

## **Clustering the Central City Catholic Church Preface to Interim Report**

This preface to the Interim Report of the Central City Catholic Churches (CCCC) is intended to provide parishioners of St. Ignatius with some of the background material and the thinking that has gone into the report. The Interim Report is the collective work of the pastors and several representatives of the five churches that make up our central city cluster: St. Ignatius, the Basilica, St. Alphonsus, St. Vincent de Paul and Corpus Christi. It provides a proposed structure to accelerate in the future and a reduction of the number of Masses.

During the past year we have published in the Bulletin several letters from Cardinal O'Brien describing the crisis facing our Church: diminishment in the number of registered parishioners in the diocese; in the number of people attending Mass; in the number of priests; which will lead to a decrease in number of Masses and pastoral services; and in the number of churches needed to serve.

In response to the crises the Archdiocese issued a report, "Building Up the Body of Christ", which describes a planning process to be used throughout the diocese. It was made available to all our parishioners and later discussed with listening groups following Sunday Masses to give our parishioners the opportunity to express their thoughts about the report and the planning process the diocese needs to undertake.

I have worked together with the pastors of the other churches in our cluster over the last nine months to lay out the framework for future cooperation and support among our parishes. Our primary concern throughout has been to maintain the identity, mission, community, geographic location and trust funds of each parish as we move forward.

On January 5, the pastors of the five-clustered Central City Catholic Churches (CCCC) unanimously ratified the four-page Report. On January 11, our own pastoral council affirmed the Report though with some helpful caveats.

Our next step in the process is for the parishioners of the five parishes to review the Report before it is submitted to Cardinal O'Brien for his approval. Therefore, everyone is asked to read the Report and participate in one of our six listening sessions that will take place after each of next Sunday's (January 22nd) Masses.

It is imperative that everyone should keep in mind three major points. First, the actual initiation of THE CLUSTERING PLAN WILL NOT OCCUR UNTIL AFTER JUNE 2013 and more likely will not BE FULLY IMPLEMENTED UNTIL 2015 OR THEREAFTER. Second, Radio Mass WILL CONTINUE AS USUAL but will be listed as a special ministry Mass that will be celebrated in the Chapel of Grace at 9:30 - - live over WBAL. Third, THE EVENTUAL INTEGRATION OF THE 9:00 AND 10:30 Masses WILL LEAVE INTACT nonetheless THE FAMILY MASS LITURGY OF THE WORD (scripture readings, intercessions and homily) as separate from the Choir Mass.

The heartening news for St. Ignatius is that, even with the mandated clustering and 25% cut in Masses, our parish will continue to grow and to maintain its strong, visionary community by carrying on its traditional life and mission in the city of Baltimore.

# Central City Catholic Churches

## Interim Report

January 18, 2012

Since March of 2011, the pastors of several parishes located in and around the center of Baltimore have been meeting regularly to discuss potential collaboration among the parishes. Since June of that same year, these meetings have included lay representatives of the parishes' congregations. The parishes involved are The Basilica, St. Alphonsus, Corpus Christi, St. Ignatius, and St. Vincent de Paul. In addition, the Shrine of St. Jude participated initially; but they have chosen not to continue within this group.

Over the course of these discussions, pertinent information about each parish has been shared. This included information about each parish's founding and historical development; characteristics of its ministry and liturgies; demographics of its past and current congregation; financial information, including unique funding sources and annual budgets; staffing and personnel arrangements, and number, nature and condition of facilities. A brief summary of this information is included in an appendix to this report.

Each of these five parishes has a unique identity and character that sets each apart from the other four as well as from parishes outside the downtown area. The parishes all identified themselves as intentional parishes, whose congregations are drawn as much from those residing outside of their immediate geographic areas as from within. While the parishes have recognized a commonality, because of the unique and strong identity of each, they do not believe that combining any of the parishes would prove workable.

Each of the parishes appears financially solvent and stable, with no precipitous drop off in Mass attendance, and sound infrastructure and physical plants, notwithstanding the age and historic nature of many of the buildings involved.

During these meetings, participants discussed the archdiocese's stated concerns about diminishing Mass attendance, about the vitality of parishes and their liturgies, and about the aging and declining numbers of priests in the archdiocese. The consensus among the parishes is that there exist currently opportunities for collaboration in several areas and that future coordination among the parishes will allow them to mitigate the challenges stated.

