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Parish pastoral planning starts with love and listening

By **Jim Townsend**, Herald Correspondent

HOUSTON — In 2013, the Archdiocese requested that pastors and lay leaders at all 146 parishes take time to discern their communities' unique needs and chart a five-year plan to live, share and nurture the faith — the three “pathways” to their pastoral planning.

The request was a large part of the **Archdiocese's own pastoral plan**¹, which created the opportunity for parishes to listen to the needs and desires of the churched and unchurched in each community. The initiative created an invitation for pastors and congregations to work together toward the goal of making disciples in a “spirituality of communion,” which is not only the Archdiocese Pastoral Plan theme but its reason for existing.

Some parishes have filed their pastoral plans and are executing against them. Some parishes filed plans and have sometimes found it necessary to go back to the drawing board. Some parishes are still in discernment. Parish planning is not a project. It's a process.

Fostering a “spirituality of communion” isn't the end goal of parish-level planning. Necessarily, it's where planning begins. It's the means to the ends. It's the spirituality that infuses and suffuses the planning.

“Before making practical plans, we need to promote a spirituality of communion, making it the guiding principle of education wherever individuals and Christians are formed, wherever ministers of the altar, consecrated persons, and pastoral workers are trained,

¹ **Highlighted texts** indicate free downloadable documents at www.archgh.org/pastoralplan/eventresources



wherever families and communities are being built up,” St. John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte* at Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Build love first

“St. John Paul cautions us against going too quickly to pastoral planning before forming people in a spirituality of communion,” said Father Clint Ressler, pastor of St. Mary of the Miraculous Medal in Texas City and former pastor of St. Rose of Lima in Houston.

“Without that real quality of communion among us, then planning is just mechanisms without a soul. To me, that’s so easy for us as Americans to overlook, because we are so much about pragmatics and achieving goals and to be able to show something for the work we’re doing,” Father Ressler said.

He added that the meaning of “spirituality of communion” is too easily diluted as “another way of saying ‘be nice’ or ‘be kind’ or ‘be loving’ to each other. I think that it’s far more than that.” Father Ressler said that Mass is an invitation for the faithful to see how intense the pact of the Catholic community should be.

Spirituality of communion meaning is often overlooked or diluted.

“Jesus told the Apostles, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’ We are being invited to love each other to the point of giving our life for each other. What is Eucharist at Mass? It really is this pact, ‘I’m ready to die for you.’ I think that level of intense intimacy and communion and relationship is scary. But I think Jesus was trying to invite us to see our relationships within the Church with that level of intensity.

“Just imagine when the Body of Christ is fully alive. When we are about all of us more than we care about any one of us, then the Holy Spirit and God’s grace can really be at work. Not just to achieve goals in some pragmatic fashion. To me, building the Kingdom of God is both the means and the ends,” he said.

Father Ressler said that when the Spirit is really at work, there is mutual love. “There’s a willingness of people to set aside themselves for the larger group,” he said. “Then what we need to do becomes very clear. Love seems to create its own plan.”

Father Ressler emphasized the importance of unity from the beginning. “Build this mutual love. And then say, ‘We’re not going to do anything until we have love for one another.’ If we’re not united, we should just go home.”



Father Ressler acknowledged it takes work. “I have to focus concretely on the day-to-day of loving those whom I encounter. And try to create this spirituality of communion within our parish staff, school staff, pastoral council and close volunteers. And hope that the fire spreads,” he said. “When people feel loved and appreciated and valued, and there is that kind of atmosphere, gradually it changes the atmosphere elsewhere.”

Reverential, profound listening

When it comes to pastoral planning, pastors generally find that listening, fact-gathering and discernment are pre-requisite to crafting long-term strategies that could change a parish’s culture. Listening avoids missteps builds trust and becomes a valuable opportunity for fostering co-responsibility with parishioners.

Father Ressler said after he transferred from St. Rose of Lima in 2015 his first priority was to spend time in reverential listening to understand his new parish’s unique needs. “I think so much of being a pastor in his first couple of pastoral years is really taking the time to listen,” he said. “There should be a profound reverence to what already exists in the parish — understanding its history, understanding its personality.”

At St. Rose and also at St. Mary, Father Ressler conducted listening sessions when he first arrived so he and parishioners would have the opportunity to get to know each other. “Not so much answer questions, but listen to them about their hopes and dreams and concerns,” he said. “Those listening sessions in both instances helped me begin to understand the lay of the land.”

Father Tom Ponzini, pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus in Manvel and former pastor of St. Mary in Texas City, agrees that listening must precede planning. It not only improved the plan, but fostered a sense of ownership among parishioners, improved engagement and increased participation in parish activities.

