

A conversation on Corpus Christi

During this Lenten season, as you might expect, the decision of some former pastoral leaders and members of Corpus Christi Parish to form their own church has been much on my mind. It had been my daily prayer that they would not separate themselves from our community of faith in that way. It remains my daily prayer that they will reconsider both the short- and long-term implications of what they are doing and rejoin us.

In view of the publicity about this most recent chapter in an ongoing story, I thought it might be helpful to readers of this newspaper if I were to share some reflections on what has happened.

What follows is not a chronology of events. Much less can it be an in-depth analysis of all aspects of a very complicated situation. It is rather an attempt to touch on the main themes and questions that have been placed before me by interested people like yourself who desire accurate information about the situation.

1. Corpus Christi Parish:

I am happy to tell you that a sizable and committed group of people remains at Corpus Christi. As things settle, their number is increasing. They have welcomed and supported Father Dan McMullin from the beginning and now extend a similar welcome to Sister Susan Marie Hoffman, SSJ, their new pastoral associate. Volunteers have stepped forward to fill a range of needs such as liturgical ministers, sacristans, trustees, etc. Measures are being taken to balance the budget and stabilize the financial situation of the community. The parish is actively engaged in outreach to the community. In addition, they are initiating new programs to strengthen faith formation and spirituality programs for the parish. These programs are in response to a felt need for a deeper understanding of our liturgical and sacramental traditions.

Yes, it is true that some former members have left Corpus Christi Parish to found their own church. It is also true that some members have gone to other parishes, at least temporarily, because they could no longer tolerate the disruption by protesters of the Eucharistic Liturgy. But I would feel badly if any of us forget the wonderful people who are Corpus Christi Parish and who have gone through so much recently.

2. Outreach Ministries:

All of the outreach ministries for which Corpus Christi has deservedly been known continue to function substantially as before. There has been some worry about them because — while they are supported from several funding sources — certain of the ministries rely more heavily on parish subsidies than do others. With the drop in parish revenues because of smaller numbers, the new leadership will need to lead the community in an assessment of these ministries, and the parish's capacity and willingness to fund them at former levels.

In the meantime, Catholic Family Center has offered to act as a temporary safety net should any unforeseen circumstance imperil a particular ministry. Several of our parishes also have offered financial support to Corpus Christi should it be needed to sustain a particular ministry.

3. The Problem:

For some time prior to the public controversy we have experienced, I had expressed concerns — sometimes personally, sometimes through senior staff representatives — about a range of pastoral practices carried out at Corpus Christi. Over some time it became apparent that parish leaders would not comply with what I asked of them. In addition, they became more resistant the more I urged that these changes be made.

Three problems that have received most public attention related to Eucharistic hospitality, the blessings of gay and lesbian unions, and certain liturgical practices. A word about each:

a) Eucharistic Hospitality:

The universal church has a set of norms about Eucharistic hospitality. These norms have been developed very carefully to enhance understanding of our sacramental system and to safeguard its integrity. They have considerable built-in flexibility to allow for unusual circumstances and extraordinary cases. And, because the sacraments are for the people, the church encourages its pastors to be generous in their interpretation of these norms. I thoroughly support that way of doing things.

My concern about Corpus Christi in this regard was that the leadership there, in practice, set aside the norms of the church and unilaterally replaced them with their own. This practice raised very important questions about how we understand the Eucharist, our process of the Christian initiation of adults, and the sensitivities of other faith communities.

b) Gay and Lesbian Unions:

We have been working hard in our diocese to assure gay and lesbian Catholics that they are members of our faith community and very welcome in our parishes. Good people among us have been active in this ministry. They have been in the vanguard in reaching out to the parents and loved ones of gay and lesbian Catholics when they need support to deal with the reality of their loved ones' homosexual orientations. Our church has traveled light years in this regard in just a few years. I think we can all

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the way



BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

remember a time when the subject was never brought up.

The problem we have faced at Corpus Christi is their practice of blessing gay and lesbian unions in a way that simulated the sacrament of marriage. To put it in other words, they adopted a pastoral practice that had the inevitable effect of distorting the church's understanding of marriage as a sacramental union joining a man and a woman for communion of life and establishment of a family. The practice also skirts the painful but real challenge of the church's moral tradition, which holds that genital sexual activity is licit only for man and woman joined in matrimony.

While admiring much of their outreach to gay and lesbian Catholics, I could not accept this practice at Corpus Christi. It was inconsistent with both our sacramental system and our moral tradition.

c) Liturgical Practices:

Primary among several concerns I had about liturgy at Corpus Christi was the manner in which a former pastoral associate participated at the Eucharistic Liturgy. Through a blend of vesture, gesture and words, this pastoral minister and the priests of the parish were systematically and intentionally blurring some legitimate distinctions we need to make in how all of us participate in our liturgical life.

My concern was that our symbols are powerful teachers. That's especially true of our liturgical symbols. We need to respect those symbols and celebrate them in union with the whole church. Otherwise we begin subtly but inevitably to separate ourselves from needed communion with the larger body.

There were other liturgical concerns. For example, the Nicene Creed, a standard prayer at the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy for a millennium and a half was intentionally and systematically omitted. Celebration of the Sunday Eucharistic Liturgy was replaced by Communion services for inappropriate reasons. I had some real concerns about arbitrary and inappropriate changes in our sacramental rituals.

