

**ST. THOMAS MORE PARISH &
ST. BERNADETTE PARISH
UNIFIED PARISH COUNCIL MEETING
Monday, May 23, 2011**

St. Thomas More Council Members in Attendance: Fr. Bill Wagner, Vic Ivers, Kathy Hornschemeier, Jim Conrady, Janet Tate, and Neil Kamphaus, Jr.

St. Thomas More Council Members Absent: Larry Bush, John Duncan.

St. Thomas More ~ Others in Attendance: Mike Gennett (Business Manager).

St. Bernadette Council Members in Attendance: Fr. Bill Stockelman, Kathy Waldeck, Paul Justice, Janet Davis, Donna Thompson, & Mark Zurlinden.

St. Bernadette Members Absent: Tim Geers, Charlie Quehl.

The Parish Councils of St. Thomas More & St. Bernadette met at St. Bernadette Parish. The meeting was called to order by Fr. Bill Stockelman at 7:00 PM EDT. Fr. Stockelman opened with a prayer.

The objective of the meeting was to begin to discuss the planning process so when the time comes the two parishes have to share a Pastor we will have a plan ready to implement.

Everyone present introduced themselves and gave a brief background on their involvement with their parish.

Fact ~ The Priest Shortage - Fr. Stockelman gave an overview on the looming priest shortage. He said we must prepare for a future with fewer priests. 70% of the active priests in our diocese are age 57 and older.

Many will retire in the years to come and the numbers being ordained do not make up for those retiring.

A few years ago, the diocese determined that there will be 100 priests available to serve 230 parishes. 100 Pastoral Regions were established. There would be one Pastor for each region. There was no way to structure the regions so the number of parishioners would be divided equally. Just a few very large parishes would be their own region and they include locations like Good Shepherd and IHM. Most discussions have gone well around the diocese about the regions.

Closer to home, establishing regions in Clermont County has not gone very well. One parish did not wish to participate. Arbitration was brought in and three priests came up with a plan: St. Thomas More & Holy Trinity in Batavia would be a region; St. Bernadette, St. Peters in New Richmond, and St. Mary in Bethel would be a region; and St. Louis in Owensville, St. Ann in Williamsburg, and St. Philomena in Stonelick would be a region. One positive of this particular regional structure was that each region would have a school.

Over time, Fr. Stockelman felt these proposed regions were not a very good plan, especially the St. Bernadette/St. Mary/St. Peter region. Fr. Leshney at St. Mary's in Bethel also had concerns. Combining three parishes in to a region could be an issue for a priest that may not want such an assignment. Traveling on Sunday for Masses between the three locations could be an issue especially when the weather was bad. This particular region was not really a workable plan.

It was suggested that St. Thomas More and St. Bernadette becomes a region. The parishes are 4 miles apart and it takes 9 minutes to travel between the two locations. Fr. Bill Wagner, the St. Martin Deanery Dean, after consultation with all the priests in the deanery, proposed a solution for the entire county to be redone. He sent the proposal to Archbishop Schnurr. He gave permission to look at the structure and come up with a new plan. The new regions being planned are: St. Thomas More & St. Bernadette; St. Mary's & St. Peter's; and Holy Trinity, St. Louis, St. Philomena, and St. Ann's. Both St. Philomena and St. Ann's are very small parishes.

This exercise is about doing the right thing now during the planning process. If the two parishes design a workable plan, it will result in an effective ministry when the time comes the parishes have to share a Pastor.

The timing when this will happen is unknown. Pastoral regions are going into place now throughout the diocese. If even one priest in Clermont County leaves, a pastoral region will be implemented. There are no priests available to send in as replacements. This could happen to our two parishes at any time within six months or up to five years. No one knows.

Right now, the diocese does not have a priest available to assign to St. Rose in Cincinnati. The priest shortage issue is now.

Fr. Bill Wagner said this effort only means we are sharing a Pastor. We have to learn how to share a Pastor. It does not mean a merger or combining the parishes. He further pointed out we already have been sharing some programs. For example, St. Thomas More and St. Veronica Parishes have had shared Penance services for a number of years. Both of these two parishes and St. Bernadette has joined in a combined Youth Ministry and football programs. Archbishop Schnurr recommends sharing between parishes.

