

Letter – Laity involvement was just a sham

The Berkshire Eagle (Pittsfield, MA)

Wednesday, August 20

Mark Dupont's letter of August 14 continues to present the diocesan party line. The problem with his letter and the diocesan line we have been hearing since last February is that neither have given us the whole story.

The Berkshire Eagle has been fair, it has presented both sides of the story and I believe it has brought up the issues that divide us. This "pastoral planning process" has been going on for the past 10-12 years with all sorts of closings, yoking and mergers being proposed, but nothing agreed to or offered as a solution.

Mr. Dupont and the diocese have continued to say that the "laity" were fully aware of and in on these decisions. The only laity involvement I am aware of was the "listening session" conducted in Pittsfield in November of 2007, at which I was a participant. At this session the various options for the Catholic community of Pittsfield were discussed, with both five-church and four-church models being proposed. There was no attempt to made to determine a consensus at this session.

In discussions I have had with other participants since that time, it appears that the five-church model was preferred. The work sheets from our small group discussion sessions were collected and we were told that they would get back to us with the results. In fact each parish was asked to provide a name of the person to be point of contact for the parish. We never heard another word until that fateful Sunday in February when it was announced that St. Teresa Parish and five other parishes would be closed in Pittsfield.

In fact, in a response to our parish appeal to remain open, the diocesan spokesperson stated, "When the bishop and I met with all the pastors of Pittsfield to present the report and recommendations of the planning committee, they all agreed that the report fairly represented the facts and they endorsed the recommendations." So much for "laity" involvement.

Mr. Dupont references the UMass. study, the Mullen Report, as an initiating point of this pastoral planning process. However when a parish references the results of the study or uses criteria from the study as a basis for their remaining open the diocese downplays the study and states local decisions were based on local considerations.

As I stated earlier, this pastoral planning process began about 10-12 years ago. At one of the first all parish meetings back then, the hierarchy of the diocese stated that we the laity had to step up and assume new ministry roles, I believe we have. At that same meeting it was asked of the hierarchy what they were going to do to increase the number of priests available to the diocese. They stated they would take action. Well, whatever they did isn't working and the problem is much worse.

Mr. Dupont states that we the critics haven't come up with any concrete solutions, I beg to differ. Many of the laity have long advocated a married priesthood and women priests, both of which would go far in alleviating the priest shortage. I recognize that this is not a decision that can be made on the local diocesan level. However, the local diocese, bishops, cardinals, etc. are in a much better position to advocate for these changes than we the laity are. They need to listen their people and present their views to Rome.

We need to be a Church that is growing and not a Church in retreat.

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