



SHAREHOLDERS AND THE COMMON GOOD: TOWARD A SPIRITUALITY OF PASTORAL PLANNING

Maureen Gallagher, Ph.D.

Today many dioceses are embarking on or have completed diocesan wide pastoral planning efforts. Primarily these have focused on reorganizing parishes based on the current diminishing number of priests and/or demographic and financial changes. The planning has resulted in many restructured parishes. Some now share pastors; some are in strong partnerships; some have merged and have formed new parish communities with new identities; some have parish directors; some are served by *in solidum* teams of priests.

At first blush, it might look like successful parish restructuring is good social science practice. While that may be true, it is much more than that. It is Catholic spirituality in action. It is the process of doing authentic pastoral theology. What are the theological and spirituality underpinnings experienced in successful planning for parish restructuring?

There are five key theological concepts that can influence diocesan pastoral planning. Sometimes they are fully articulated; sometimes they are imbedded in the planning process, but not expressed. However, there is real power in seeing, naming and acting upon the rich theological tradition which supports planning and change. Seeing the spiritual reality gives a sense of the meaning and support to the planning efforts. Naming it connects it to the Catholic heritage and builds solidarity with the tradition. Further, naming in a prayer context helps the community discern the will of God. Acting upon what is seen and named, while not removing

the hurt and loss and the feelings of “disorientation,” brings engagement and purpose to the radical change which may be happening. The movement to action involves many people growing in faith on the journey to communion with God.

I. Creation and Incarnation

The first important concept is a melding of the theology of creation and the incarnation. Teilhard de Chardin’s statement, “By reason of creation and even more the incarnation, nothing is profane for those who know how to see,” applies to parish restructuring. It is a sacred process where the Spirit is engaging the community in helping to design its future. It is the spark of the divine which enlightens the sometimes darkened path of resistance to change. It is the deep respect for the dignity of the human person which is rooted in God’s creating humanity into the divine likeness that sets a planning process grounded in spirituality apart. How we relate to one another at a time of loss and hurt, where some may appear to be “winners” and some “losers,” where wandering in the wilderness is recognized as part of the change process, needs to respect the dignity of each person. The journey through change is rooted in the spirituality of the Paschal Mystery. It is interconnected with the community reading the “signs of the times” as an element of being signed at Baptism as prophet as well as priest and king.

Establishing ground rules for respectful dialogue is rooted in the dignity of each person and each community. The empowerment given by the local bishop; the way the planning process is structured; the dialogue which happens; the accountability embodied in the methodology; the timelines established; the materials created; the prayer resources assembled; the communication checklists provided are all based on the belief that all are made to the image

and likeness of God and all have a share in the future of the Catholic community. As shareholders in the mission and ministry of Christ we are empowered to assist in the creation of the future of our parishes as authorized by our bishops. We are brothers and sisters of the incarnate Word of God and thus share in the dignity and gifts of all humanity.

II. Trinity—God in Relationship

The mystery of the Trinity is significant to pastoral planning because it is the relationship within the Triune God that calls us to be in relationship with God and one another. We are created as social beings. Christ, becoming incarnate, empowered people in relationship with each other to share intimately in the life of God. Just as the persons of the Trinity share their life in relationship to each other, so we are shareholders in the life of God through the “body of Christ.” At baptism we celebrate the divine life in the community. Baptism initiates us as shareholders, receivers of the promise of eternal life and a life of love and support in the name of Christ through the experience of the community. “Baptism is a sharing in the priesthood of Christ” (LG 26) and a “sharing in Christ’s prophetic office” (LG 12).

Sharing in the life of the Trinity leads us to be empowered as disciples of Christ. One implication for being shareholders in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ is that we need to be involved in planning as disciples on how the mission and ministry will be carried out in the local Church. Planning provides a stellar opportunity for the whole body of Christ to work together, with particular attention being given to the poor and the underserved. Bishops, priests, deacons, vowed religious and the laity all share in the body of Christ; all are vibrant energizers of

the community of the faithful. While playing different roles all share in the same life of the Trinity. All share in planning for the future.

III. Life-Death-Resurrection of Jesus Christ

As stated above at Baptism we are initiated into the life of Christ. We die with him; we are raised from the dead with him. Engaging in this mystery through our lives prepares us for our final death-resurrection. We experience various kinds of death in our daily existence. We know the disappointment when dreams do not come true, when our loved ones suffer debilitating illness, when relationships end; when we lose a spouse, child or parent; when we are passed over for a promotion; and when we fail at something for which we have been striving.

The poignancy of the life-death-resurrection mystery is felt when people have to share a pastor, when church buildings close and communities are asked to merge and form something new. The consolidating involves a lot of loss. While some things—the most important things—remain the same, the familiar images, the regular place we have worshipped and maybe our grandparents have worshipped changes. Our comfort level is disrupted. We have identified our faith so closely with the place where we worship, that change involves a real loss. Pain and hurt accompany the loss. In the planning process not to identify the “endings-wilderness-new beginnings” with the life-death-resurrection of Christ is to miss a wonderful, strong and effective way to assist people to develop a sense of direction, purpose and meaning as shareholders in the mission and ministry of the Risen Christ. Not to connect to the Paschal Mystery is to miss an opportunity to help people grow in faith.

