

# Mullin Report Critique

By Robert M. Kelly

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## 1. introduction

The main reason for this essay is the invitation by Bishop McDonnell to comment on the Mullin Report<sup>1</sup>.

I begin with the conviction that the People of God in the Springfield Diocese consists of laity and clergy with an equal baptismal responsibility to build up the Church. The vision that I have and that I assume I share with everyone in the diocese is that the Church here is worth saving.

And yet, there is considerable alienation in our Church. Many laity are physically alienated - over two-thirds decline to attend weekly mass. Many attendees are burdened by a spiritual alienation toward the clergy. This alienation is tempered by respect for our spiritual leaders. Nevertheless, I see it expressed by passivity, coolness and skepticism, all signs of a real "turning away".

I believe that many clergy are also alienated. Except for Sunday homilies, one rarely hears any original, independent thought from the "lower clergy", even when critical issues within the Church cry out for thoughtful comments. The clergy's alienation appears to stem from their submission to life within a spiritual bubble. I realize that theirs is a special role, but must it result in a separation from the objective world? The hierarchy that they belong to is literally a sacred order, but clergy and laity are human beings, and need to make sense to each other through their humanity.

This alienation extends into the chancery. For example, the leaders of the diocese are openly distrustful of the mainstream media and often place themselves in opposition to it. Since the laity belong to the mainstream world, I suspect that their distrust of independent, objective appraisal extends to the opinions of the laity as well.

While there appears to be a hollow spot between clergy and laity, it need not persist. The way forward, I believe, is to recall that both are part of the Body of Christ. If we strive to be Christ-minded, and Christ-like, there is no dead space that cannot be brought back to life.

## 2. narrative

The Mullin Report arrived full-blown on March 2, 2007, in a graphics-filled summary placed in a supplement to the Catholic Observer. Included were links to the full report online, and articles in the supplement and regular issue of the Observer which highlighted aspects of the pastoral planning process, of which the Mullin Report is one element. It was a neatly packaged display.

The headlines summarized an array of pronouncements and assertions: "Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Springfield: Our Joys, Our Sorrows, Our Faith, Our Future", "Laity, Religious, Deacons Preparing To Fill More Leadership Roles In Diocese", "Members Of New Parishes Share Sorrows, Joys Of Pastoral Planning", "Mullin Report 'Just The Beginning' Of Pastoral Planning Process", "Terminology Important In Pastoral Planning Process", "Latino Plan An Important Part Of Pastoral Planning", "Involvement Of All In Diocese Needed And Encouraged", and "Pastoral Planning Committee Members Ready For Work Ahead".

"My God, they've thought of everything" was the comment that floated across my mind when I sat down to read it. And yet, after further reading and reflection, I'm convinced that the confident, all-knowing tone of the headlines, which is a regular feature of diocesan announcements, is itself a sign of trouble.

It is the voice of the Roman Church. The Church triumphant, the voice of the Church that is always right. But, obviously, the clerical hierarchy cannot always be right; there is no divine guarantee that their decisions will be the right ones, even if they make them in "the name of the Church". It is to the Bishop's credit that he realizes this and has invited the laity to speak up about the future of parishes within the diocese.

Very possibly the clergy believes in good faith that they need to display this proud tone for the benefit of the flock. They probably don't realize how off-putting it can be. When I look back now, after several months of study, the issue of March 2 has a different aspect. Now, it looks more like the program for a Christmas pageant, a stage-managed

script in which the end is well known, and the only question is: what part shall I play? Shall I be one of the Three Wise Men, complete with scratchy beard, or a lowly shepherd in a bathrobe, chasing wayward animals off the stage?

When I re-read the Bishop's editorial, it seems thick with euphemisms and slogans, some cheery, some dark. But the Bishop is ill-served by this language, because it fails to inspire trust. What we need is plain talk.