Listening improves contents and fosters ownership, engagement and participation.

When Father Ponzini arrived in late 2013, Sacred Heart had just started down the path of pastoral planning. He installed a new pastoral council, a mix of new and previous members, and they began building a spirituality of communion within themselves. They modeled their planning process after the **Archdiocese’s plan**, deciding to spend more than a year simply listening to the congregation and community.

“We discerned why it was important for us to have a pastoral plan for our parish,” Father Ponzini said. They created a presentation to explain the planning process — not the plan itself — and shared it with parish staff, the finance council and other leadership groups which created buy-in and a cadre of future volunteers.



“Over several meetings of the pastoral council, we discussed what questions we wanted to use during these listening sessions, what we wanted to gain from it, and what we wanted to do to gain information. That took a little while but it helped us to grow together as a pastoral council,” Father Ponzini said.

In early 2014, the pastoral council created a format for 90-minute listening sessions, beginning with an opening prayer and overhead presentation. They practiced among themselves until the presentation was polished. “We fine-tuned the model. Fellowship, snacks, an opening prayer. It helped us come up with a model of how we can be welcoming to our other groups as well,” he said.

The first listening sessions were with staff, “mainly to fine-tune the process,” he said. “We started out with five questions for the group to answer. We saw that took too much time. So we reduced our questions to three. We had three relevant questions that we felt were important to learn about our parish. And it gave us time for recording the information, summarizing the information, discussing the information. That seemed to work well in the hour and a half presentation.”

The questions were open-ended, which invited creative responses. “The last question was, ‘If you had all the resources in the world, what would you ideally want for our parish?’ Another was, ‘What new ministries could you foresee in our parish?’ Even that process took a while,” he said.

Eventually, in early 2015, the invitation was extended to the entire parish to participate in the listening sessions. Dates and times were printed in the church bulletins, on the church website and via the church’s automated phone calling system. Sessions were scheduled days, evenings and weekends. In English, Spanish and bilingual. Sign-ins and walk-ins were welcome.

Their voices do count

Each session began with fellowship and snacks hosted by a volunteer welcoming team. At the precise time, an opening prayer. Classrooms were used as venues, each had multiple tables and at each table, a volunteer facilitator passed out Post-it notes so that participants could jot down their ideas — one idea per note, as many responses as each participant had.

“There was no discussion during that time. No one to criticize. Any idea is a good idea. Just put it out there,” Father Ponzini said. “We tried to get the idea across that their voice does count.”



When all the Post-it Notes were collected, they were sorted by question or category by a team of volunteers. Other volunteers fastened them to large sheets of paper. A volunteer presenter would highlight some of the responses. At the end of 90 minutes, the volunteers thanked respondents and the sessions ended in prayer. More than 2,500 notes were collected and sorted.

“There might be many ideas on the same topic. But then there might be just one idea that’s by itself. But that one idea could be the main idea that could turn the parish around. So we’re going to keep every idea,” Father Ponzini said.

After the listening sessions, the pastoral council conducted a “pew survey” at each Mass. During the announcements following the Liturgy, the questions were projected to an overhead screen. Ushers gave cards and pencils to congregants for their responses. The cards were collected by basket. An online survey helped reach some of the younger parishioners. In all, more than 6,000 pieces of data were collected. “We categorized the responses, then fine-tuned the categories,” he said.

From that, the pastoral council evaluated the data and made recommendations to the parish staff leadership. “We looked at those ideas and evaluated a timely way to pursue some of these things,” Father Ponzini said. “Some ideas we had started already and so we looked how we could build upon them. We looked at financial concerns. We looked at how we would prioritize. So we started addressing those ideas.”

The vetted ideas became part of the **parish’s action plan**, which was reported back to the Archdiocese. “What we’re trying to do a better job of is when these action plans are completed, we share them in our bulletin and our website and again thank the people for their ideas that we’re now able to implement,” Father Ponzini said. “The council is still listening to ideas. We’re constantly adding new ideas to the potential list. From the data we’ve already received, our parish leadership team has more than enough ideas to keep us going and moving forward.”

About 20 percent of Sacred Heart’s 3,500 registered families participated in the idea stage, Father Ponzini estimated. As a direct result of listening and acknowledgement, parishioner engagement is higher, and more of them are joining more ministries, he said.

“What I’m seeing, too, is a stronger trust level and better communication between leadership within the parish and leadership to their particular ministries,” Father Ponzini said. “For instance, between the parish staff and the parish pastoral council, there’s more openness to see how we can work together. There’s more a sense of ‘We’re in this together.’ I think that’s rubbing off on the parishioners.” †