

Forward Together in Christ – Report to the Parish (April 10, 2024)

In December of last year (Dec. 3, 2023) representatives from our parish met with those of other parishes of the Hamilton deanery (region) to discuss the diocesan initiative, *Forward Together in Christ*. This was in part the Hamilton diocese's response to Pope Francis call for the Church to adopt a synodal approach in terms of its planning and governance; a more consultative model that sees the many constituent parts of the Church in conversation around important pressing issues. It was also integral to the diocese's post-COVID strategy of rebuilding in light of the pastoral and financial damage that resulted from prolonged lockdowns and other restrictions to community activity.

Organized by the Bishop's office and under the supervision of Auxiliary Bishop Wayne Lobsinger, the meeting was a guided discussion of seven key areas of concern that had been identified by a prior online survey promoted in the diocese earlier in the year. The clergy of the diocese met in small groups with Bishop Douglas Crosby through the fall of 2023 to discuss these seven: Laity, Communication, Catechesis, Schools, Hospitality/Outreach, Liturgy, and Clergy Care. It was then the turn of the laity.

At the December meeting, our six-member parish delegation was divided and one each placed at a discussion table with reps from other parishes. Following several hours of talk, the meeting shared some of the commentary and observations made at the tables. We were then charged by Bp. Lobsinger to have the parish reps meet together in the new year to share more of the discussion with each other and prepare a report for their respective parish communities.

Our parish delegation met February 17 of this year to hold this debriefing, sharing what was heard in the table groups in December, and to form our impressions into a report.

One comment common to our parish group was that discussion was not equally balanced across all seven areas, but clearly concentrated on a narrower set of issues. In some instances, this was the result of connecting two or more thematic areas into a single issue.

The reason other topics appeared to get short shrift was the simple absence of any sense as to how to address the specific problems identified. For example, under "Clergy Care" there was no shortage of sincerity in concern, but little in suggestions as to how to cope with the shortage of priests, their workload, and the growing problem of stress, fatigue and lack of free time for pastors and their associates to replenish their energy through rest and recreation. However, it was suggested that people think to invite their pastor to dinner more often!

Communication was another area that was only lightly discussed. Much of the discussion looked at technology that might ease the burden of parish offices in "getting the word out." However, it was also acknowledged that managing social media, email, websites, etc. in most organizations is a job in itself while most parishes don't have the staffing to dedicate one person to this. Rather, communication is one of many tasks undertaken by pastor, church secretary and other staff, in an often uncoordinated way. This accounts for the lack of innovation in parish practice, a reliance upon the printed bulletin and email while other possibilities for promoting church activities go unexplored or if known about, unused.

There was considerable discussion as to what the common core of our problems is, and how better strategy was needed to address it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was in matters connected with the faith life of the laity. This then brought a focus in conversation toward our publicly-funded schools, laity involvement in parish ministry and governance, and faith formation ("catechesis") of lay people.

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Our “Catholic” Schools

Our parish reps reported that almost every discussion topic included mention of the schools as a detached, parallel Catholic community that no longer have a meaningful relationship with the parishes. The point of contact is the parish priest, and in the context of the schools, he functions less as a pastor and more as an occasional chaplain, i.e. not part of the school leadership. It was also noted that it seemed that school board employees, both retired and active, were well represented at the regional meeting of parishes, most expressing frustration with the current state of the school-church relationship. What became apparent in the discussion was that most Catholics don't understand how the Church actually relates to the publicly-funded school system by law. The school boards are wholly autonomous entities and are in no way within the jurisdiction of the diocese or under the authority of the bishop.

Past outreach strategies were brought up, and suggested (e.g. special masses featuring school children in prominent roles in the liturgy). However, it was observed that these and similar outreach efforts had clearly failed. So, why try them again?

Faith formation was seen as the key issue by many. Among our representatives the problem was seen to lay in parents “outsourcing” religious instruction to the schools; and that many of the teaching staff no longer being practicing Catholics, were ill-suited for the role of catechist.

Catechesis (Faith Formation)

Our general Catholic population do not know the faith – this was shared by most participants at the regional consultation, and agreed by our parish reps. The majority of Catholics in Canada are spiritually moribund (as distinct from “dead”). It was suggested that we emphasize “family faith formation” and engage the mothers and fathers – perhaps, by creating a forum for parents to ask questions, raise concerns, and voice complaints. Many within the current generation of parents reject central tenets of the Catholic faith yet send their children to schools that are ostensibly Catholic because they nonetheless appreciate the environment created by a spiritually-informed approach to education. It was observed that many objections to Catholic beliefs are not grounded in reason or understanding, but by impressions formed from popular culture and the superficial “reading” of doctrine (i.e. outside a faith context, with a materialist/secular frame of mind).

Among our mass-going faithful lies great potential, but there is a tremendous lack of confidence (on their own part and the part of some clergy) in their ability to be effective evangelists and catechists, ministers and parish leaders. Efforts by the current leadership, both lay and ordained, to provide more advanced faith formation that would give the active faithful this needed confidence, are urgently required.

Going forward from here

While one of the objectives of the diocesan “Going Forward” initiative is to encourage the adoption of synodal practices within parishes, the agreed consensus among our parish reps was that this would be premature in light of issues raised above. The lay faithful need deeper instruction in their faith, the disengaged need to be evangelized and catechized. To attempt discussion about serious pastoral issues without a solid grounding in Catholicism would likely be unproductive, and potentially divisive. The parish then should look to putting in place programs of re-evangelization of the existing Catholic community, family-focused religious instruction, and intentional formation of lay leadership as a prerequisite.

Submitted by the St. Augustine, Dundas delegation of *Forward Together in Christ*,

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