

The Road Map Ahead

(Bishop Bart's Initial Vision for the Diocese)

With the risk of being too ambitious or to set a direction without doing the proper inquiries, I would like to offer my priests and the people of the Diocese of Corner Brook and Labrador as sense of what I would like to see happen in regards to the pastoral challenges that lie before us. Knowing full well that plans will face roadblocks, need to be revised on a regular basis and are open to the insights and the ideas of many contributors, I would like to offer some clarity in regards to where I am coming from.

1. Clear Pastoral Plans in each Parish, Mission and Region:

In my many years of pastoral ministry, it is my experience that many pastoral efforts fall short for lack of any clear pastoral planning from the outset. I have never started a year without having a clear idea what I wanted to accomplish that year, making sure to build on the initiatives I began the year before. It is my expectation, from the outset to require each parish and mission to develop a clear idea of what they would like to accomplish in regards to ministry in one or two particular areas of ministry (i.e. families, youth, young adults, seniors, faith formation, evangelization, etc.) in their parish and in their outreach into the larger community. Pastoral plans start with a common dream and a desire for something better. They take flesh by clear steps for execution. I take my direction from my background in the field of Education; just as a teacher is required to have unit plans and detailed lesson plans for each lesson they teach, this should also be true for anyone taking on the responsibility of leadership in the Church. Without a clear plan the ship never sets sail, or worse yet, goes in circles or is wrecked on the rocks. One of my chief responsibilities is to help priests and parishes develop their individualized plans (with the help of the Diocesan Planning Advisory Committee, the Presbyterate and Diocesan Staff) and to offer ongoing support, resources and encouragement to help in the process of execution.

2. Family-Centered Ministry:

All the major documents produced by the Church on the topic of faith formation, identify the family as the central unit of operation. The Church goes through great pains to identify parents as the primary educators in regards to all matters, but especially in regards to faith and morals, and that the family has a central role to play as the "Domestic Church" or as the ultimate "Small Christian Faith Community". And yet, the way we deliver our "programs" often ignore or even mitigate against this fact. It is my hope that we develop models of ministry that support parents in their primary role as Christian parents and help our families to be more firmly rooted in their ministry to one another, in their ministry to the world and their place in the Church. This ministry may involve connecting families together, for joint support, in ways that are attractive to families (i.e. family camping weekends, a joint family hike-and-Mass, family nights centered around food and activities, conversations between parents and activities for children, etc.).

3. Christian Outreach:

Pope Francis has warned the Church against becoming too insular in our perspective. Too often we do not look much farther than our own four walls. The Church's role is in the world. This is where most of the faithful are called to carry out their God-given Call to be light to the world. It is my hope to develop a greater sense of Christian Outreach into the needs of each local community that both challenge us to greater charity of our time, talents and resources and gives us a greater presence in the world. It is only in responding to the needs of the Christ who hungers for our love that we may come to understand his love for us and the greater purpose of our lives. Christian outreach will not only help build stronger communities, it will help our communities to grow.

4. Building up a Local Clergy:

When St. Francois de Laval was first sent to New France as its first Bishop, one of his first projects the building of a local seminary. He knew there was no future in an overly great dependence on France for his priests. Though I will not duplicate his efforts in building a diocesan seminary, I do want to take steps to ensure a greater percentage of priests come from the diocese. This will ensure that priests are better versed with our local circumstances, will commit to a life-long vision to build up the diocese and build a strong bond with the people and area they are called to serve. Beginning with greater vocational initiatives, the diocese needs to actively engage and invite young people to a personal relationship with Christ and the possibility of giving their lives in service to their brothers and sisters in Christ. A greater presence on local campuses, more events and attention geared towards youth and young adults, a monthly Holy Hour for Vocations in each parish and mission and a more family-centered approach in parish ministry will put a renewed focus on discerning one's Call from God based on the needs around us.

The diocese will also be willing to recruit potential seminarians from other countries in exceptional cases. Judging from my experience as Vocation Director for the Diocese of Nelson, there are a few good candidates out there. That out of every twenty or thirty that apply, there is always one that proves his worth to the diocese that makes the effort by setting up strong screening protocols. The advantage of recruiting young men as seminarians includes: enculturation happens when they are in the seminary, better control over discernment process and the qualities needed to minister in this area and men who are fully committed to the diocese.

5. Optimizing All the Properties at our Disposal:

Many of the buildings we use are either too big, too many or too cumbersome to maintain. Although I strongly believe in retaining a physical presence in most of our communities, many of the churches can easily be divided into two equal halves (this has been done in many different aesthetically pleasing way in the Diocese of Nelson, with excellent results): one half serving as worship space, the other half serving as parish centre. In most cases, a separate parish hall may no longer be necessary. In the case of smaller churches, various ways of optimizing building space can be studied. I have had great success with a moveable divider that

can separate the sanctuary (the raised area containing the altar, ambo and tabernacle) from the seating area of the church. This will allow for a more “flexible church space” that can be adapted depending on the event. It will also ensure more and better use of facilities, allowing for the building up of our parish communities. Optimizing church properties may also involve creating separate heating zones within our buildings, ensuring that high traffic areas in larger rectories and bigger buildings are heated, without wasting it on areas of lesser use. Some communities may also explore renting as an option. We are often paying a high premium for a space we rarely ever use.

