
THE FUTURE OF OUR DIOCESE (3)



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.

SEVERAL MODELS

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 re-membering 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 ELEMENT

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.

THREE 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.

... AND FOUR MORE

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.

A PARTICIPANT'S PRAYER

« I give thanks to the Lord for the session, for what I have experienced and heard, and for the 'work' that is taking place in me. Our resource person called on many people to discover 'ways to the future...' The Spirit breathes where He wills but I feel that many Christians are afraid to let themselves be shaped by Him. I ask the Lord to keep on sending me His Spirit, that I continue to listen and be receptive... and especially, that He give me the strength and enthusiasm to reach out to others. I am rather reserved when it comes to developing new contacts, and this may not be my charism, really. I also pray the Lord to help me discern those charisms He has given me. I hope, dream, and pray that each baptised person discover the riches deposited within the heart by God our Father. » Have a good week!

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