

Diocese Looking at 75th Year: DYNAMIC!

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Context

Pope Pius XII established the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana on Oct. 21, 1944. We are so named because there are dioceses of Lafayette also in France and Louisiana. Just as our diocese was getting its legs under it, Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council in 1959. The second revision of Canon Law went into force in 1983. The first Church-wide catechism in 500 years was published in 1994. If we look at Indiana history back to the 1830s, it is clear that the Church is regularly redefining its locations, ministries and relation to surrounding society.

My recent rereading of Acts of the Apostles and Paul's epistles confirms that such is the nature of being a "pilgrim people."

Trends

The Catholic population of our 24-county area in 1944 was about 32,000. (In 2018, our largest parish has about 12,000 parishioners.) Today, the diocese numbers more than 100,000, possibly as high as 125,000. Hispanic Catholics are an increasing presence over the past 30 to 40 years.

Our area used to be mainly rural, with a number of small industrial cities. Today, most of us are in urban and suburban settings. There were a half dozen religious orders helping in hospitals and schools, where today women's religious orders numbers are smaller. Ministry by laypeople, once rare, is thriving here. The permanent deacons, re-established in the 1960s, are also a growing presence among us. Over the past 10 years, the diocese has been blessed with relatively numerous ordinations to priesthood. Historically, our country has produced enough home-grown vocations only between 1955 and 1962.

Presently our diocese does not have a "priest shortage," but we do have an unbalanced distribution of priests and ministry demands. With local research and outside help, we are investigating options so we have healthy priests and flourishing faith communities.

Here, for example, is a situational challenge. Some of our priests are saying four or five Sunday Masses on the weekend. Sometimes there might be a funeral on Saturday, so add one more.

The Church has a rule about a priest saying two or three Masses on Sunday. In places where the parish church is not nearly full for each Mass, over-scheduling goes against good worship sense. And in places where a priest's parishes have scheduled both Saturday and Sunday evening Masses, it is now almost impossible to find a "supply priest" who is available for 30 hours from Saturday confessions through Sunday evening Mass.

I am not knocking the men who are saying a lot of Masses on weekends. But parishioners and priests unintentionally create expectations for successive priests and parishioners. Our priests have heard me say numerous times, "Have mercy on your successor."

Key perspective: Evangelization

Renewal committees talk about moving “from maintenance to mission.” The bishop, the diocese and the whole Church are the mission of Christ. When an institution tries to keep things as they are (buildings, schedules, programs and staff) apart from the reason they came to be, it fossilizes. Because change in the Church happens relatively slowly, it can take all of us a while to perceive whether vitality is evident, or if stagnation has set in. In no way do I promote disruption as a good thing in itself.

A test for our Church’s “heart health” is reflected in all sorts of literature and workshops. Some parishes have active groups intensely renewing their evangelizing efforts. A booklet by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis called “Living as Missionary Disciples” is a summary for personal and parochial renewal. If you have had a 20-minute conversation about the Church that did not mention Jesus, you really need to sample this text online at <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/living-as-missionary-disciples/files/assets/basic-html/page-3.html>. Also in Spanish at <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/living-as-missionary-disciples-spanish/files/assets/basic-html/page-I.html>

Resources

A bishop’s work must attend to everyone, but he has special obligations with and to the priests. The Presbyteral Council represents a big part of this relationship and provides a necessary sounding board for the bishop.

Not only has society changed, but it has changed the generation of men we hope feel called to ministry and priesthood. Younger people are coming from “families of origin” that are measurably different than even a decade ago. They are citizens of the “digital continent” which has shaped how they receive and send information —indeed, how they judge what counts for information. Seminaries are constantly adjusting to the changing needs of their students. After ordination, the diocese offers priests ongoing skill-building opportunities and team awareness. We intend that our efforts will build bridges of knowledge, wisdom and friendship across generations. The men report that this is happening.

One of the questions most often addressed to me is “Does the Church teach priests about management and finances?” Yes, formally and in a sort of apprenticeship. Some men already have business experience. Almost 30 of our men participated in a 20-month program several years ago called “Good Leaders/Good Shepherds.” Today, with the help of a Lilly Endowment grant, the Catholic Leadership Roundtable has done “360” evaluations of Chancery staff (me included) and continues follow-up consultations. As part of this effort, priests participate in a week-long learning session called “The Pastor’s Tool Box.” There is a group doing this as I write, and there will be more chances to participate. The faculty comes from around the country and costs are covered by the grant. All priests, regardless of their age or past experience, are encouraged to sign up. At this point, I believe that the encouragement by parishioners rather than orders from the bishop makes the “Tool Box” registration a more meaningful experience. Please invite your priest to join this effort, or learn that he already has.

As my offices develop an outlook for going forward, we have enlisted proven outside consultants for various projects. These give a better and less expensive result depending on the project. In all

of this, we keep a prayerful eye on our faith mission. Our role will always be “the care of souls,” whether to benefit the laity or clergy and religious.

I am looking for a variety of positive outcomes over the next months and years. I am obligated to two of them: to increase the ministerial capacity of the diocese, and to increase the pastoral capacity of the parishes. I am glad to report that during the past year a good number of priests and lay persons from diocesan and parish offices are helping to illuminate discipleship opportunities for all of us.