

RENEW MY CHURCH ARTICLES FROM FR. MIKE FOLEY PUBLISHED IN AREA BULLETINS IN JUNE OF 2018

(The first of three articles follows. Each new article being on the page following the end of the previous article).

By now, many of you have heard of the Archdiocesan initiative **RENEW MY CHURCH**. When fully implemented, it will mean many changes here in the Archdiocese of Chicago. Some of these changes may include closing or merging parishes, sharing staffs and programs between parishes, reallocating priests' responsibilities, and more. Every parish and school in the Archdiocese of Chicago will be affected in some way. This will be phased in over a period of years.

Thirty-two parishes in the Archdiocese have completed the initial decision-making processes, with the result that those 32 parishes will be reduced to 19 parishes. In our Vicariate, the 61 parishes and missions that encompass the southwest side of the city and the southwest suburbs, three parishes have gone through the process to date, which has resulted in the announced merger of Saint Adrian and Queen of the Universe in the Marquette Park community. New groupings, involving 38 Archdiocesan parishes, began their consultations this winter and will complete their efforts by the end of the year.

We, the pastors of the parishes in the Southwest suburbs, called Deanery V-E, are writing a three-part explanation of this effort to assist you in understanding the process, before we begin the formal conversations. While some parish communities in our area might not fully activate this process for a couple of years, we did feel that it is important that you hear from us. In three articles we will speak honestly about the rationale for the process, some details of how it will be implemented, and in what ways our parishes are already moving forward.

Today we will speak of the rationale for this effort. Next week we will address the details.

The Archdiocese is initiating this because of three realities: demographics, finances, and opportunities, that is, strength in numbers.

In truth, the active population of the Catholic Church in the Midwest and Northeast is shrinking. It is growing in the South and Western areas of the nation, but not in our region. Additionally, many dioceses are dealing with aging infrastructures that are too expensive to maintain and a shrinking number of clergy.

This is true in the Archdiocese of Chicago. In the last 30 years, the number of Catholics attending Sunday Mass weekly has dropped from 580,000 to 410,000. In that same timeframe the number of non-retired diocesan priests has fallen from 860 to 540 (and will be below 450 in less than ten years). Over 80% of the parish buildings in the Archdiocese are over 80 years old. Finally, we have nearly 50 parishes that have less than 300 people on Sunday and another 70 that have between 300 and 600 worshippers. This represents about one-third of all parishes. Many of the smaller congregations have challenges providing a full range of pastoral services and opportunities.

There are opportunities as well. In this Archdiocese, we have already created new parishes from the merger of several smaller parishes. When done well, these mergers have resulted in more vibrant and prayerful liturgies, and stronger and more professional outreach in areas such as youth ministry, catechesis, and adult faith formation. The costs of operating these new parishes are often less than when several parishes operated individually. At times some property can be sold and the proceeds given to the new community. In other situations, we have parishes that remain distinct, but have shared resources and ministries. This too has created new energy. Often we can do together what we cannot do alone.

To address these realities, factual realities, to ensure every parish is fully comprehensive in meeting the various needs, and to ensure that there is a more equitable distribution of priests, **RENEW MY CHURCH HAS BEGUN**. Next week we will discuss the format as it applies to our parishes.

See next page for second article from Fr. Foley.

Dear Parishioners,

Last week we shared an overture of the Archdiocesan initiative **RENEW MY CHURCH**. In this letter, we will outline the basic format of that process.

All parishes in the Archdiocese of Chicago have been placed in groupings that will be activated over a period of years. The first groupings began their work two years ago and the final groupings will be activated within four or five three years. In our region (Deanery V-E), the Archdiocese has created the following groupings:

- **Group one:** Incarnation, St. Alexander
- **Group two:** St. Christopher, St. Damian
- **Lemont Group:** SS. Cyril and Methodius, St. James at Sag Bridge, St. Alphonsus, St. Patrick, St. Alphonsus/St. Patrick School, Ss. Cyril and Methodius School, Blessed Anton Martin Slomsek Slovenian Catholic Mission, Our Lady Mother of the Church Polish Mission in Willow Springs.
- **Orland\Tinley Group:** Our Lady of the Woods, St. Elizabeth Seton, St. Francis of Assisi, St. George, St. Julie Billiart, St. Michael , St. Stephen, Deacon and Martyr, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Elementary School.

