
PASTORAL STUDY SESSION:

THE FUTURE OF OUR DIOCESE: PASTORAL RESTRUCTURING

Over 180 people attended the fourth pastoral study session at the Diocesan Centre, February 4, 5, and 6, 1998, around the theme The Future of Our Diocese: Pastoral Restructuring.

The resource person was Fr. Gilles Routhier of Université Laval in Québec. What follows are major excerpts from a personal summary written by Sister Géraldine Brotherton, F.M.A., throughout the session.

These reflections are offered to the session participants as a tool to aid in their ongoing reflection and continued action.

The objective of the session was to allow ourselves to be transformed in such a way that we would return home with enthusiasm to take up the challenges awaiting us. The future holds out many challenges that call us to life. Fr. Routhier stated,

*If you are so many here
it is because of your concern
for the future of your parishes.
There is interest,
but there may also be a certain amount of fear
that [the parish's] very survival is at stake,
and we want to ward off any evil spells.*

Fr. Routhier then drew a brief sketch of his pastoral experience: as a missionary in Hudson's Bay where he had a parish whose dimensions measured 1,100 Km. north-south/250 Km. eastwest. He then went to Québec's North Shore to a parish 120 Km. long. He was then sent for further studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris, where he was in close contact with a parish whose population numbered 47,000. Following which he was sent to pastor a parish along the Québec south shore.

This implies that the word 'parish' covers several different realities. And it is no tragedy to have different kinds of parishes.

Our parishes must be recast, if they are to be vibrant; otherwise they will become fossilised. It is important not to be defensive about it or be resistant to this, one ought not function just by reacting according to one's apprehensions. We are not specialists in resuscitation, but we have to risk being midwives to help with the birth of new modes of living the parish reality.

Our parishes will change:

Are we to be victims or agents of these changes ?
Are we to just suffer these changes with resignation as a bad throw of the dice,
or are we to be major players, in these changes ?
How shall we react ?
Our parishes are going to change... into what ?
And why ?
Besides, what is the cause, the origin, the source of these changes ?

Why do we need a parish ?
What do we do with one ?

The Mission

What is our mission, for the next few years? In what way will awareness of our mission direct the life of our parishes ?

It is important that we first look at our mission, it gives us a project and allows us to look to the future not in terms of decrease, compared to the past. The mission opens us onto an exciting adventure. One does not readjust or restructure only following a study of a situation, but also because the mission itself demands it.

It is important that the starting point be the mission rather than ourselves, because it directs our attention to God who loves and serves the world through us. The focus is never on the number of those sent out but on the command to « go to » God's beloved world. We are not present for the sake of structures but for the people themselves, and the mission takes us back to this fundamental premise. It is among the people that we shall re-focus on the God who sends us out, and this is the reason of our existence. It unites us, to start with the question of mission, because then there is room for everyone.

God's Business

Mission is God's business, even though we have believed that it is ours. Mission is God's action of sending us out, of God's concern for the world. We are God's instruments for carrying out the mission, so we shall not fear that this service of God to others be given more adequately, in a way better adapted to the world of today.

The Church's objective is to reveal God's love for humankind. It is only after this that we shall find the appropriate means of communicating it. God sends us: we are but servants. We must be docile and open to this God who commissions us. The first reason for pastoral restructuring is the relationship that exists between God and the world. We must re-think things as they relate to the mission; then only will we find the means. Otherwise the whole exercise becomes a patchup job.

The Church's mission is not to maintain an inherited network of parishes. Mission does not equal the sum total of the work to be done or the amount of work being done. The Church's mission is not to be seen in the number of pastoral tasks accomplished. We sometimes risk identifying mission with the work we do. They are not the mission but an expression of what mission is at a given moment. There are some things that appear and others that vanish. Wanting to maintain all of our actual pastoral tasks could be an obstacle to the Church's mission being carried out. If we do not consent to having some things disappear we probably keep new pastoral actions more adapted to today from appearing. A bad question would be to ask,

*What are we going to do
for the parish's status quo to continue,
but with fewer people involved ?*

In taking that route we shall quickly hit a stone wall. The mission does not equal the number of pastoral tasks which we are now keeping.