4. The Larger Problem:

Through the course of this whole experience it has become clearer to all who have been close to it that key parish leaders designed to establish what they referred to as a "post-denominational" church or parish. This objective, it seems to me, has been the driving force in this controversy since its inception. To me the name suggests a movement away from Roman Catholic belief and practice, and a movement toward the establishment of some group or entity that would devise its own basic belief system and practices.

I am not gifted to read minds — much less to judge hearts — but I do have a responsibility to observe and make judgments in matters that touch the integrity and direction of our faith community. On October 6, when I met first with the staff at Corpus Christi and later in the evening with the full parish assembly, I expressed my concerns about this issue and raised some questions based on my concerns.

I repeat my words here: "All of the above have been raising questions in me about how the people of Corpus Christi Parish and your pastoral leaders are understanding and expressing your Roman Catholic identity. It has been my presumption all along that such identity is a value near and dear to the hearts of all present. It remains my strong presumption and deep hope, even as I speak, that my presumption is rooted in fact. Is your identity as a worshipping, serving Roman Catholic parish near and dear to your hearts?"

"I had always thought the answer to that question was a strong yes. But is it not true that there is talk here of a 'post-denominational' church? A creed-less church? By that I understand one in which love of Jesus becomes the sole requirement for membership — to the exclusion of significant doctrinal and credal content and the implications of that. I certainly hope and pray that this is not the case. It is wonderful to welcome to Corpus Christi all who look for a home in a Roman Catholic parish. It is something quite different for Corpus Christi Parish to attract others by teaching or pastoral practice that moves the parish away from its Roman Catholic identity."

I received no direct verbal response to those questions that night, nor have I since. But I think many have answered the question in other ways. Those who remain committed to Corpus Christi Parish and its clear Roman Catholic identity answer the question in one way. Those

who by public statement announce intent to establish a church outside of our Roman Catholic communion and act to carry out that intent answer the question in another way.

There are others who are uncertain in their response. On the one hand, they loved their parish's outreach, established many friendships there and embraced with enthusiasm the parish's commitment to work for reform of our church. Just now it feels to some that they will lose all of this and, so, they weigh the possibility of splitting away to the new community. On the other hand, they wrestle with the awareness that to move in such a direction is to move not to some alternate form of Roman Catholic faith they love, but to something quite different.

5. Some Hopes:

For that reason, it is my hope that those who have moved away to the new group or who are thinking of doing so will give serious thought to the short- and long-term implications of formal affiliation with the new group. That direction, freely and definitively chosen, separates a person from full communion with our church. I urge all such persons to think about the impact such a decision will have on your sacramental life and that of your children. Who will confirm them? Who will ordain them? In the longer run, what will happen when the current leadership becomes ill or moves away or dies? What are going to be the new community's principles of continuity, succession and connection to our faith tradition? Who holds ultimate teaching authority in this community, and who will be arbiter when doctrinal differences or questions of pastoral practice arise, as surely they will?

These are extremely important questions. Anyone contemplating leaving our community should think about these very carefully before moving to a community that — the rhetoric of some of its leaders notwithstanding — is substantially different from a Roman Catholic parish. I would hate to see anyone move in such a direction without seeking counsel from a trusted and experienced pastoral leader.

6. Our Life Together:

It has always been a great consolation in my years of service as a bishop that the priests and people of this diocese pray by name for the pope and the bishop at every Eucharistic Liturgy: "make us grow in love together with John Paul our Pope, and Matthew our Bishop..." or "Strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim church on earth; your servant John Paul, our bishop Matthew with the clergy and the entire people your Son has gained for you." Such inclusions bring much strength and encouragement. They remind me that I am called not only to serve the people, but also to grow with them in faith and love.

While I am strengthened by that language, enshrined in the most precious prayer of the church, I mention it here for another reason. It speaks about the nature of our life. It refers to an ordering of relationships through and in which the church lives its life. It acknowledges explicitly our call to grow in faith and love and, in doing so, at least implicitly, teaches that we are always in need of reform. We — each one of us, and all of us as an institution — need to become more loving, more just. That is among the great calls and challenges of Lent.

My concern about the controversy at Corpus Christi has never been that its members often raised good, even tough questions that pointed out our need continually to grow. I think the evidence is quite solid that this diocese has worked hard at ongoing conversion and reform. My concern, rather, has been their unilateral adoption of certain pastoral practices that ran counter to the common teaching of the church and tended to isolate the parish from the wider church's pastoral life. All that is needed, if you were to follow their line of thought, is gumption enough to withdraw from the wisdom and practice of the wider church and proceed in your own direction. I think I need not spell out for you the impact that that direction has on neighboring parishes or on their pastoral ministers who quietly give their lives in pursuit of similar values. And I think you can imagine what our life would be like if every one of our parishes, in similar fashion, chose its own direction.

7. A Final Note:

I hope that reading these reflections has been half as helpful to you as the writing of them has been to me. As I mentioned at the beginning, my intent was to share with you what has been on my mind and in my heart about a matter that is very important to all of us — the union of all of us in our local church and the union of our local church with the Great Church.

I am aware as I conclude that there are many other issues I might have commented on and that I might have gone into more depth on several of the themes I did treat. If you have comments or questions about what I have written, or desire further information, I hope you will let me know. I and/or the *Catholic Courier* will continue the conversation as suggested by your input.

I promise you my prayers as we prepare to celebrate the Easter feast.

Peace to all.