Despite the fact that none of these groupings has been “activated” at this time, please know that as your pastors we have already begun some preliminary work.

When a group is activated, every parish will have lay representation on the consultation process and the Archdiocese will provide necessary training as well. In this process, the Archdiocese will present a number of scenarios for the grouping. These scenarios are based on parish vitality, financial realities, the state of parish facilities as well as priest availability.

There are a number of general principles to guide the process. They include the following:

- **As a general rule, a parish needs to have a Sunday church attendance of at least 600 persons to justify a full-time priest in the future.** A minimum of 800 worshippers is preferred. Within a few years, we will not have enough priests to provide smaller parishes with a resident pastor.
- **As a general rule, a parish needs to have an income from collections that exceeds \$500,000 per year.** However, \$750,000 is considered ideal to offer more comprehensive ministerial services and ministries.

- **As a general rule, a Catholic school should project an enrollment of at least 200 students in the future to be considered viable. A minimum of 240 students is preferred.**

The groupings will be free to create their own proposals for consideration as well. In larger parishes, this might mean adjusting the daily and Sunday Mass schedule, including sharing the daily Masses between parishes or even sharing the Sunday evening Mass. It also might mean more combined ministries and perhaps the sharing of associate pastors, if one has one.

Overall, the process will include a number of meetings between staffs, between parish leadership teams (such as parish council members and school advisory members) and town hall style meetings open to the entire parish. Planning in detail cannot begin until the groups are activated. The overall time frame of the RENEW MY CHURCH process for an activated grouping of parishes is approximately six to eight months of discernment, followed by their recommendations to the Archdiocese. Several more months will be needed to finalize the plans and then a time from for implementation is determined.

In our next letter, we will explore how we are moving forward today and what we can all do to prepare.

See next page for third and final article from Fr. Foley

Dear Parishioners,

For the past two weeks we shared an overture of the Archdiocesan initiative **RENEW MY CHURCH**. Two weeks ago, we presented an overview of the reasons behind this effort. Last week, we wrote about some practical aspects of the process. This week we will share information about preliminary work we are doing, along with a spiritual perspective of what this might mean for us all.

As of this date, the formal process has not begun in any of the groupings in our region (Deanery V-E). Informally, however, we have begun working behind the scenes. Let us highlight a few areas of cooperation.

Long before **RENEW MY CHURCH** began, the parishes of Lemont began cooperating in a number of ways. They have shared an associate pastor. Two parish schools merged into one. There is a common Youth Minister. In the summer, three of the parishes share the daily Mass. There is a common RCIA experience. In a number of ways, these efforts have strengthened the Lemont Catholic community. Similarly and more recently, other parishes have made similar strides: sharing a youth minister, partnering in the RCIA, coordinating Respect life Groups, to name just a few collaborative efforts. In many ways, when we ask the question about a particular ministry, the perspective includes how we might work together.

The pastors throughout our area are looking at their Mass schedules. As the number of available priests shrink, it will be necessary to adjust Mass schedules on Sunday in many places. It will certainly mean that parishes will become more cooperative with daily Mass times as well. It makes no sense for every parish to have daily Mass at the same time. For the last couple of years we have also published the reconciliation schedules for Advent and Easter to assist parishioners.

In the Orland-Tinley grouping, we are organizing a special experience with Chris Stefanic and the Real Life Catholic Team this fall. This will strengthen our own vitality and our commitment to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others.

The truth is change is at times disconcerting. As pastors, we feel this as well. All of us must recognize that change brings new opportunities. As Catholics, we hold tight to the Paschal mystery of Jesus. This means that there is a dying and there is a rising. All of us must understand that while some routines may die, new opportunities will open up. We will be asked to move beyond a narrow sense of church as parish into a greater appreciation of Church as a larger community that shares much.

This process has begun in other parts of the Archdiocese. Soon it will begin here. As we move forward we are comforted by the promise of Jesus to be with us always and confident of the Holy Spirit's guidance as we *RENEW MY CHURCH*.