

PROPOSAL FOR PASTORAL CARE IN & THRU PRIESTLESS PARISHES

WHAT: The Pastoral Task: i.e. What they are to do, is the central issue. Key elements:

- Leadership – to create a vision with the parish community: “the purpose for which we are here,” and form persons in the faith and train them for ministry and service.
- Care - To visit the faithful, especially in time of sickness and death, but as much as possible, know and be known by all and to be present to the whole community.
- Governance: To take responsibility for the day to day coordination of parish activities, and take initiative as need to motivate, to correct, and to affirm persons who work in the parish ministries; and where needed, provide conflict resolution and reconciliation. To be a true pastoral leader he/she must lead worship where appropriate, and likewise break open the Word. In short, he/she would be in the role of pastor, excepting sacramental ministry, and under the supervision of the canonical pastor. (per Canon 517.2)

WHO: The persons: Who are the potential pastoral leaders?

There are many persons presently active in our parishes, whether pastoral staff members, deacons, or members gifted with charisma for ministry. We speak of proven individuals. Given the local nature of this ministry, it would be advisable to choose from the involved parish itself, or a neighboring one. The pastoral leaders will be appointed by the bishop and be under the supervision of a canonical pastor nearby, while still having the flexibility to make ordinary decisions and actually lead the parish according to its gifts and needs. Canonical Pastors, too will need training and a desire to embrace this manner of ministry. Diocesan Offices must be included in this training also. Most especially, the people of God in a parish must be involved in this process and own it or it will be a failure from the outset.

Training and formation would be as needed in individual cases. This is primarily a Pastoral Role which demands spiritual and pastoral preparation as well as managerial skills. Persons would in some cases, have quite a bit of spiritual formation and managerial expertise, while others may have little.

HOW: Remuneration and Status: Pastoral leaders who are expected to be involved 5 or 6 days in the work should be paid a commensurate salary, with proper benefits. They should have the job tenure that other professional ministers and Church employees do. Statutes created and approved by the USCCB should protect the status of these ministers from dismissal without cause, or because a new ordinary or pastor would not accept the program. Those who would accept the presence of this form of ministry and accept formation/training would be best suited to continue it.

WHY: Prophetic Importance: These Lay Pastoral Leaders will provide a very important proving ground for the USA Church because we would learn what men and women, married and unmarried, can accomplish as pastoral leaders, and what kind of persons we need. We will gain a great deal of wisdom about what works and what doesn't work. In a larger framework, it would show how the priesthood of the future might discern proven individuals.

A special urgency to begin now arises from the fact that presently, due to the large number of retiring priests, we have many sacramental ministers available on a flexible part-time basis. This will be true for the next ten to fifteen years. This is a providential time to initiate Pastoral Leaders of Priest-less Parishes. With many sacramental ministers, available for part time service, we can ensure Sunday Eucharist and basic sacramental ministry for most of the parishes who are without a resident priest as pastor while we work out the dynamics for the future. It is unquestionable that time, creativity and courage will be needed to make all the adjustments. Time will also be needed to properly train Pastoral Leaders.

BACKGROUND: The Experience of some dioceses: The experience of various dioceses (including Jackson, Baltimore, Seattle, Saginaw, Scranton, Harrisburg and Camden) with lay or diaconal pastoral leadership of parishes has been varied. Some bishops began it, but a successor closed it down where it existed in an early stage. Time is needed for a new process to take hold and there will be challenges to embrace along the way even as in parishes with resident priests.

The most extensive effort seems to have been Saginaw's under Bishop Kenneth Untener.

"Basically, they took the diocesan Deaconate Training program and opened it up to both men and women. It consisted of two to three years of academic studies conducted on weekends once a month, followed by a practicum year in which the candidate committed to a specific ministerial program in the parish. After the completion of the program, and with the recommendation of their pastor, they would be commissioned by the Bishop as a Lay Minister for a three-year period. Their commission could be renewed every three years. After twelve years, they could request permanent Lay Ministry status. During their Lay Ministry, they were expected to participate in an annual retreat and to attend some ongoing workshops. Most of the Lay Ministers served as volunteer ministers in their parishes; a few were employed in paid positions. A few of the lay ministers obtained Masters Degrees in Theology or Pastoral Ministry."

Normal practice in many Third World parishes, especially in Africa and Latin America, is to have a larger parish, usually rural, with many "out-stations" (Uganda) or "chapels" (Guatemala) which are visited by the parish priest four, six or twelve times a year for Mass and sacraments. Weekly or bi-weekly services are conducted by a catechist or ideally by a trained lay preacher. Training in those parts of the world is much more difficult to accomplish. Leadership of the community may be vested in this individual or a different catechist. All such ministers are expected to take part in periodic formation

weekends at deanery or diocesan level. The formational training must be provided by a person who him or herself is well prepared for this role. While on-the-ground realities in our part of the world are greatly different, this is an established model of the lay pastoral care that we in the First World can learn from.

For the reasons given above we offer this plea: that our bishops corporately, with the collaboration and assistance of those with experience in this area, formulate a plan now to meet this emerging crisis. Depending on circumstances, such a plan may be applied at once by some dioceses, more slowly by others, but a nationwide reality is unfolding which demands action by our whole Bishops' Conference. Pope Francis has urged this very kind of action. Faith tells us that this crisis is also an opportunity. Hope tells us that whatever risk is involved belongs to our mission of bringing the Gospel to all people.

If USA Church leadership postpones dealing with this issue, the window of opportunity will slowly close. Then we will experience a greater collapse of parishes than we are currently experiencing, a loss of morale and health among priests, and further decline of the morale and trust of people who depend upon us to meet their spiritual needs. As our Catholic presence diminishes, so will our presence in society in all of its aspects.

Some dioceses may rush into a crash program of pastoral leadership. Others may declare that is God's plan that we become a smaller remnant in order to give a stronger witness to a faithless world. It is difficult to view either response as what the Spirit is saying to the Churches, or as obedience to Christ's command to "Go out and make disciples of all the nations."

REFERENCES:

- *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord A resource for guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry*, A STATEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
- *Parish Life Coordinators* by Hendricks, Loyola, 2009
- *Shaping Catholic Parishes* by Gamin (ed.) Loyola
- **Pastoring Multiple Parishes**, Moguilka and Wilkins, Loyola University Press.
- The USCCB documents that address this concern, on [website](#).
- *The Theological, Sacramental and Ecclesial Context of their Emerging Models Project*, Most Rev. Blasé J. Cupich, National Ministry Summit, 2008.
- *Listening to the Spirit: Bishops and Parish Life Coordinators*, Gautier, Bruce and Bendyna, CARA, 2007
- *The Changing Face of the Church*, Jewell and Ramey, Loyola University Press, 2010.
- *The Next Generation of Pastoral Leaders*, Hoge and Jewell, Loyola University Press, 2010.

PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION:

'lighting fires all over the prairie' (John Hynes)

- Seek feedback regarding this draft proposal-cum-rationale by sharing it with all AUSCP members, enlist all members in approaching
 - Each of their individual bishops
 - Their deaneries and priests' councils
- AUSCP's Moderator and individual bishops in such places as Bridgeport, Newark, Chicago, San Diego, Lexington, to invite feedback
- The NFPC
- Revise proposal as suggested by feedback received.
- Submit officially to USCCB officials.