

American Experience of the Changing Needs of Parishes and Fewer Priests

150 people came to Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Dunfermline to hear Fr. Mark Latcovich speak on how some of the United States dioceses have been trying to develop their mission while experiencing difficulties similar to our own. The purpose of the meeting, organised by St. Andrew's and St. Margaret's Deanery Pastoral Council, was to help those attending to reflect on how the American experience might help the people taking part reflect on their own experiences and the challenges lying before the Church in this country.

Fr. Latcovich is a regular visitor to Fife and is rector of St. Mary and Borromeo Seminaries, Cleveland, Ohio. He holds a doctorate in sociology, serves currently as chair of the pastoral theology department, has previously directed a doctor of ministry programme and at the moment is directing a doctoral thesis on the question of what has proved valuable in questions of parishes working together, amalgamating or merging.

He showed how the question of the future is not simply numbers of priests to parishes and people, but as how to live in the situation we find ourselves in dealing with the shortage of priests and parish personnel, changing demographics, and a general drop in numbers.

At the centre of his presentation was the need for a diocese to have an understanding of the situation it was living in in order to develop a clear vision of what it was trying to do about it. It was clear from how he talked about successful collaborations, mergers and amalgamations that there is no easy, quick solution. Much hard work, prayer, study and action is necessary for those involved in developing clusters or new parishes from old ones.

Parishes need to learn how to assess how vibrant they are by evaluating themselves through a variety of headings such as evangelisation, liturgy, stewardship. In doing this parishes can see where they need to develop and how they may find it useful to collaborate with other parishes. It may be also that a parish will come to the conclusion that it cannot go on its present form. Fr. Latcovich emphasised the usefulness of Appreciative Inquiry in helping people give thanks for the good things they have as well as being a help for looking at necessary changes for the future.

The role of the bishop is vital. He has to work with all levels of the Church community in developing a vision of the future, while at all times taking great care to communicate and to encourage communication within the whole diocese. Solutions cannot be imposed from the top down. The Church's canon law provides a good, freeing framework for this consultative process, challenging bishop, priests and laity to make sure that everyone has a chance to be involved either individually or through the various councils of the Church's life.

He thought that as Catholics carrying out this process we work through the Church's structures. If these structures are not as responsive as they might be we should not give up but persist in finding ways to help them work. There is a danger that if we bypass the structures we engage in congregationalism and perhaps end up with a break-a-way parish or congregation.

By their baptism all Catholics are involved in the mission of the Church. If a searching look is taken at the situation of our parishes, priests and people and greater collaboration takes place, the same number of priests as we have had in the past will not be necessary. This means taking on the challenge of providing better ways of training for those willing to be involved in lay ministry.

After a very brief opportunity for the participants to share some thoughts with one another there was a time for questions. The purpose of the question time in the planning was to provide an opportunity for people to ask and reflect on how the content of the talk could be developed within our situation in the diocese. This did not happen directly and the time was taken up by people making statements, in a sometimes vehement manner, about what they thought was happening or had not happened in the diocese up until now. Fr. Latcovich in responding to these statements continued to emphasise the need for communication, for following proper means of consultation, and for working from within the Church.

The purpose of asking Fr. Mark to speak was to help the deanery reflect on how the situations he had studied might encourage deeper thought on our own situations. Hopefully this might be helped happen by our participation in this evening. The organisers thought perhaps 30 people might come along. They were taken to some extent by surprise by the large attendance. This shows the depth of concern about the future development of the diocese.

Much of what was said was not new to the diocese. In previous studies and reports some of the ideas and suggestions had been identified, but somehow they didn't bear the fruit they might have. It was valuable for us that Fr. Mark presented them to us again from within a lived experience of how they can be put into action.

Fr. Mark after the meeting suggested that it might be worth while looking at some dioceses had worked in their rural areas in having clusters of parishes and also other ministers than priests living and working in them. Given the difference in scale between Cleveland and St. Andrews and Edinburgh, some of the ideas developed in American rural areas could be applicable in our towns.

The participants were challenged by Fr. Mark and by his material to continue and deepen what has been done so far to develop a good way for Catholics in the diocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh to prepare for a future which is going to be quite different from what we have been used to. In particular I felt stimulated to look at the importance of communication of what is going on and is not going on at every level of my ministry, to realise how we have to help one another embrace change, to develop my understanding of consultation and collaboration, to realise that any process is going to be lengthy and often arduous, to keep on challenging and being challenged by the Church at every level, and to keep to the forefront of my mind that all process has to be rooted in a praying and worshipping Church.

Fr. Mark throughout his talk gave examples of good and bad practice from his own diocese and others. He has also made available a bibliography and a much shortened one. These can be had from Fr. Hand admin@stpaulsandstmarys.co.uk. Notes on the evening made by Patricia Carroll can also be had from patricia.carroll@staned.org.uk

Gerard Hand 27th July 2105