IV. The Eucharist and Sacramentality

This concept upholds to the Second Vatican Council’s proclamation of the Eucharist as the “source and summit” of the Church’s activity (SC 10). Worship is a communion in holiness where all who share in the life of Christ come together to recall the covenant of the past in the present and renew it for the future. Liturgy is the way the community praises, thanks and glorifies God. At Eucharist those who share in the life of Christ gather to hear the Word proclaimed—a Word that is living as it is proclaimed—a Word that fosters the conviction that when God speaks, something happens.

Sacramentality refers to the sacramental principle. This principle focuses on the belief that all reality is potentially a reflection of the presence of God and an instrument of God’s saving activity. It is connected to two other principles: mediation—that God works through ordinary people and ordinary events to achieve God’s purposes; and communion—the belief that the purpose of God’s activity is union with humanity.

How does all this relate to planning? Planning in Catholic Communities is always done in the context of prayer. There the shareholders in Christ’s Church gather to recall the wonderful nurturing moments of the past. They do this in the present in order to be energized for the future. Rooted in scripture and faith-sharing the gathered community situates itself in the presence of God and prays for guidance of the Spirit. Catholic prayer is not just words. It is blessing with water; it is lighting candles; it is being sprinkled with baptismal water; it is being anointed for service; it is praising God with incense; it is sharing meals and blessing food.

As people plan and prepare for change, sharing the stories of the past, connecting them to the Scriptures and using the rituals of the Church can be part of any meeting. It follows the

pattern of the liturgy—gather the folks, listen to the story and share the meal, as a way to praise and thank God. Prayer and ritual sharing prepares people for greater appreciation of the Eucharist and roots them in the traditions of the Church. It unleashes the power of our traditions. It helps heal loss and hurt. This of itself empowers the shareholders of the mission and ministry of Christ to discern the will of God for them in the future.

V. Stewardship and the Common Good

This concept is a great theological lens which incorporates many theological principles and social justice values. In many ways it encompasses the heart of parish reorganization. Good stewardship of resources and promoting the common good are Catholic values which support pastoral planning. Upholding the common good has the ultimate goal of sharing the fullness of life in God.

The common good is experienced in many facets of existence: through family life, in friendships, in intentional communities and in civic endeavors. When first encountered in a planning process, working for the common good may seem to conflict with parochial loyalties. When it comes to pastoral planning the resistance found due to parishioners' attachments to buildings and the "way we do things here" engenders strong emotional reactions. Things which have nurtured faith in the past are changing. For many faith and spirituality are deeply embedded in something very intimate, and change in such things as worship sites and pastoral organization brings a sense of deep personal loss, disorientation and hurt.

In pastoral planning one of the challenges is moving away from parochialism and toward what is good for all. The focus on planning considers the best stewardship of human and

financial resources for the common good. Shifting the focus from “my parish” to the common good of all the shareholders is the primary concept that shapes the discussion. The movement is from what I want for my comfort and convenience to what is in the best interests of the larger community. More specifically it is often about how can we be organized to guarantee access to the Eucharist for all.

The planning process is more than just looking at what the “majority” wants. It calls for the wisdom of the whole community. Voices often not heard need to be listened to. Just as in the civic community, it is the government’s leaders who need to spearhead the possibility of all being involved, so too in the Church it is the bishops who ensure that all are invited to be a part of the planning process in some realistic way. The Constitution on the Church calls bishops to be compassionate and to listen to the community whose welfare they promote and to urge them to collaborate readily with them to achieve harmonious unity (LG 27). Many bishops have begun highly participative processes respecting the many diverse voices in their dioceses. After listening on all levels and receiving recommendations based on what was heard, they make decisions incorporating the wisdom of the community for the common good.

St. Thomas Aquinas strongly states that a right relationship to God necessitates a commitment to the common good of one’s neighbor. The theological tool for achieving the common good is conversation. John Courtney Murray S.J. promotes respectful conversation about the beliefs we hold in common across different “life worlds.” David Hollenbach, S.J. advocates for a common vision, which can only be achieved through dialogue, to sustain the common good, characterized by virtues of hospitality and humility rather than suspicion and coercion. Kristin Heyer, Professor of Christian Ethics at Loyola Marymount, suggests using the

lens of the common good, along with conversation to move from “I want...” to “what would be good for the community to which we belong.” Meaningful conversations have, through the lens of the common good, led to wealthier parishes subsidizing poorer ones so there can be a presence of the Church in an otherwise abandoned part of an inner city or an isolated rural area. Dialogue, conversation and participation are at the heart of who we are as shareholders. When we engage in these endeavors, we are deeply embedded in the Catholic tradition leading to a deeper communion with God.

By incorporating “best practices” from the social sciences and rigorously integrating theological principles and spiritual practices, widely cherished in the Catholic Church, the challenges facing the Church related to restructuring parishes can be turned into transformative moments for both the hierarchy and the faithful. Through the process of moving from some “endings” to some time in the “wilderness of the desert,” new beginnings gradually emerge. Along the journey are found many opportunities to grow in appreciation of who we are called to be as Church in the 21st Century in the United States.

Maureen Gallagher, Ph.D. is a consultant and partner in The Reid Group, a consulting firm which focuses on assisting Catholic communities to transform challenges into opportunities to build a better world.