Number one, let's admit that there is mounting debt in the diocese, and at the same time, a surfeit of parish assets. The clergy has been dropping broad hints about this for years, but nowhere was it stated more plainly than by Msgr. Bonzagni, in the 2006 annual report: "...our ancestors...have left us vast resources in the form of buildings and properties...how to best utilize all that we have...is the charge of the Office of Pastoral Planning..."<sup>ii</sup>

I decided to look into these resources. In my corner of the world (Berkshire County), the diocese owns over 53 million dollars worth of property, a number that makes any subsequent reference to 7 or 8 million seem almost paltry.<sup>iii</sup> And note that this 53 million represents the assessed value for non-profit use. Almost certainly, a reappraisal of the property for commercial use would show a much higher figure.

But while there are millions of dollars worth of property in the diocese, this does not mean that it can be converted to cash at will, and this has to do with the nature of the Church. Most property does not belong to the diocese, but rather to the parishes of the diocese, as part of their long-term stable patrimony. It can only be altered with the permission of the parishioners.

Nor is this the only issue. Leveraging the current debt of the diocese by transferring parish property to cash does not address the underlying causes of the debt.

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I thought it might be good at this point to tell you a little about myself and my perspective. I've been a Catholic all my life (though not one with a perfect attendance record). Since I married in 1982 I have attended St. Mary's in Lee, Mass. I am 57 years old, have a wife, mortgage, adopted daughter from South Korea, a regular job in the painting and decorating industry, and four cats.

If you had asked me to define "corporation sole" or "juridic personality" or "stable patrimony" three years ago, I would have flunked. But that was before my small church, St. Francis, a part of the St. Mary's parish, was closed.

What was important was not the closing of it, but the way that it was done. For example, I knew that corporations had spokesmen who could defend and explain questionable actions of their employers to the news media. But I didn't realize that the Diocese of Springfield had such a spokesman, and that I and other parishioners would be on the receiving end of a public relations skirmish.

The particular issues of St. Francis church are not part of this critique, but I do want to explain that the decidedly authoritarian way that the diocese closed St. Francis church had a profound effect on me. I could not help but notice that the way the suppression was done increased alienation, rather than reducing it. For example, at the closing Mass, there were only about a dozen of the regular parishioners, while between 75 and 100 attended most Sunday Masses.

I wondered why, and I wondered if it were true that church closings had to be done in an authoritarian way. I began to question more, read more, and pray more about the issues of church governance.

Although I soon found that I shared many concerns with groups such as the Voice of the Faithful, I made a decision not to join with them, because I feared that I would lose my perspective. I wanted to see if it were possible to grasp the details of problems right here in the parishes of the diocese by independent reading and by studying the Catholic Observer, annual financial reports, and the homilies that were being preached on the subject of parish closings and consolidations.

So, I've been reading the Observer cover to cover for the last six months, I attend any parish or deanery parish council meetings possible, and when St. Ann's in West Springfield closed (temporarily, it turned out) in August, I attended that closing, too.

Incidentally, the way that St. Ann's was closed, with no notice to or input from the parish council of either St. Ann's or Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, was similar to that of the St. Francis church closing referred to earlier. In both cases, the planned suppressions were carried out by clerical announcements, with no meaningful lay involvement. It is in the hope of avoiding this type of event in the future, which can only increase alienation on all sides, which is another reason for this essay.

### 3. context of report

The Mullin Report is said to be one tool among many in the pastoral planning toolkit. Yet the Bishop also editorialized, on March 2, that ".....the study points out the reality of where we are today...". I find that this overstates the case. On the contrary, the Mullin Report is mainly a select compilation of data that the diocese has known for some time.

Indeed, understanding the reality of where we are today in the diocese, though a worthy goal, seems unattainable for the laity at the present time, especially in terms of money. There's a Temporalities Secretariat which

manages the assets of the diocese, but it's not clear how the Cemetery Corporation, Foundation, and investments relate to the big picture, nor how parishioner contributions affect the whole.

Nor do we know how well the diocesan framework (corporation sole) is working, and whether the administration of the diocese could stand improving, and if so, where. There needs to be much more detail published so that parishioners can see how they can and must contribute, where their contributions fit in, and what their dollars are used for.<sup>iv</sup>

For example, annual reports are made, but these show operating budgets and not net worth. What significance do operating budgets have to net worth? What significance does net worth have to pastoral planning? What significance does parish income have to diocesan planning? How does pastoral planning differ from financial planning? Granted, these are difficult questions, but attempting to answer them may provide the framework for dialogue that the Bishop has called for.