On the other hand, we must not think that parishes are a thing of the past. Here, one must avoid two pitfalls: that of steadfastly insisting on maintaining all parishes forever, or setting everything aside and starting over from scratch. In the diocese of Edmundston there are only about ten parishes in thirty-two that are over one hundred years old: this means that parishes have not always been there, that things used to be different. At the time opening parishes was the best way of living the mission. We would be bad inheritors if we did not work on our forebears' intuition. We must do as they did and find the best means for today. There is one risk: to maintain some kind of heroic position in supporting parishes with all of one's strength; this would direct energies to maintaining a formula that is not necessarily good. We would quickly experience a dwindling of strength by holding on to a formula that no longer works, while our energies should be used in ensuring the spread of the Gospel in our midst.

Who Are Those We Want to Serve ?

How are our activities and organisations reaching and serving them ?
What would we need to have, in order to reach the people ?
What must we do, to make the Emmanuel present to them ?
How are they affected by what we are actually doing ?
To those priests who say that they are overburdened:
Go through your calendar and cancel 25% of your activities.

There are four ways of doing this:

- a) cancel all activities that do not serve the mission
- b) cancel everything that could be done by others in your parish

- c) carefully consider everything you are doing which could be done with others
- d) look at everything there is,
which could be the object of inter-parish collaboration

Look at the people:

Who are we reaching ?

Who aren't we reaching ?

Look at your calendar, your agenda, and your activities:

Remember that the mission is not to be identified with our activities.

The aim is not to manage the decline but to set up a new dynamic, a new stimulus to push the Church forward. The task of restructuring is not an administrative measure but a project in which we shall all have a part to play.

If we do not refocus on the mission, pastoral restructuring to the contrary, we shall see the group shrink and shrivel up, and that is a paralysing situation. When badly directed, readjustments can lead to paralysis, and this cannot inspire anyone. What will give new vigour will be your looking after the people. It is energising, to serve God and others, while patching up is a pretty discouraging exercise. We want to live in a Church with vision and life, and not in one over whose decline we are presiding. What do we do for the power of the Spirit to act ? What new initiatives and organisations must be initiated in order to liberate the Gospel ? Pruning is a life-long task, for the sake of strengthening the tree. It would be looking the wrong way to say, "There are fewer priests, so we shall replace them with lay people. "This would just be a continuation of existing conditions, and real pastoral readjustments will not have been made.

If we do not consider the mission, others will do it for us. The Church will be seen as a service, as distributor of rites when needed. People are used to grand public services: people sometimes come to the rectory according to their needs. But our parishes are more than a public service. It is the Father who sends His Son and His Spirit. It would be to marginalise the Church if we were to consider it as a dispenser of rites. What's the Church for, in our society ? It is there to proclaim the Good News. The parish enterprise is based on the Gospel. One must not confuse the means (the parish) with the end (the mission). What is basic is the mission.

Parish Styles

A synod in France stated that

*The parish is to be closed
where there are fewer than forty practising families.
« A parish - all of Christian life for all »*

- has two characteristics:

- a) it has everything needed for Christian living, and
- b) it is for everyone.

And this requires many people and more energy than most other groups of people. Our aim should not be to "parish-ise" all Christian groups, because it would lead to their demise.

At first we used to say that it would really be bad if a parish stopped being one. It would destroy the existing group. Today we are saying the opposite. Ask anyone whose energies are drained, to keep a parish going, and you will quickly see how this can bring down the entire church community structure. It is often like giving oxygen to a milieu when it is given the demanding mandate of becoming a parish.

Necessity of Closeness and Necessity of Working on the Whole

It is important that the Church be visible in a particular milieu and environment, that it be easily identified on streets and among houses, that it be within reach. But there is also the necessity of looking at the broader view, at several parishes together. Christian living will be available to all only where there is sufficient critical mass. Hence we must remain close to the people while taking the broader view.

