

SAINT BERNADETTE CHURCH

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In response to the “Road to Renewal” initiative, a meeting was held by the Pastoral Council in order to address some questions and concerns, as well as its effects on Saint Bernadette Parish and the Diocese. Father Bryan Zielenieski, Vicar for Renewal and Development, Saint Bernadette councils, staff, and ministry leadership all met on Tuesday, June 22.



Some History:

Necessary for our Diocese to regain focus, in 2020 Bishop Scharfenberger formed the Diocesan Renewal Task Force to research how other dioceses have strengthened their abilities to serve the mission of the Catholic Church. The Task Force’s examination of the Diocese of Buffalo made clear that the “*status quo is simply not an option*”. They noted that leadership failures in the shameful history of the sex abuse crises and its cover-up, ongoing bankruptcy, Covid -19 pandemic, and the lack of a compelling and vibrant vision, all erode the Diocese’s ability to carry forward the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Due to the decreasing number of priests, negative financial trends, and the aging congregations left in our churches, our Diocese is on a “*slow path to irrelevance*”. The Task Force went on to further recommend the implementation of the “family of parishes” model that has been or is currently ongoing in other (Arch-) dioceses. Most notably, Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Pittsburgh, Columbus and the London Ontario are at different stages in this model, with successes noted in each. The Buffalo Diocese has adopted the “*lessons learned approach*” from trials and failures of those dioceses, and continues to adapt Road to Renewal based off those findings.

Dioceses “family of parishes” dialog and talking points:

In response to questions and concerns, Father Bryan expressed the following:
To bring about consistency, streamline operations, anticipate future changes in pastoral resources, engage laity, and provide local flexibility for pastoral and ecclesiastical needs, 162 parishes throughout the diocese will group into 36 “parish families”, in an effort to serve our community best without having to close parishes.

Saint Bernadette would be part of a “family” of parishes, and one other worship site, specifically:

- *Saint John the Baptist Parish*, Boston
 - *Saint Mary (Oratory of Saint John the Baptist)*, Eden
 - *Nativity of Our Lord Parish*, Orchard Park
 - *Saints Peter and Paul Parish*, Hamburg
 - *Saint Bernadette Parish*, Orchard Park
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- Fr. Bryan affirmed that the family of parish model is not about the closing of parishes, but rather an effort to keep them open, work through the reduced number of available priests, and create a sustainable model of leadership, etc. Should a parish within a family begin to fail, the family would come up with a pastoral plan to assist the failing parish. If in three years, for example, a parish continues to be unviable, it would be up to the family to decide its fate but “*only the building could be closed*”. The true “parish”, the parishioners within the building, would be fully integrated within the family.
 - Shared among parishes within the family will be a single pastor, parochial vicar, priests, and deacons. The family will decide if staff positions, and ministries will be shared among the parishes.
 - Saint Bernadette’s family would most likely start with 6 to 7 shared priests (there are 7 currently). Priests initially assigned to families will slowly diminish due to the inevitable retirements and aging. Mass schedules will diminish across the families throughout the diocese over time, but the mass schedules will be determined by each family. It is currently not known how Christmas, Holy week and the Easter Mass demands could be met and accommodated for across the family of parishes and throughout the diocese.
 - Renewal calls for a clergy assessment process. Pastors and priests would be reassigned upon the needs of parish families throughout the diocese, with implementations over 3 years. There could be exemptions to this rule for “personality meshing” of clergy, etc.

- The family model provides for laity leadership and staffing, freeing priest for Sacramental Ministry. Communications would have to strengthen to minister to urgent parishioner's needs, as pastors and priest could be living offsite. It is not known at this time how or where priest will be living.
- Each Parish retains its own identity, assets, and finances. Each Parish will remain its own organization.
- While each family structure will have a shared administrator, parish council, and a finance council (comprised of representatives from the councils within each parish), representation would be equal across the family. Following a process of reconciliation, the Family Pastor would have the final say in arbitration within the family.
- Should one of the parishes within the family find themselves in need of additional capital funding, for example, for a roof; the family could not *force* an allocation of funds from other family members.

Concerns:

During the course of the meeting, various concerns became apparent from attendee questions; The abilities for pastors to fill the indigent urgency of the most vulnerable, our youth leaving the Church, a diminished Mass schedule, the accessibility of a consistent priest, the loss of priests due to the additional "renewal load", the unknown living accommodations for clergy, financial independence of parishes as they interlace within the family, the ability to operate a parish with an already diminished support staff, the hollowing out of administrative functions, the loss of building usage because of the sharing of ministries and the inevitable closing of those facilities because of that, the loss of income due to a diminished Mass schedule and the accompanying collections, the authentic successes of the "family of parishes" model, mitigations of dysfunction among parishes within a family, poor timing of a total diocesan restructuring during a time of bankruptcy, and the "lack of diocesan effort" on vocation appeal for the priesthood.

It was maintained by an attendee that these concerns make for a "*hard sell*" for the Renewal model throughout our Diocese. However, Fr. Bryan stressed that the Road to Renewal, modeled from implementations in over 30 diocese already, is still in "No. 2 pencil" and the task force is learning not only from other dioceses lessons, but also hearing the concerns of the many parishes in Buffalo. Two days after our meeting, a letter was sent from the Diocese of Buffalo adjusting/slowing the rollout of Renewal as feedback has uncovered areas where the initial groundwork still needs additional development and communications need to be clarified.

What's next?

- The Renewal office will now use the summer months to bring clarity to many of the questions that have been raised, to put together clear information on their work and answer the questions that will impact the future of the Renewal and Families of Parishes.
- Pilot parishes that were identified and announced will be moved to a later date so that more preparatory groundwork can be ready for their announcement and launch.
- A clear communication plan will be put into place to help parishes, laity and clergy to gain a better understanding of the Renewal and Families of Parishes.
- Regarding proposed families, NO meetings should be had at this point between parishes within a potential family as this is preemptive and could undermine the entire process. Everything is still "in pencil."
- For updates and information, the diocesan website for renewal is "www.roadtorenewal.org".

Please keep in mind that Saint Bernadette is a vibrant parish which gives us great opportunity within our family. We have opportunity to grow our many ministries, which includes our programs for the disabled and for the youth, as well as share our church, buildings and grounds. And we have strong and faithful leadership within our parish. Thank you to our priests, staff and volunteers who make Saint Bernadette the special parish that it is.

The Pastoral Council would like to extend a sincere thanks to Father Bryan for his care in this, as well as to all attendees,
Thank You.