Figures from annual reports suggest (but do not establish) that the Springfield Diocese has been in a financial freefall for several years. Total amounts owed to the diocese by parishes and institutions, for example, rose from 7.5 million in 2004 to 7.8 million in 2005, and then to 8.9 million in 2006<sup>v</sup>.

Parish debt to the diocese, the major component of the above figures, is high, about 6.6 million presently. The Mullin Report contains a crushing amount of evidence to drive the point home, but the reasons for the shortfall are not addressed. Nor are they addressed elsewhere. In seeking information I found this lone paragraph from a past annual report on the diocesan web site:

"...there has also been an increased effort to obtain from parishes reimbursement of their portion of insurance premiums and school assessments related to parish and school personnel. The necessity to cover the parish share of these costs has contributed to diocesan deficits in recent years. These non-payments, in many instances, reflect a general over-all decline in many parishes' financial health, as they also face increased expenses with little growth in their collections..."<sup>vi</sup>

#### 4. report proper

I believe that for the Mullin Report to begin to be useful, several diocesan statements need to be reconciled. First, the above statement that parish collections have been decreasing. Second, the statements in the Mullin Report

which describe the financial health of 9 out of the 10 geographic areas of the diocese: "...in general, financial indicators suggest that parishes in this region are not in financial difficulty...". How can this contradiction be explained?

Nor is this the only contradiction to be found.

According to the premises in the Mullin introduction, the report is designed to support the institutional mission of the diocese<sup>vii</sup>. But, the individual parishes are being studied - not the diocese. Nor is this institutional mission defined, and how it relates to the mission of the parishes.

The premises assume that dwindling numbers of priests must result in dwindling number of parishes<sup>viii</sup>. This premise places the availability of priests above the canonical right of the parishes to exist.<sup>ix</sup> It also slights the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>x</sup> Why are fewer parishes held to be inevitable, when we've known for so many years that the population of priests was dropping, and when there are thousands of lay people who could be authorized to take on non-sacramental functions of priests?

Recommendations for whether a parish should be suppressed, merged or left alone are guided by a set of indicators, and these indicators are explained. But, we're not told why these particular indicators were chosen, nor the weight given them, nor why they were given this weight. In other words, there is no methodology. Without knowing what relative values were assigned to the indicators, and why, the conclusions become clouded.

In annual reports, in order to make the case for changes, the Bishop has stated that there've been negative changes - to society, the region, the job market, and availability of resources - which have weakened the diocese.<sup>xi</sup> A Catholic Observer editorial deplored the loss in population: "... our diocesan family has become significantly smaller in the last 30 years because our region has itself become smaller... "<sup>xii</sup>Elsewhere, Msgr. Bonzagni explains: "... The state is undergoing a net decrease in population... "<sup>xiii</sup> Introducing the Mullin Report, McDonnell said: "...we sought the expertise of the Economic Development Center at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, to provide as much raw data as possible for all of us together to study... "<sup>xiv</sup>

However, many of these statements are either misleading or debatable.

The county populations of the diocese aren't getting smaller, and those of Massachusetts aren't decreasing. All ten-year periods since 1940, save one, have shown growth in the diocese. All five-year periods for the Commonwealth are projected to show growth until 2030<sup>xv</sup>.

The median family income of all four counties is at par or well above the national average. Hampden County is poorer than the other three counties<sup>xvi</sup>, but in Springfield, its largest city, there was a budget surplus of \$6.8 million last year<sup>xvii</sup>. Catholics are more prosperous and better educated than the general population, but choosey about whom they support, and how they spend their time.<sup>xviii</sup>

The raw data for the Mullin Report was provided by the diocese, not the University of Massachusetts. Figures for baptisms and funerals, weekly mass attendance, parishioner contributions, amount of parish debt, and numbers of priests can only be found in the diocesan chancery. Other data, population projections for example, are readily available at no cost from public agencies.