Around the 1950s, parish, village (where the population was generally Catholic), pastor, and a human group were seen as inseparable elements of the equation. Since that was the situation in which we were born we thought that this set-up was divine law. But then, in Cameroon a parish includes over 40 villages, therefore several human groups. In northern Québec there were 14 villages, one parish, and two places of worship. A municipality like Edmundston, for

instance, can have two parishes. In a diocese, one must look at more than one working parish model. At the beginning of the Church, in Rome there was one bishop. The city was divided into seven districts or deaconries. We can have a parish composed of several communities whose identity is maintained. Here we find a greater entity within which are found several communities. It is important to consider the distance factor. Even if a community does not have a parish status, this does not mean that we are losing everything. One can remain a human community within a greater whole, without losing one's identity. It is important to make a list of what we are willing to change right now, and a list of what the people are not ready to change. A Church presence must be maintained even where the community can no longer support the parish project. People's reactions of fear are understandable, and it is important to identify the more sensitive problems and find solutions to them.

A Few Ways of Looking at the Future

Inter-parish collaboration: Doing things together is a first step. It allows us to get to know one another. If the aim is to create a pastoral unit and leave parishes intact indefinitely, there is a danger to overburden the pastor who has to administer his own parish while ensuring the functioning of the unit. In this case another burden is added on and does not liberate one for the mission. But this might well be a first step in getting people together who would otherwise have no contacts between them. It is better to first aim at inter-parish collaboration. One can also look at the remembering of parishes and the creation of new ones. In this case no one parish devours another. What happens is two or three existing parishes are dissolved and a new one is created in their place. Otherwise, if one is maintained and two are dissolved, these latter would have the feeling of having been gobbled up by the former, bigger parish. It is important to ensure that each community keep its own place of worship, inasmuch as this is possible.

Time can be either foe or friend. If one feels cornered, one will be defensive. If we want to destroy someone, that person will defend him - or herself. If people are faced with a « fait accompli » or an emergency situation, they do not have sufficient time to adjust their minds to it. We must work in stages. It is important to have time as one's ally, to have time on one's side. Those people concerned by the process of change must be implicated. Change must not be decided upon against the will of the people. Where people are not in agreement, problems arise.

Steps to Follow

1. State the problem.
Oftentimes we find a solution or reach a decision to things that are not a problem to the people.
Where there is no awareness of a problem, no solution can be reached.
The people must go through the same process that you have.
2. Clearly identify the decision-making process.
The more a decision-making process is clear, the less will people feel threatened, and the smaller the chance for negative reactions.
For example, if the topic at hand is the rectory or the cemetery, it can be announced that a committee of experts will study the situation and make recommendations, that there will be consultation on the issue, that the population will be kept abreast of suggestions made, and that the finance committee will make its decision at a stated date.
3. State one's values.
For example, if we decide to get rid of the rectory, it will be in favour of a community group, for instance, one involved with evangelisation of one form or another.
Therefore, it is not a question of making money from the sale of the rectory.
The solution supported is one that ensures a Church presence in a particular milieu, one that would liberate energies for work in new missionary endeavours.
In this way the situation is de-dramatised.
People are free to make suggestions, and the decision made will serve those values that have been identified.
4. Inform.
We take in an awful lot of information.
When we have information we believe that matters will be different tomorrow.
But more often than not we keep this information from others.
Parishioners are not informed.

- It is important to pass on information relevant to PPC and PEAC discussions taking place. More the information is given, more will people be ready for change.
5. Suggest different scenarios.
 - Could take one shape or another, so that together the people would be involved in the discernment process.
 - What would best serve our values ?
 - It will not be the same answer everywhere.
 - If the answer is a viable one, why not adopt it ?
 6. Look at other experiences.
 - It is stimulating to hear of others who were able to make it, to hear of those who took the step and have not regretted it.
 - It is good to know about other experiences, it relativises certain fears.
 - Throughout, ensure sufficient time for sharing.
 - This can take on different forms:
 - meeting with groups rather than general meetings of the entire parish.
 - The people must be allowed to express themselves.
 - Resisting change is to get into a greater predicament.
 7. Decide. If we start we must have the courage to carry through.
 - If you do not start you do not solve the problem.
 - We must respect the people, decide, and start.
 - In Other Words...

