

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter - C  
Acts 13:14, 43-52;  
Revelation 7:9, 14b-17;  
John 10:27-30  
Little Flower - 4/21/13

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter. It is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday. Also, today has been designated World Day of Prayer for Vocations.

Last Sunday there was an insert in the bulletin, a letter from Archbishop Tobin, concerning *Connected in the Spirit*, the Archdiocesan planning process. The first goal of this process is the most important: "To enhance the vibrancy of parish life in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis." The accomplishment of three of the other nine goals will contribute significantly to the vibrancy of parish life in the Archdiocese. More than anything else, increased participation in Sunday Eucharist will contribute to more vibrant parishes. According to the Second Vatican Council, the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life and activity. Likewise, parishes will be more vibrant and alive if all parishioners have opportunities for quality lifelong Christian Formation, including increased availability of quality Catholic School education.

However, parishes do not exist simply to meet the needs of parishioners. Pope Francis has been very vocal about the Church's mission to the world. Some of the goals of *Connected in the Spirit* push us to look beyond ourselves. The Church in the Archdiocese of Indianapolis wants to strengthen service to the marginalized in our parishes and in the larger community. As Catholics, we are to advocate for peace and justice in the Church and the world. As a Christian community, we should want to build a greater sense of unity among the many cultures of the Archdiocese. We want to increase collaboration among all entities in the local, national, and universal Church.

However, the Archdiocese recognizes that we have some concrete challenges. Many of our parishes struggle financially; some cannot make it on their own. This is why Archbishop Daniel focused so much on home missions during his years as our Archbishop. Therefore, one of the practical goals of *Connected in the Spirit* is to promote good stewardship so that parishes are financially viable now and into the future.

The second challenge is the decreasing number and increasing age of the clergy. Within the last few months, the Archdiocese has provided the parishes with all sorts of statistics. The one that struck me most was a bar graph with the ages of the priests by decades. By far, the single largest group of priests is priests in their 60's. Of 142 priests in the Archdiocese, both active and retired, 39 are in their 60's. When the chart was developed, five priests were still active in their 80's and eight in their 70's. There are 22 active priests in their 50's, 16 in their 40's, 14 in their 30's, and two younger than 30. In light of these challenges, one of the goals of *Connected in the Spirit* is to "realign parishes considering the number of priests available to serve, financial resources and demographics."

The demographics of many parishes have changed, including our own. To use our own parish as an example, we are a much smaller parish than when I was growing up. The last several years our numbers have remained fairly constant or have increased slightly. However, the number of parishioners attending Mass on any given Sunday has decreased. Our school is approximately half the size it was when I became pastor in 2003. At the same time, we have grown by approximately 50 students over the last two years. On the other hand, there are some parishes

that are continuing to grow each year. For example, when I was ordained, my first assignment was St. Malachy in Brownsburg. St. Malachy had approximately 3,500 parishioners in 1975. Today St. Malachy has 6,750 parishioners.

As I mentioned in my bulletin letter last week, we were asked to appoint a Core Team of four people besides myself to lead our parish through this process. Our four Core Team members are Sandy Clegg, Chairperson, Diane Sharp, Secretary, Tom Costello, and Mark Erdosy. Since the training at the Catholic Center, we have already met twice. One of the challenges in this process is its aggressive time line.

The next step of the process is for each parish in the Indianapolis Deaneries to engage in a self-study to determine our strengths and weaknesses in four areas: (1) the Sacramental Life of the Parish; (2) Evangelization, Catechesis and Catholic Schools; (3) Stewardship and Justice; and (4) Effective Administration. As I look over the materials, I can certainly see that we have some real strengths, but we also have some real weaknesses as I am sure every parish has.

The Archbishop and the Archdiocese want your participation in this self-study. Based on the information that the Archdiocese has asked us to compile, we have decided to do a parish survey. Within the next couple of weeks, you may receive a survey in the mail or will hear how you can participate if you do not receive a survey directly. I hope many of you will choose to participate. I also hope that you will pray for our parish and for the Archdiocese during this process.

My brothers and sisters, as I mentioned at the beginning, today is the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. We certainly all need to pray for vocations. However, we need to foster a culture of vocations in our families and in our parish. Recently Fr. Eric Augenstein, the new Archdiocesan Vocation Director, shared some national research with us about vocations. One of the major factors that will cause young men to think about a vocation to the priesthood or religious life or young women to think about a vocation to religious life is a personal invitation to think about it. This is something all of us can do. We need to look for and encourage good candidates for the priesthood and religious life.