

Restructuring Further Thoughts

Last week I read a letter from Archbishop Blair about the restructuring of parishes that is occurring throughout the Archdiocese, and since then you have read articles about this in the local newspapers. Although this plan leaves Saint Mary's as a free-standing parish, the restructuring of the Archdiocese involves all of us since the church is greater than our parish. We belong to a diocesan community, and the life of that community affects all of us. Our vision of the church goes beyond our parish. It includes the church at the diocesan level as well as the parochial level. It includes the church at the universal level as well as the diocesan and parochial level. We are one body in Christ, and what affects one member of the body affects us as well.

So why is the church in the Archdiocese restructuring? There are three dimensions to this question:

- (1) The changing demographics of the Catholic population in Connecticut
- (2) The changing demographics of the priesthood
- (3) Secularization and the Catholic faith.

Changing Demographics: Fifty years ago, most of the Catholic population could be found in cities such as Hartford, New Haven, Waterbury, Meriden, and New Britain. Most Catholics lived in these urban areas. Drive through any of them today, and you will see the beautiful churches that are a testament to the faith of an earlier generation. But while the churches are there, the people are not. In many instances, the people of these once thriving parishes have moved out.

Clergy: There is no need to tell you there are fewer priests today than there were fifty years ago. When I was ordained in 1968 there were over 500 priests, and the median age was at the lower end of the scale. Today there are less than 200 priests and the median age is toward the higher end of the scale. I am 74. I have no regrets whatsoever about being a priest. For me this has been a life-giving vocation, and I would do it again in a heartbeat. But the priesthood at this time is not attracting enough candidates, whatever the reason may be. Perhaps that will change, I do not know. But at the present time there is a shortage.

Secularization and Catholicism: This is the most serious and worrisome issue of all. A deep-rooted secularization has taken hold in New England, and it has the potential to destroy the fabric of our faith. By 'secularization' I mean a belief that the fullness of life is this life and nothing more. There is no place for God and even less for the church and its worship. We are living at a time when people who have been the beneficiaries of centuries of Catholicism are no longer passing on the faith to the next generation, with the result that the faith will die with them. How sad to be the generation that extinguishes hundreds and in some instances thousands of years of faith.

The Challenge: Our challenge is not restructuring. That's the easy part. That's a matter of rearranging the furniture. The challenge is revitalizing the faith of the Catholic community, especially the faith of those who have dropped out. If you have taken the time to read this essay, you are likely someone of strong faith and what I write here is not about you. But it is about people you know, some in your own family. The time has come for all of us to actively reach out and preach the gospel—the joy of the gospel—to them.

Father Matera