God's action sends us out into the world, and this is what conditions pastoral restructuring. We are called to experience the parish differently, in other forms. We must maintain a pastoral ministry of closeness that respects local identity and colouring, a place of worship, a response to local needs. How to go on to new parish forms? At first there will be some insecurity and tension; the cost must not outweigh the benefits. Time must be given the time to proceed, but we must not delay. This undertaking must be accompanied by a spiritual process, by a real conversion experience. The community-as-Church must also experience conversion, and not only individuals; it must better reflect the face of Christ. There is a call to conversion for the parish as there is one for each individual. Besides, it is helpful to bring historical elements to bear on the process: The parish has always been in a state of transformation, and can still do so. Change is something permanent, in the Church.

Actors in the Mission

Reference: the Vatican II document on the Church's missionary activity, article 3, number 15, deals with the formation of the community. Various types of ministry are necessary for the implanting and growth of the Christian community, and once these forms of service have been called forth from the body of the faithful, by the divine call, they are to be carefully fostered and nurtured by all. Among these functions are those of priests, deacons and catechists, and also that of Catholic Action. Brothers and nuns, likewise, play an indispensable role in planting and strengthening the kingdom of Christ in souls, and in the work of further extending it, both by their prayers and active work.'

We are used to a Church based on only one ministry, that of the priest, and this has left its mark on us. When the number of priests is declining, there is a strong temptation on our part to replace them with another person and keep the 1950's model. But this is a far cry from St. Paul's teaching to the Corinthians regarding the Church-Body of Christ. All members must be active. It is important to actively involve everybody. The Church is not composed of only one person. (Cf. nos. 16 to 21 to the above-mentioned Vatican document)

Let our starting point be the Church-as-Body and not the priest shortage, otherwise we are on the wrong track. The question is: How are we going to raise the quality of life of the Church body ? and not: How are we going to replace the priest? It is necessary to foster a committed laity. We are sometimes too focused on our problems and not enough on the people. Who will do this or that ? The laity are from their people. They also belong to Christ. Their main task is to witness to Christ in their own milieu. What is most needed in our milieus is a laity that belongs to Christ and which, through its social action, transforms its milieu and nurtures Christian values. This witness must be made by all the baptised, otherwise the Gospel and the Church become irrelevant. Through her children, the Church must be present in the world. Evangelisation will be made by Christians. The Church is a vast body, it is not composed of pastoral agents only.

Pastoral Agents

What we must aim at is that the Church nevermore rest on the shoulders of only one person. The gifts of the Spirit are varied in number, and one person alone does not monopolise the Spirit. In a parish there are many and varied responsibilities. To replace a priest with a lay person may work for a while but it does not remedy the situation. Under the guise of modernity it is the most regressive solution. In this scenario there is no concern to diversify ministries, and the lay people are used as stop-gaps, as substitutes when we do not have any priests. This does not raise a lay person's self-worth, nor does it give the mission new impetus. It is both necessary and legitimate to have lay ministries, but to make of lay persons substitutes for priests is to short-change them, as it is a too short-term solution. From the moment a lay person exists only to the extent that there is a priest shortage, that lay person's status is no longer secure. The person exists only because of a lack, and this has been the cause of permanent conflicts between priests and lay people. Ministry must be based on something more solid than this.

If a status is based only on rivalry it causes permanent conflict rather than a desired partnership. How will that person's identity be defined? As a replacement for the priest who will never be there? A second rank minister. What is needed is a ministerial identity that is not based on substitution. Ministries are necessary because of their diversity. Each ministry must be specific to a certain extent. Priests are used to being the only ministers, and do not see this as being specific or limiting. No one should be allowed to say, « I do not need you. » The priest is a member of the body, and he needs the others. Everyone must say, « I need the other. » A necessary partnership, interdependence of ministries. All are needed, and indispensable.

