

Pastoral Planning Task Force Releases Summary

(Embargoed until weekend of July 22-23, 2017)

Special to *The Catholic Commentator*

The Pastoral Planning Task Force has released a summary of its recommendations that have been implemented since March 2016.

In 2015, Bishop Robert W. Muench announced during the Chrism Mass celebrated at St. Aloysius Catholic Church that a task force had been formed. At that time, he noted that because of a shrinking number of clergy, “demographics clearly pose a challenge.”

Chairman Father Trey Nelson said the task force consists of 12 members that includes “lay persons, religious and priests have given this time of themselves freely because they believe in the church and the future of the Diocese of Baton Rouge. While implementation of the recommendations made has not always been easy and while there has often been high emotion, I have personally found every Catholic lay person to be open and confident that the Holy Spirit is guiding us into the future. (Bishop Muench) has continually called us to be more ecclesial and less parochial. This means more our church and less my parish.”

Father Nelson said each parish has its own needs that makes it unique and no two parishes are alike but added that the process has helped “us all to understand what it means to journey forward as one body of Christ.

“Personally, it is my heartfelt belief that we are going where God is leading us to go. Our works have born much fruit, as you see in the bullet points of this press release, and will continue to do so. How can we be church with fewer priests and more Catholics? We must choose and strive to do it together. Thank you to all of you for your courage and your openness and your prayers. It has been my privilege to serve as the chair of the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Task Force.”

Listed below is the summary of recommendations implemented since March 2016.

A more detailed description can be found at www.diobr.org.

1. Weekend Assistance for Priests

A centralized resource has been established to assist priests with finding a substitute for weekend Masses when there is an emergency need to do so. If a priest has difficulty finding help on his own, he can now call Fr. Paul Yi, Chancellor, for assistance.

2. Parish-to-Parish Tithing

The category of “extraordinary income” (income to a parish that is taxable to the diocese) has been broadened to include “any income received by a parish from another parish.” Toward the goal of greater financial collaboration, Bishop Muench immediately approved this recommendation in March of 2016.

3. Mentoring Programs for Priests

Programs to assist newly ordained priests and foreign-born priests have been reorganized and are being coordinated by Fathers Jason Palermo and Michael Alello.

4. Formation of the Pastoral Support Team

During the summer of 2016 the diocese established what is known as the *Parish Pastoral Support Committee*. This Committee consists of 25 to 30 volunteers from throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge. Trained by SSA Consultants of Baton Rouge, the purpose of the Committee is to assist parishes, priests, and parish leadership in discerning the best structural and pastoral ministry model for their particular community, given the fewer number of priests available and changing demographics in their area. The Committee is divided into smaller *Parish Resource Teams*, each consisting of 3 to 5 members. Each team is connected with a particular pastor and parish or group of parishes and guides them through a process of gathering input and seeking consensus regarding possible structural changes. Each Team enters into the process with a clearly stated goal and a process that is clearly outlined in the *Parish Pastoral Support Committee Resource Guidebook*.

5. Diocesan-Wide Reduction of Masses Where Appropriate

Based on the Task Force recommendation to reduce the number of Masses offered by a parish or group of parishes, due to the decreasing number of priests, the Pastoral Support Team (mentioned in #4 above) has completed work in 6 areas of the diocese. Clergy and parish leadership were led through a process toward the goal of developing a 1 priest Mass schedule in the following areas of our diocese:

6. The Shared Pastorate of Sacred Heart Parish in Gramercy, St. Joseph Parish in Paulina, and St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Convent

There are 2 priests currently serving these 3 church parishes. In December of 2016, these 3 churches reduced their total number of weekend Masses from 8 to 6, thereby establishing a schedule that is reasonable for 2 priests. In light of this change, the Task Force has recommended there be no further adjustments to the weekend Mass schedule at this time. Rather, focus is to be placed on further collaboration between the 3 parishes and most significantly the development of a job description for a potential administrative assistant to the pastor to assist with facilities management. The Task Force is also working on a possible means of financial subsidy to assist with the salary for this position.

7. The Parishes of Our Lady of Peace and St. Philip in Vacherie, and St. James in St. James

There are 2 priests currently serving these 3 church parishes. It is probable that in the near future, only 1 priest will be available for service in this configuration. Therefore, effective July 1, 2017, these 3 church parishes will implement a collaborative schedule of

Masses and ministry expectations reflective of a 1 priest model. The total number of weekend Masses will be reduced from 6 to 4. At present, these 3 churches will retain the service of 2 full time priests.