Fr. Wagner also pointed out the schools are **not** involved in this discussion. There is currently a moratorium by the diocese on combining and/or closing schools. Dr. Rigg, the Supt of the Archdiocese Schools, has a visioning process going on regarding the future of the Catholic School system in the diocese. A consultant group from Notre Dame University has been hired to look at the future structure of the school system. Pastors, Principals, Business Managers, Finance Committee members, and School Board leaders have been to meetings to offer their views. No decisions are planned until September 2012. The bottom line is the schools are **not** part of our discussion. This is only about sharing one Pastor and how to scheduling liturgies, the Sacraments, etc.

Fr. Stockelman added that the issue is we are all in this together. Working hard together as brothers and sisters will be important. We cannot view the parishes as competitors.

Hopes & Positive Outcomes – Everyone was asked to share what they feel might be the positive outcomes of sharing a Pastor between the two parishes:

- More to offer, ministries, etc.
- Expanding opportunities
- A survey was suggested to get suggestions from parishioners
- A greater interaction between friends of the two parishes
- One voice from both parishes is needed to help dispel rumors
- Rivalries between parishes need to be managed
- Ensure that the average parishioner sees this as a collaboration effort
- Having one Pastor will help break down any rivalry
- The role of the parish councils will be one of leadership
- The councils need to help parishioners understand they need to have realistic expectations
 - There will be over 2300 households that one priest will have to minister to
 - For example, today, St. Thomas More has about 35 funerals a year. St. Bernadette has 20. One priest would have 55 funerals a year. This is one example of understanding the expectations of sharing a priest
- New friends would be made and old friends will become closer
- Parishioners need to remain open to the possibilities of other ideas to share
- The sooner a common sense plan can be put together, a potential Pastor could review the plan before making a decision
- It will help more parishioners to get involved and do more

Barriers – Everyone was asked to share what they feel might be the some of the barriers regarding sharing a Pastor between the two parishes:

- The issue cannot be swept under the carpet
- Mis-information. Get the right information out to the people. Proactive communication is going to be critical
- A perception who “won” and who “lost”. That can’t happen. Key liturgies may have to rotate....Midnight Mass and the Easter Vigil

- may have to rotate every other year between parishes. The Pastor cannot be in two parishes at the same time
- We cannot assume how things may or may not be as we go forward. Assumptions must be identified. We must reach out to learn the issues others have. Communication!
 - Some have already read into the March 2011 letter that this is a “merger” even though that was never stated
 - We must clearly communicate that the schools are not involved
 - Communication must be one document from both parishes and released at the same time
 - A new, shared Pastor may not implement the plan when he arrives. He might see everything differently
 - A plan needs to be put together with what we have to work with today
 - How does the future of the St. Thomas More Deacons plan into sharing a Pastor? It was stated they might do all the Baptisms, funerals without a Mass, and all weddings
 - Deacons cannot hold a scheduled Communion Service on Sunday in lieu of a Mass

Next Steps - Where do we go next?

Fr. Wagner said there is no due date for a plan. The other region's planning process is not working out at this point. He also stated a facilitator may be the way to go. Some of them have a great deal of experience in doing this. They have guidelines how to put this together. Hiring a facilitator does cost money. Jim Brown is someone Fr. Wagner said he knew. Fr. Wagner said he would contact Mr. Brown to see if he is available, or to recommend someone, and to give a cost estimate.

It was also suggested that both Parish Council names be listed inside both church bulletins sometime in the near future.

It was suggested a smaller group be assigned that would have the passion and the time to put a plan together. Trust would be critical. It was

suggested maybe the Pastors make the appointments. This smaller group could meet with the facilitator.

It was decided that both councils meet again. **The next meeting was set for Wednesday, June 15, 2011, at 7 PM in the School Library at St. Thomas More.**

The meeting adjourned at 9:05 PM. Fr. Wagner led the group in a prayer.