First priority must be given to the developing clergy shortage. At present there are six full-time priests assigned to the five parishes: one archdiocesan priest each to Basilica, St. Alphonsus, Corpus Christi and St. Vincent de Paul, and two Jesuit priests to St. Ignatius. The Jesuit provincial, queried by St. Ignatius' pastor, assures us that the Jesuits intend to keep two of their priests there for the foreseeable future. The number of available archdiocesan priests, however, is likely to diminish over time. All of the four current pastors are over 60 years old, and in view of the current projections of archdiocesan clergy availability over the next fifteen years it is unlikely that they can be replaced on a one for one basis as they die or retire or are asked to move on to other assignments.

Prudence suggests, therefore, that a plan be developed to maintain these parishes and their ministries with a reduced number of clergy. This in turn will necessitate a revision of weekend Mass schedules, as it will be impossible to maintain the current schedules with a reduced number of priests.

To deal with these realities in a way that will be both mindful of the needs of the Church and understood and accepted by the people, it is essential that plans be developed at the local level, with full participation of the clergy and laity of the parishes involved. Critical even in the early stages of this collaboration has been the involvement of the laity. Information about the parishes' intended cooperation has been shared with parish/pastoral councils and the congregations. As the planning process continues, communication will continue with parish/pastoral councils, Parish Leadership Teams, and congregations. The ready dissemination of information about the group and explanation of the rationale for the steps it intends to take should facilitate cooperation among the congregations. This model will also make future accommodation among these parishes more likely and more readily implemented.

The Coordinating Committee of the Central City Catholic Churches therefore met on October 6 2011, with our Vicar Bishop, Most Rev. Denis Madden, and proposed to him the following:

1. That the five parishes of the Central City Catholic Churches be recognized as a planning cluster, even though some of them are in different Regions,
2. That these parishes develop a plan that will preserve their identities and unique ministries while recognizing and adapting to the diminishing number of clergy,
3. That the plan should provide for the clergy staffing of these parishes when four, three and a half, three, two and a half, and two archdiocesan priests are available for the cluster (where a "half" represents a retired or semi-retired priest, or a priest with substantial other duties),
4. That the plan should provide for adjustment of weekend Mass schedules for all five parishes in light of the declining number of priests,
5. That the plan should be formulated in full communication with, and with the participation of, the clergy, staff and laity of all five parishes,
6. That the plan should be completed, approved by the parishes, and submitted to the Vicar Bishop by Easter, 2012, and
7. That the Coordinating Committee should then turn its attention to the numerous opportunities for ministerial improvements and resource conservation that can be attained by sharing of staff, volunteers and programs among the five parishes.

The Bishop responded that such a plan would be very much in keeping with his hopes, and those of our Apostolic Administrator, Archbishop O'Brien, for realistic planning at the grass roots level, and he encouraged the Committee to proceed. The Committee therefore agreed to disseminate this plan-for-a-plan to the councils, staffs and parishioners of the five parishes, and to continue to meet to develop a plan on this basis.

At the subsequent meetings the Committee discussed the clergy needs of the parishes in the light of forecast for clergy availabilities. There emerged in these discussions a number of similarities between the Basilica and St. Alphonsus. Both are shrines. Both have a large number of visitors (i.e., people from outside the parish who are tourists or pilgrims or both). Both are fairly traditional in their outlook, and take most of their leadership from their clergy staff. It was suggested that one priest might be found who would be a good fit to serve as Rector of the Basilica and Pastor of St. Alphonsus, or Director of the two Shrines. Special consideration would need to be given to the needs of the Lithuanian congregation and the Tridentine congregation at St. Alphonsus, and questions of pastoral as well as administrative staff would need to be worked out, but the pairing of these two parishes would seem to be a good way to go if the number of priests would have to be reduced.

This sparked the observation that Corpus Christi and St. Vincent de Paul also have a number of similarities. Both parishes rely on non-resident members rather than either neighborhood parishioners or visitors. Both are fairly progressive in their outlook, and are accustomed to a lot of leadership coming from the lay members of the community. It was therefore suggested that one priest might be a good fit for both of these parishes, or that one shared or two separate lay ecclesial ministers might be well accepted at these parishes, with a part-time priest for each (perhaps a retired priest, or a seminary or college professor could be a good fit). Here as well questions of pastoral and administrative staffing would need to be addressed.