#### 5. observations and conclusions

The contradictions above bring the premises of the Mullin Report into question. The report also lacks transparency. For example, we need to know how the study of the parishes relates to the institutional needs of the diocese, since this is the reason for the report, yet this explanation is nowhere to be found. The fact that so much emphasis has been placed on vague "societal changes", and on the roll-out of the report, and on parish debt, is very troubling. It begs the question - Why now? For example, within living memory parish debt has been as low as 4 million and as high as 14 million. Why then is the Bishop preparing to shut parishes at this time?

Absent any better explanations, the pastoral planning effort, of which the Mullin Report is part, seems to consist largely of encouraging or enforcing the dissolution of parishes in order to alienate their assets for the benefit of the diocese.

There are other reasons for this supposition. According to the CFO for the diocese, Mr. William LaBroad, parishes are prone to need extra money from the diocese because of mandated insurance and the like, but don't contribute extra money because any excess in weekly collections is retained by the parish<sup>xx</sup>. And, if a parish becomes merged, its property and assets belong to the new parish, not the diocese. This means that the diocese can never profit from the assets of parishes as long as they remain parishes.

The Mullin Report is full of information, and that's all to the good. It may yet overcome a puzzling start and help open the way to dialogue. However, as it is presently being used in the context of pastoral planning, it is a rather slippery tool. Its contents can be used to close a parish just as easily as they can be used to keep one open. Indeed, this has already happened.<sup>xx</sup> Surely the people who commissioned the report intended it to be more than a sort of Swiss Army Knife of pastoral planning. Parishioners may well come to the conclusion that a suppression is a valid and helpful decision. But, it should be their decision.

Whether future parish closings are merely encouraged, or forced, the result will be the same - the diocese stands to profit financially. However, without better explanations to allow us a more complete understanding of

diocesan aims, this alienation of parish property is likely to come at a high cost - the further alienation of lay Catholics, and the increased alienation of the clergy from the objective world in which lay Catholics live. In the opinion of this Catholic, it is a price too high to pay.

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## Eight Questions

Here are eight questions that might be asked about pastoral planning:

1. Why is the assumption being made that fewer priests mean fewer parishes, if there are remedies in canon law for priest shortages?
2. How does the study of the parishes relate to the institutional mission of the diocese?
3. If contributions to parishes are declining, as stated in the annual reports, then why does the Mullin Report conclude that in 9 out of the 10 areas of the diocese, "...parishes in this region are not in financial difficulty...?"
4. What significance does net worth of the diocese have to pastoral planning?
5. What significance does income from parishes have to diocesan planning?
6. How does pastoral planning differ from financial planning?
7. Where is the diocesan financial report for FY 2007, which ended June 30?
8. What is the overall financial health of the diocese?

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<sup>i</sup> See editorial, Catholic Observer, March 2, 2007.



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<sup>ii</sup> In the Annual Report of the diocese (2006), pg. 5. The report is located online at: <<http://www.diospringfield.org/administration/annualreport2006.pdf>> Note, use this link because the link on the diocesan web site for the Annual Report, 2006, does not work.

<sup>iii</sup> see: [www.masslive.com/news/church/index\\_wide.ssf?church\\_property.html](http://www.masslive.com/news/church/index_wide.ssf?church_property.html), last visited 9/5/07.

<sup>iv</sup> For example, on the diocesan web site ([www.diospringfield.org](http://www.diospringfield.org)) there is a single page of financial information to cover all of 2004 and 2005; also, the hyperlinks pointing to the 2006 annual report for the diocese and the 2006 report on the Foundation are both dead links.

<sup>v</sup> Page 11 of the Annual Report of the diocese (2006).

<sup>vi</sup> Diocesan financial report for July 1, 2003 to June 30, 2004.

<sup>vii</sup> in the Introduction to Mullin Report; "...the final set of indicators selected for the analysis were chosen based on the indicators ability to support the institutional mission of the Diocese...".

