

Diocesan Pastoral Council Minutes of the September 12, 2009 Meeting

The meeting began with prayer led by Bishop Melczek. Council chair Gary Pieters welcomed everyone and introductions were made. In his opening comments Bishop Melczek stated that the ideas recommended by the Council on the transitioning of a pastor were shared and welcomed by the priests and the Parish Pastoral Councils. The bishop then moved on to the focus for the day, which was Catholics who for some reason have not been practicing their faith ("lapsed Catholics".) He noted four points from Pope John Paul II's document on the new evangelization. We are to evangelize to all, especially:

- Ourselves, to nurture and deepen our relationship with God.
- Those who have not been practicing their faith
- The unchurched; those who have no relationship with God. We are to be welcoming by our example or by word, but we do not proselytize.
- The culture. We are to help ourselves and others to positively influence our culture which is steeped in secularism.

In his comments he also stated that the Priest Council agreed that the October Count will be annually. In terms of evangelization the October Count helps us to see our past, our present and possible future. Are we losing people or gaining people; do our programs and structures meet the needs of the people.

Debbie Bosak, from Ss. Peter/Paul Parish, presented a program called "Catholics Returning Home," which she has adapted for use in the Merrillville parishes. Currently it is being used in the Merrillville cluster of parishes. She noted that as a Church, we do a good job of welcoming new Catholics during the Easter season but for every one person who comes in, four leave for reasons such as:

- Conflicts with Church teachings
- Disagreement with Vatican II teachings and rituals.
- Marriage issues
- Most often heard from returning Catholics is "I missed one Mass, and it got easier each week and I drifted away." They did not know how to come back.

For many "Catholics Returning Home" serves as a support group. A variety of topics are covered and the participants are updated on changes that may have occurred while they were gone. Most importantly, the sessions focus on building a relationship with God. The challenge for the program is to find those people who have lapsed. Since they obviously are not at Mass, we must reach out personally and invite the lapsed Catholic back to the Church. Experience has shown that 8 out of 10 who participate in this program come back to the Church.

The Council broke into small groups to discuss the question: ***"How can you personally, along with other Pastoral Council members, raise the issue of evangelization, especially for non-practicing Catholics, with your Parish Pastoral Council? Identify what you believe would be an effective way to raise this issue."***

Summary of discussions:

- Rather than take the idea to the Parish Pastoral Council, form an evangelization committee and set the groundwork.
- Make a conscious effort to reach out to our own parish community and invite them to get involved.
- Have greeters in the church, but make sure they are well trained to help make visitors feel welcome.
- People of color sometimes do not feel a connection to the Church because they worship in a different way.
- Use mailings, and a "foot patrol" that knock on doors.
- We are mandated to find out why people have lapsed.
- The Church must be welcoming in a different way. Possibly have a special Mass and invite someone who has lapsed to the Mass.
- More than a passing invitation is needed; have a ride to church program.

- Counseling programs for those who feel detached for some reason; having someone to talk to might help.
- Have programs to help them learn about your parish ministries.
- We need to help our youth get involved in parish ministries, eg. as greeters.

Bishop Melczek commented that perhaps a welcoming committee should be formed to follow up with newcomers, and he suggested using youth as greeters.

Bob Marben, from St. Teresa of Avila, presented his adaptation of the process developed by Fr. Frank DeSiano, C.S.P. As Catholics we are welcoming, but not always inviting. Bob noted that in the Gospel of John, Jesus invites people to "come and see" (1:38-39) and this form of invitation is more intriguing to people. Our invitation must be genuine. This evangelizing process must begin with the Parish Pastoral Council and then taken to the Commissions. Evangelization begins with those in the pew. Active Catholics must be evangelized. They must experience conversion, so that their invitation to others is genuine.

The Council returned to their groups to develop their recommendations by responding to the question: *"After hearing the speaker share their ideas and importance of Evangelization in the Church today, how can you refine your suggestions from Round 1, or add to them?"*

Final recommendations to Bishop Melczek:

- Have a variety of social activities to invite people to so that they are gradually introduced to the parish
- Have available at church cards for those who wish to be contacted.
- Get youth involved in the parish ministries; at most parishes 8th grade is like the finish line.
- Follow-up is most important and must be personal. Look for genuineness and notice the talents of people. Get those who have held a position for a long time to mentor someone new, rather than asking them to just step down.
- It is vital for the Pastoral Council to take leadership. Have an all-commission meeting to plant the seeds.
- Have someone at all Masses to help people understand what evangelization means.
- To be successful in inviting and welcoming, it is necessary that it starts with the Pastor, all the parish priests, and the Pastoral Council.
- If the church is not joyous, if someone who has been away doesn't get the feeling of joy, they won't be back.
- The Council and the Pastor must be on the same wave length; they must radiate and live the message beyond the church doors.
- Form an evangelization committee and make it a part of parish life.
- Seek out the talents of all and find where they are needed. We don't ask in the right way, a personal invitation is important.
- Follow-up in all aspects is crucial, especially new Catholics
- Let people know that what they have done is important and appreciated.

Bishop Melczek thanked the Council for their recommendations. He noted that we must be genuine in what we project. We must let go of hurts, forgive, and move on to holiness. We must be always aware of how the Lord works in our lives. Social events such as weddings, baptisms and funerals are often times that make people begin to think. We must find ways to be inviting and welcoming in these instances. He noted that he hopes that the Council members will take these recommendations back to their respective Pastoral Councils, and help them get excited about evangelization. The engagement of youth is imperative; they should be on all Commissions and involved in all aspects of Church life. To engage and involve everyone, we need to find ways to create ministries that use the talents of all. The feeling of joy is part of self-evangelization; our relationship with the Lord must be right and is an ongoing process.

The meeting ended with prayer and lunch. **The next meeting will be Saturday, March 6, 2010.**