediately following ordination. A bride called me about a year ago asking if I would witness a wedding ceremony that she was planning with her fiancé. The call took me by surprise because I left the parish 30 years ago. But she went on to explain that I had witnessed the marriage of her parents 33 years ago, and thought it would be a meaningful connection if I could come back to witness her marriage.

As I was driving back to Cincinnati following the wedding I had a great sense of joy that I could return to Dayton to witness the marriage. There was a sense of fulfillment because it is easy to forget that each act of service has a lasting impact on people. This is, I believe, one way that we know that we are doing God's will. We look for these moments, regardless of what specific call God gives to each of us.

Let's look specifically at church vocations for just a moment. We all have the responsibility to let our parishioners know when we sense that they may have a call to the priesthood (whether as a diocesan/secular priest — or a religious order priest — they are very different callings), the diaconate, or a brother or sister. Let's be honest, the response to these vocations is not a very popular way of life to choose today. None of these roles are considered prestigious, and each calling has its own circumstances of sacrifice. In these callings there are not many opportunities for advancement and financial reward, because that is not what this way of life is about. And, much like other "jobs," the demands and stresses of ministry are not inviting for most people. The calling is only sustained when the calling comes from deep within a person.

As we move forward we will make a concerted effort to create a Vocation Plan so that we can nurture the gifts that God has put into each of us, in different ways, all for the sake of ministry to Christ and His people.

“No longer burdened by the illusion of control.” I noticed this bumper sticker as I was driving behind a car recently. I enjoy reading *other people's* automobile bling, though I really don't want it on my own car. This saying has been occupying my thoughts since I read it.

I have all kinds of ideas about what the church of the future could look like, but the reality is that, ultimately, it is God's church. For all of our planning and preparation for what *Beacons of Light* will look like for our archdiocese, we believe that the Holy Spirit is going to shape the church of the future, according to God's will. The illusion that we are in control is certainly a burden in all things, including what the church will look like.

That being said, we have to do our part. “Work as though everything depends on us, pray as though everything depends upon God,” St. Augustine noted. As we move forward we are all going to need plenty of patience and understanding with the process — and one another. The proposals that we will soon see will find some current regions having parishes added to them, some regions to which we have become accustomed will change, and most parishes that have been “stand alone” parishes will now be joined by another parish or parishes.

On Wednesday, September 29 all priests will be gathering for a workshop in which the proposed models will be examined, agreed upon, or suggested changes made. The next day school principals will look at those same models so that they can make recommendations and suggestions.

Then parishioners throughout the archdiocese will have the opportunity to respond to the models that have been presented by their pastors. Catholics throughout the

archdiocese will need to go to <http://www.beaconsaoc.org/> to give their input, starting October 1, and ending on October 20. It is going to be very important that Catholics take this opportunity to share both their affirmations and concerns.

The Archbishop will announce the Families of Parishes sometime before Thanksgiving, with the Families of Parishes going into effect on July 1, 2022. The Families will then have up to five years to transition to one parish. The timeline and manner in which this happens is decided by each Parish Family throughout the Archdiocese.

Pastors and Parochial Vicars will be assigned and announced in the spring, when usual assignments are made. There will be sixty pastors assigned, with one or more parochial vicars in each Family of Parishes.

I know that we all, myself included, would like to control the outcome of this planning process. The reality is that control is an illusion any time we are working for the good of the whole. Please take the time to pray as though everything depends upon God, because it does. And work as though everything depends on us, because God needs our cooperation. In faith we believe that our planning for the future is something that we have face — and our belief tells us that God is already in our future.