8. The Shared Pastorate of the Parishes of St. Joseph in Grosse Tete, Immaculate Heart of Mary in Maringouin, and St. Francis Xavier Cabrini in Livonia, and St. Catherine Chapel in Fordoche

There are 2 priests currently serving these 3 church parishes. It is probable that in the near future, only 1 priest will be available for service in this configuration. Therefore, effective July 1, 2017, these 3 church parishes will implement a collaborative schedule of Masses and ministry expectations reflective of a 1 priest model. The total number of weekend Masses will be reduced from 6 to 4. Masses will only be celebrated at the 3 parish churches. Mass will no longer be celebrated at St. Catherine Chapel in Fordoche. At present, these 3 churches will retain the service of 2 full time priests.

9. The Shared Pastorate of St. Anne Parish in Napoleonville, St. Philomena Parish in Labadieville, and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Parish in Plattenville

These 3 church parishes are currently being served by 2 priests, namely 1 pastor and 1 parochial vicar (associate pastor). Toward the goal of further collaboration between the churches along Bayou Lafourche, and given the very real possibility that this will eventually become a 1 priest configuration, a new Mass schedule will be implemented effective July 1, 2017, reducing the total number of Masses between these 3 church parishes from 7 to 4. At present, these 3 churches will retain the service of 2 full time priests.

10. The Parishes of St. Louis King of France and St. Thomas More in Baton Rouge

These 2 church parishes have been served by 3 priests total with St. Louis King of France being served by 1 full time priest and St. Thomas More being served by 2 full time priests. Due to changing demographics in the area, and due to the lack of financial viability on the part of St. Louis King of France Parish, effective July 1, 2017, the 2 church parishes will become what is known as a “shared pastorate.” Simply put, this means that the 2 churches will be served by 1 pastor. A parochial vicar (associate pastor) has also been assigned to serve as well. It is also recommended by the Task Force that St. Louis King of France Parish cease to function and exist as a parish of the Diocese of Baton Rouge and amalgamated with St. Thomas More Parish no later than June 30, 2018.

11. The Parishes of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in White Castle, St. Joan of Arc in Bayou Pigeon, and St. Catherine Chapel in Bayou Sorrel

In completing the remaining summer assignments of priests, our diocese is lacking the number of pastors necessary to fill certain positions. One of these is the position of pastor of the shared pastorate of Our Lady of Prompt Succor in White Castle, St. Joan of Arc in Bayou Pigeon, and St. Catherine Chapel in Bayou Sorrel. This reality, along with an

extremely low number of parishioners attending Masses at these churches, has left us with the need to make some immediate adjustments to the Mass schedules. Effective on the weekend of July 29-30, 2017, the number of Masses celebrated at these 3 sites will be reduced to 2 – 1 Mass on the weekend at Our Lady of Prompt Succor and 1 per weekend at St. Joan of Arc. No weekend Masses will be celebrated at St. Catherine Chapel. Bishop Muench has also asked The Task Force to begin discussion of a long term plan for these sites.

12. Formation of the *Auxiliary Pastoral Planning Committee*

In order to ensure that all protocol is followed when there is a significant change in the status of a parish or parishes, Bishop Muench asked for the creation of the *Auxiliary Pastoral Planning Committee* (commonly now referred to as the “A.P.P.”). This committee is a subcommittee of the Pastoral Planning Task Force. The purpose of the committee is to ensure that all necessary canonical and civil protocols are followed and that personnel issues are prudently addressed during such a change. The committee includes the Chair of the Pastoral Planning Task Force and representatives in the areas of canon law, civil law, diocesan finances, and diocesan human resources.

13. Suppression of St. Pius X Parish

In March of 2017, Bishop Muench, after consultation with the pastor and lay leadership of St. Pius X Parish, the Presbyteral Council, and the Auxiliary Pastoral Planning Committee, and after having completed all steps required by canon law, accepted the Task Force’s recommendation to formally suppress the civilly-incorporated ecclesiastical parish of St. Pius X in Baton Rouge effective on 31 May 2017. In doing so, he also transferred its community, territory, archives, and any and all ecclesiastical property to the Congregation of St. Isidore the Farmer Roman Catholic Church in Baton Rouge (Baker).

14. The Chapels of St. Jude in Greensburg and St. Elizabeth in Kentwood

At the request of the local pastor of St. Helena Parish in Amite, and after consultation with the Task Force, Bishop Muench has accepted the formal request to “*relegate the Churches of St. Jude in Greensburg and St. Elizabeth in Kentwood to Profane but not Sordid Use and to Alienate Said Churches.*” No regularly scheduled Masses have been celebrated at these sites since 2014, and most parishioners who live near St. Jude and St. Elizabeth attend Sunday Mass at St. Helena in Amite. Financially, neither chapel can sustain its own existence. The upkeep, maintenance, and insurance required for the two to minimally function is disproportionate to the use of the buildings to the detriment of St. Helena Parish. The Parish/Finance Council of St. Helena Parish has also endorsed this recommendation. On Tuesday June 20, in keeping with canonical protocol, this recommendation was brought before the Presbyteral Council, who in turn proposed it to the Bishop for his acceptance.