In this regard, it is not my intention to dictate to the parishes/missions, but to offer possible options. As long as you can afford what you have, well and good. If you can no longer afford what you have, or if it is impractical, it is the community’s responsibility to study the options and to come to a decision based on need, affordability and practicality. This is equally true of churches, halls and rectories. This should be done prior to finding help from outside sources.

6. Financial Self-sufficiency:

Just as we need to re-assert a greater sense of certainty over our own future when it comes to priests and the properties at our disposal, we also need to do the same in regards to financing. There is no reason why most of our parishes/clusters, with the exceptions of a very few, cannot be financially self-sufficient. Financial self-sufficiency is dependent on two things: revenues and expenses. By limiting our physical footprint to what is necessary and by heating only that which needs heating, significant money can be saved. By engaging our families and younger demographic and reshaping our parishes and activities to be at the centre of our communities, we not only increase our financial base but give people a reason to give. People tend to give more when their money is seen to make a difference in the community.

7. Building Parish Communities that are Places of Refuge and Hospitality:

Pope Francis speaks of the Church as a field hospital, not a museum. Greater emphasis should be placed on giving people a place to come, rather than a place that is available for only the rarest of occasions. A space needs to be set aside for prayer, but so too a space for “coffee”, crafts, “play”, learning, art and charitable outreach. It is not the quantity of space that matters, but in the innovation by which it is used. The more we position our parishes at the heart and service of our community, the more its mission and its support is assured.

8. Strong sense of collaboration between parishes and within regions:

As our parishes and missions diminish in size, the unity among parishes and missions can be threatened by the fear of closures and amalgamations. Rather than learning from one another and working more closely together on common concerns, we become parochial, almost combative, competing with one another, focusing on “scarcities” rather than “opportunities” and “possibilities”. In order to have healthy parishes and missions, we must have a healthy sense of working together, not only within and between parishes and missions, but in the larger structure of the Diocese. Learning to work together around common issues will allow for better decision making, support systems and resources. It will also help ease the pain should any future amalgamations and/or closures be seen as beneficial by an overall consensus.

The Bishop's Office, The Diocesan Pastoral Centre and its offices, the Diocesan Pastoral Advisory Committee together with the clergy of the Diocese and the many diocesan based groups, ministries and associations are there to help build greater unity and provide help for any parish or mission who are looking for support. The Diocesan Pastoral Advisory Committee will be concentrating part of its efforts to bring parishes/missions together for regional and/or diocesan gatherings.

9. Reconciliation and Healing:

In my desire to focus on unity within the diocese, I would like to make mention of the pain and the betrayal that many have felt in response to the Sexual Abuse Scandal of the past, the Residential School Abuses in the North and the Abuse of Power that rears its ugly head from time to time. Though perpetuated directly on, and carried disproportionately, by the few, it continues to impact and scar the lives of each person, each community and each initiative moving forward. Despite the court-imposed settlements of 2005 and the demise of The Diocese of St. Georges, despite the Truth and Reconciliation Proceedings of the recent past and the apologies that have been offered by different Church Officials on a variety occasions, the wounds have not healed and the pain and indignity of it all still simmers, even festers, below the surface. This, too, is part of our common history. A history of great sacrifice and charity by many, but a history that is equally marked by grievous sin and collective shame, where our greatest danger is to forget.

Much like the Eucharist as Jesus' command for us to remember, so we need to find the ways and means to remember and to carry the prayers of those who have suffered in silence for way too long. Though painfully aware of her own sin, we should be not content with formal apologies and acts of contrition but work to establish strong procedures, policies and protocols in dealing with inappropriate conduct by church officials and be in the vanguard of speaking out against any form of abuse or injustice in the world. Our Responsible Ministry Policy, Sexual Abuse Allegation Protocol, proposed Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy, ongoing policy development in this area and the Diocesan Committee's work in dealing with such matters provide us hope moving forward; so, too, the healing work of Christ in the lives of all those who suffer.

10. The Importance of a Personal Relationship with Christ:

Finally, despite our best plans and our greatest efforts, nothing is possible without Christ (and all things are possible with him). It is my mission, therefore, together with Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, to stress the absolute importance of a personal relationship with Christ in each one of the Clergy and Faithful alike. Our work begins and ends with knowing him alone, and the incredible love he has for us. It is only in union with his Passion and Death that we could dare to hope for conversion and the renewal of our parishes. It is only in union with his self-sacrifice on the cross that we can dare to bring the Good News of Salvation to those who are silently waiting for it to be made known.

In this spirit, I would like to encourage a new openness to the life of the Spirit found in a variety of different movements in the Church, including the Charismatic Renewal, the ALPHA program,

Lectio Divina and “CORE” for youth and young adults and “CURSILO” for adults. No effort should be spared to help people rediscover the power of Scripture through days of recollection, parish missions or on-line retreats/reflections. Renewal is made possible in opening our lives to the Spirit of God poured forth upon the world.