

Be Not Afraid

Bishop John M. LeVoir's Monthly Column for *The Prairie Catholic*

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Concerted efforts needed in pastoral planning

Over the last two years Tom Keaveny, director of Pastoral Planning for the diocese, and I, in consultation with the diocesan Committee on Parishes and the Priest Personnel Board, have been working with priests, deacons, pastoral leaders, and parishioners on parish mergers.

What is a merger of parishes? The type of merger that we are working on in the diocese occurs when, "one or more parishes are absorbed or assimilated into another parish," such that the receiving parish retains its identity and name throughout the process ("Fourth Plan," p. 120).

In a merger, the assets of the merged parish – such as its church building, its cemetery (if it has one), and other financial resources – become the responsibility of the receiving parish ("Fourth Plan," pp. 122-123).

It is not true that the church building of a merged parish automatically shuts down once a merger takes place. Not only can Sunday Masses, Baptisms, funerals, weddings, and other forms of divine worship still occur there, but at least one weekday Mass should still be celebrated there as long as it is open ("Fourth Plan," pp. 122-123).

Why are mergers necessary at this time in our diocesan history? The demographic trends in our diocese, both in terms of numbers of laity and priests, are showing an unprecedented decline. Specifically, since 2000 the diocese has been experiencing a loss of about 850 parishioners per year due to death and attrition.

The priests tell me that over the last several years, they have been celebrating more funerals than ever. Most of the people who are dying have been the backbone of parish life. The next generations are not as fully engaged as these faithful elderly parishioners have been or they are not attending church at all. This decline in parishioners will most likely continue into the future.

The number of priests serving the 75 parishes in the diocese is 42. Projections show the number of priests dropping from 42 to 26 in the next 10 years.

In addition, our priests are overextended right now.

However, even if we had one priest for each one of our 75 parishes, some parishes could not afford a priest's salary. Parishes are able to support their priests now because the ratio of parishes to priests is about two to one. For every two parishes, there is one priest. The decline in the number of priests is a serious issue.

As the "Fourth Plan for Parishes" states: "At some point, most area faith communities will no longer be able to function well simply by reducing the number of their Masses and integrating the operations and activities of its constituent parishes. The loss of a priest or the loss of a significant portion of the population in one or more of its parishes will likely be responsible for the situation.

This is when changes to the structure of their organizations [mergers] may come into play” (“Fourth Plan,” p. 141).

The diocese is at that point now.

As the bishop of the diocese, I need help in making the decisions about pastoral planning. I need the input from people in the diocese: priests, deacons, pastoral administrators, diocesan officials, parishioners, and committees.

Please share your ideas with your pastor or pastoral leader and be supportive of their efforts to address these issues.

All of us are members of the diocese and all of us are called to work together to solve our problems. Prayer and honest dialogue will help me to discern what God’s will is for us as a diocese.

Advent

The season of Advent begins Nov. 29. During this season we are called upon to give witness to our faith by preparing well for Christmas, the celebration of the birth of our Lord. During Advent, we are also to give witness to our hope that Jesus will come again at the end of time to make all things new.

Pope Francis reminds us of this hope when he says that the season of Advent restores “a hope which does not disappoint for it is founded on God’s Word. A hope which does not disappoint, simply because the Lord never disappoints! He is faithful! He does not disappoint! Let us think about and feel this beauty” (Angelus message, Dec. 1, 2013).

Diocesan Ministries Appeal

It is time for the Diocesan Ministries Appeal (DMA). This is the collection that funds the various ministries of the diocese, as well as parish needs. Please see the section of this issue of *The Prairie Catholic* that is dedicated to the DMA. Please note the changes in the 2015 DMA from the previous DMAs. I ask that you please be generous to the DMA.

Compliance with the charter

Recently, the Diocese of New Ulm was audited by an outside firm and was found to be in compliance with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People.” The outside auditing firm was StoneBridge Business Partners.

This year, there were also one parish and two schools audited in addition to the diocese. The audits went very well. Please see page 3 of this issue of *The Prairie Catholic* for more on the audit. Also, see the Diocese of New Ulm Web site and click on “Safe Environment.”

Year of Mercy

Pope Francis has announced an extraordinary jubilee, a Holy Year of Mercy, to highlight the Catholic Church’s “mission to be a witness of mercy.” “No one can be excluded from God’s mercy,” the pope said.

The Holy Year will open on Dec. 8, 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, and will conclude on Nov. 20, 2016, with the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

This holy year is very important to the Holy Father and might be seen as the defining moment in his papacy. Please see the Diocese of New Ulm Web site www.dnu.org and click on “Extraordinary Year of Mercy.”