Finally, it was observed that St. Ignatius, with its staff of two Jesuit priests (and often one or more other Jesuits either in residence or passing through), could be seen as a resource for the entire cluster. If one of the Jesuit priests were fluent in either Latin or Lithuanian, for instance, he might regularly cover that Mass at St. Alphonsus in addition to his work at St. Ignatius. Also, it might be possible for St. Ignatius to do more than its even share in providing cover for other parishes in the event of clergy vacation or illness (though surely all priests in the cluster will have to help each other out in this regard p.r.n.).

The question of Mass schedule changes depends on the number of available clergy, and the question of the time-line on which such changes might take place needs to be considered in light of the existing priest personnel and their plans. Msgr. Bastress, though the oldest serving priest in the Archdiocese by far, has the vigor of most men half his age, and has no plans to retire unless and until forced to do so by ill health. Fr. Lawrence, on the other hand, has already announced to his parish his preference for moving to senior priest status on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his pastorate there (June, 2013), and continuing his ministry at St. Vincent's on a reduced schedule thereafter. Msgr. Valenzano and Fr. Demek have no plans to retire in the near future, nor to request reassignment, but it is impossible to predict whether or when they may be asked to take a different assignment as the Archdiocese continues to struggle with its clergy shortage.

This suggests that we should plan for the Basilica-St. Alphonsus pair of parishes in a way that allows for the continuation of the clergy status quo indefinitely, but allows for reduction to one priest serving the two parishes on short notice should either parish become vacant through the reassignment or ill health of its pastor. There should be a plan for the reduction of the weekend Mass schedule to rely on one priest, plus a little help from St. Ignatius. This will be accomplished by dropping the English Mass at St. Alphonsus, advancing the time of the 10:30 at the Basilica by a quarter-hour, and consolidating the four Sunday morning Masses at St. Ignatius into two.

The plan for the Corpus Christi- St.Vincent de Paul pair of parishes should anticipate a reduction of the Mass schedule at St. Vincent's to what its Senior Priest can do, beginning in June of 2013, and a plan should be in place for a Mass schedule for these two parishes that can be feasible for either one full-time or two senior (or other part-time) priests. This will mean the elimination of the midnight Mass at St. Vincent's in June, 2013, and, at some point in the future, the elimination of the 11:45 Mass at St. Vincent's and the moving of the 10:30 at Corpus Christi to 11AM..

The existing weekend Mass schedule for the five parishes, a total of 19 Masses, is:

	Basilica	St. Alphonsus	St. Ignatius	Corpus Christi	St. Vincent de Paul
Vigil	5:30		4:30	4:00	7:15
Sunday	8:00	8:30 Lithuanian	8:00		12:15am
	10:45	10:00 English	9:00	10:30	9:30
		11:30 Tridentine	9:30		11:45
	4:30		10:30		
			6:00		

Adjustments to this schedule will be made as clergy changes dictate, with the following resulting schedule, a total of 14 Masses, to be:

	Basilica	St. Alphonsus	St. Ignatius	Corpus Christi	St. Vincent de Paul
Vigil	5:30		4:30	4:00	7:15
Sunday	8:00	8:30 Lithuanian	8:00		
	10:30	11:30 Tridentine	10:15	11:00	9:30
	4:30		6:00		

In sum, our discussions have led us to a view of the cluster in at least three perspectives:

1. Five separate parishes, each with its own heritage, historic buildings, distinct traditions, devoted membership and unique ecclesial flavor. This is why our final plan preserves all five communities and their churches.
2. Two pair of somewhat similar parishes plus a resource parish, with shared staffing and coordinated Mass schedules.
3. One cluster that brings together the five Catholic churches serving the center of the City of Baltimore, which needs to continue to meet in some form similar to the present committee to keep exchanging ideas and working on ways to coordinate staff and programs.

We, the pastors and parish councils of the Central City Catholic Churches, do therefore hereby endorse this plan for our future and ask that it be accepted by our Vicar Bishop and by the Apostolic Administrator.