

Parish leaders show openness to change

Bill Pickett, diocesan director of pastoral planning, and I will be driving to Ovid later today for a meeting with leaders of area parishes who have been working on our Pastoral Planning for the New Millennium (PPNM) process.

I look forward to that drive because I always enjoy Bill's company and because we'll pass through some beautiful countryside on the way. But most of all, I anticipate the evening with joy because I love to spend time with our parish leaders. They are faithful and generous people who are willing to do just about anything they can to foster the life of the church and contribute to the strength of their parish communities.

Like most of us who are asked to participate in processes that are likely to yield substantial change, our friends often agree to participate in PPNM with a certain amount of apprehension. Those from the smaller communities of a given cluster of parishes often have to deal with the fear that they will be swallowed up by the larger groups. And it can happen that those from larger and/or more financially secure communities have to wrestle with the demon that tells them that they are in a no-win situation because, from their perspective, things go quite smoothly just as they are.

A part of me understands both of those reactions. We tend to react defensively or

along the way



By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

negatively to anything that implies loss for us or the change in a status quo we find quite satisfactory.

That leads me to the reasons I so much enjoy being with our parish leaders, indeed, why I admire them so much. I'd say that principal among those reasons are the following:

1) Their ability to put aside their personal preferences and tastes to search with others for what will best serve the common good. They have the freedom to let go of their favored directions and a corresponding willingness to be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I do not mean at all that such individuals lack convictions or a point of view, or that they are shy about expressing them. Much the opposite is true. But, having expressed their opinions, they do not hold onto them so tightly that they shut themselves off to possibilities suggested by other participants in the process. They

operate with a practical sense that they have much to offer and that there is still much that they can learn.

2) Their sense of history and life unfolding. These individuals may or may not have a great deal of formal education. But they all have a good deal of the wisdom that comes from their experience of life. They have a living sense that life is dynamic, that we can continue to enjoy and transmit our most cherished values effectively only when we are able to make the adjustments to which constantly changing circumstances call us.

For example, such people know how important it is to communicate with one another in the best possible way. They know also that the rotary phone was the best instrument of its kind at one time, but no longer is. Similarly, they know that the church's self-understanding continually develops and, with that, its pastoral practice. And, they have a good grasp of the reality that our circumstances change. We are not immune from population shifts or economic changes, variable vocation patterns, the impact of other cultural realities.

In summary, I admire their faith, their sense of history and their openness to life beyond their own boundaries and personal concerns. I am grateful to God that our diocese is blessed with so many people like them.

Peace to all.



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