



An Archdiocesan Vision for The Parish of the Twenty-First Century

Introduction

As the Mother Diocese of the Catholic Church in the United States of America, the Archdiocese of Baltimore has a rich tradition, expressed nowhere more eloquently than in its parishes. From the Chesapeake Bay in the East to the Alleghenies in the far Western boundaries of the state, the parishes of our Archdiocese have for over two centuries been the home, the help, and the hope of our people. Ever evolving to meet the changing needs of our people, and in response to the evolving tradition of our faith, our parishes nonetheless have maintained their basic identity as the most local embodiment of the Church universal. As the 21st Century continues to unfold, the identity, function, and structure of a parish, as Church, must continue to render God present and, as it were, visible in the world by being a herald of the Good News, providing for the liturgical and sacramental life of the community, and performing those ministries and service throughout the Archdiocese to fulfill the mission of the Church entrusted to us by Jesus.

Identity: The Parish as Church

“The parish is the fundamental cell of the life of the diocesan Church . . . It is not an administration or a business; it is a spiritual reality, made up of men and women, called by the grace of God to become sons and daughters of God, entering into a new relationship with each other by baptism.”
- Pope John Paul II

Just as Vatican II recognizes the diocese as a “particular church,” a real church, not just a sub-unit of the Church Universal, bishops, theologians, and the Holy Father himself now speak about the parish as Church as “a fundamental cell of the life of the diocesan Church.

In our future, the parish must and will continue to be Church, a gathered community of disciples, formed by Word and Sacrament, and working, hoping, and praying for the Kingdom of God. The people of the Archdiocese will live and make Christ present in and through our parishes, being Church together in the city, the suburbs, and rural areas alike, and most especially where the burdens of poverty and racism are the greatest and there is most need of the home, the help, and the hope that the parish church provides.

Functions: What the Church Does

“Each member of a parish is to become ever more conscious of the richness constituted by the life of the parish. This richness is summarized in its three missions: The Prophetic Mission, characterized by the task of proclaiming to all men the Good News of salvation; The Priestly Mission, characterized by participating in the one priesthood of Christ by celebrating the divine

mysteries; The Royal Mission, characterized by service to all persons living within the parish boundaries whether they are Christian, non-Christian, or of no religion.” - Pope John Paul II

In our future, the parish will continue to explore new ways to perform these same functions of the Church. No parish may think of itself as, or allow itself to devolve into, or be replaced by, just a community of mutually supportive friends, or just a place of worship, or just a teaching tool, or just a service program. As we face the challenges of the new century, we must find ways for all these dimensions of parish life to thrive. All the dimensions of the life of the Church must continue to be a part of the life of every parish, if we wish to remain true to our tradition.

Structure: Who the Church Is

“The parish offers an outstanding example of community apostolate, for it gathers into a unity all the human diversities that are found there and inserts them into the universality of the Church. The laity should develop the habit of working in close union with their priests . . . in all the apostolic and missionary enterprises of their ecclesial family . . . Parish priests are in a special sense collaborators with the bishop. They are given, in a specific section of the diocese, and under the authority of the bishop, the care of souls as their particular shepherd.” - Vatican II

In our future, the ordained ministers of our Church must continue to provide leadership in our ministry of the word and to be guardians of our sacramental existence. All of the baptized must share actively in the work of the Church as priest, prophet, and king. From among the entire baptized community, however, there are those who will be called to become increasingly fully involved in pastoral leadership and parish administration.

The projections of our Archdiocesan study *The Hope That Lies Before Us* about future numbers of available priests show that even the notion of an ordained priest serving full time as the leader of every parish will change, and indeed in some places it has begun to change already. Different models are beginning to emerge. Working out the roles and the place in parish life of various ways to represent the single leadership of the bishop in the Church will be a challenge, but we will face the problems and work them out as a people.

Similarly, ways must and will be found to develop the role of the parish pastoral council in the direction of the life and work of the parish, and to develop the roles and ministries of deacons and professionally trained lay ecclesial ministers on the parish staff.

Pastoral leadership, conciliar decision-sharing, effective staffing, and total community involvement are the essential structures of any church. They will, in one form or another, continue to characterize our parishes.

Conclusion

Our parishes in every part of the Archdiocese will endure, and will thrive in the 21st Century because we will both remain faithful to our tradition and continue to evolve with it. Our parishes were, are, and will remain Church.