Starting from the viewpoint of mission, pastors of parishes in Ville d'Anjou, Québec, tried to find new ministries to respond to their milieu's current needs: family ministry, children ministry, ministry of support for catechist volunteers, for those fighting against poverty. These are critical ministries for the Church, and productive of self-worth. And this is what is needed in our Church, to tackle the problem from the viewpoint of mission rather than administration. But for this to happen we cannot work piecemeal at this, case by case, because it would just be a solution of substitution. If the starting point is the enlarged parish, there will be room for different ministries. We must promote the rise of the Church body. If a parish is composed of 6 different localities, it will be important for each one to have a core group, someone involved, for example, in the fellowship aspect, another, in the community's prayer life, another in religious education, etc.

This core group or local pastoral team does not do all the work. This group needs the support of the parish pastoral team. One must work with the people who are there. Which lay ministries do we need in the pastoral team, to support local teams?

Role of the Pastor

His ministry is specific; it is not the sum total of everything. His ministry is limited and definite. He does not have to look after everything; others too have real responsibilities.

A first specific role of the priest is to preside. He is the one who 'stands before,' the one who is there to remind the group of the stranger (the Other) in their midst, Jesus Christ. The group will be tempted to believe that what they think becomes the norm. There will always be the Other who will disturb and challenge. The pastor is there to remind the group of the Other.

A second specific role is that of calling back the group to its sense of mission. His task is to ensure that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in both word and deed. The pastor calls forth the gifts and discerns the charisms needed for the Gospel to be proclaimed. He is an 'awakener,' in relation to the mission. In the group, he is the one who recognises and confirms that what is being done is ecclesial. He has the duty to correct, challenge, and point out what is not evangelical.

He coordinates the different undertakings, the different charisms so that all may move in the same direction. The people must serve at building up, and charisms must be awakened, for all the work to be done. These charisms are from the Spirit, and do not depend on personal initiative. The pastor ensures that the mission is being carried out.

Since he presides over the Church, so also does he preside over the principal sacraments: baptism and the eucharist, those sacraments that build up the Church.

This is fundamental, and if we stick to it we will need many people. To the pastor is given the gift of presiding: he was ordained for this, but it does not mean that he has all the charisms: these must be found within the People of God. All of Christian life for all. He has the responsibility of ensuring that this happens. It is the Church-body that

must be roused. All ministries are associated with one another for the mission.

The real problem is not the priest shortage; rather, the shortage of priests allows us to renew the diocese's pastoral organisation. How do we keep alive the memory of Christ, in the diocese of Edmundston? The first question to be asked has to do with the mission and not with how we are to replace the priests. How do we promote the rise of the Church body, and how do we foster the new ministries needed those are the challenges.

Conclusion

Steps to Be Followed

A possibility would be that 2 or 3 parishes start, during the year, to get some of their already-existing organizations and committees to work together. This would be a good beginning.

A new parish is not established overnight, it takes time, but in the meantime we can join together in work and activities. Not only must we not encourage chauvinism, but we must attempt to get local P.P.C.s together once in a while to work at a common project or task. Review the session notes and decide what could be shared or worked at together, and begin.

By beginning with the suggestions made by the different discussion groups gives us choices.

When only one option is given, it does not encourage debate.

Do not forget to identify our values.

The choice made will be the one respecting our values the most as well as the objective envisioned.

Some have mentioned the advantage of having been participants in the session.

It is not only an advantage but also a responsibility to work at offering new perspectives and facilitating ongoing discussion.

This, to the extent that you begin immediately!

There is not much time left, you have two years to move gracefully; if you do not start, in three years everything will explode in your faces.

Listening to your summaries and and comments,

I see that you are not lacking any means for beginning the project.

This is a challenge which you must win.

Don't forget to work at this in a prayerful atmosphere.

Finish what you start!

If you do this you will come out winners,

and in this way the love of God will be made manifest to the entire People of God.

¹. In: Austin Hannery, O.P., Gen. Ed.,
Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, New Revised Edition.
(Vatican Collection, Vol. 1) Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1975, 1984.
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