<sup>viii</sup> The introduction lists "...anticipated decline in the number of active priests to minister to parishes..." as one of the chief factors in choosing indicators.

<sup>ix</sup> The premises of the Mullin Report slight the fact that there is nothing in canon law which prevents the laity from becoming administrators of parishes, officiating at liturgies, and fulfilling other ministries. Indeed, to the Bishop's credit, there are already some parishes in the diocese that have lay administrators; but this option could be widened considerably. Many experts in clergy/laity relations see no reason why a respectful and liturgically correct prayer service, including distribution of the Eucharist, could not substitute for the weekly mass in priest-poor areas of the diocese.

<sup>x</sup> Canon law supports the principle of subsidiarity, whereby smaller and less powerful units of the faithful are favored over larger units. It was in defense of this principle that Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos, prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Clergy, wrote a letter reprimanding American bishops for their incorrect application of canon 123 (suppression) to parishes. He wrote:

"...only with great difficulty, can one say that a parish becomes extinct. A parish is extinguished by the law itself only if no Catholic community any longer exists in its territory, or if no pastoral activity has taken place for a hundred years (can.120#1)". (see article ' Vatican: Suppressed Parish's Assets Must Go To Receiving Church, Not Diocese', online at: [www.catholic.org/national/national\\_story.php?id=20738&page=1](http://www.catholic.org/national/national_story.php?id=20738&page=1)).

<sup>xi</sup> On page 2 of the diocesan Annual Report (2006). "...there is no question that the resources are less than what they once were and that simultaneously needs are growing. People in the Church, like all people, are impacted by changes in society and by changes in the community. There is no question we have seen changes in the job market here in Western Massachusetts. There is no question there have been changes in the availability of resources. Those have had their effect on our ability to respond as fully as we might like to the needs of people here in the four counties..."

<sup>xii</sup> The unsigned editorial appeared in the issue of 3/2/07, pg.8.

<sup>xiii</sup> In the Annual Report of the diocese (2006), pg. 5. The report is located online at: <<http://www.diospringfield.org/administration/annualreport2006.pdf>>

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<sup>xiv</sup> on page 2 of the Supplement on Pastoral Planning, March 2, 2007 Catholic Observer. This supplement is located online at:

<<http://www.diospringfield.org/pasplanning/Catholic%20Observer%20supplement.pdf>>

<sup>xv</sup> The U.S. Census reported these totals for the four counties that comprise the diocese, at ten year intervals:

for 1940, 576,294;

for 1950, 641,278;

for 1960, 729,581;

for 1970, 791,643;

for 1980, 791,258;

for 1990, 812,322;

for 2000, 814,967.

In 2006 there were estimated to be 817,291 people in the diocese (U.S. Census, at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/25/25003.html>), and 820,000 are projected in the diocese by 2010, see pg. P16 of the Catholic Observer of 03/02/07 (Mullin Report; located online at:

<<http://www.diospringfield.org/pasplanning/MULLIN%20REPORT.pdf>>.

For the ten year periods, see - Massachusetts - Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990, Compiled and edited by Richard L. Forstall, Population Division, US Bureau of the Census, Washington, DC 20233, at <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/ma190090.txt>, last viewed 5/19/07.

U.S. Census projections show that the population in the state in the period 2000 - 2030 is expected to grow from 6,340,097 to 7,012,009; see especially <http://www.census.gov/population/projections/SummaryTabA1.pdf>, which shows steady growth of the Massachusetts population over every five year period from 2000 to 2030.

See also [www.berkshireplanning.org](http://www.berkshireplanning.org) for interesting pdf files about Berkshire County population trends.

<sup>xvi</sup> The median family incomes of Berkshire, Franklin and Hampshire counties are higher than the national average. The national average median household income for 2005 was 55,832; for Berkshire, it was 59,862; for Hampshire, 65,681; for Franklin, 59,267; Hampden was close to the national average, at 55,067. See U. S. Census web site ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).)

<sup>xvii</sup> see "Glimmers of A Turnaround In Springfield, Mass.", New York Times business section, May 9, 2007

<sup>xviii</sup> See the article by David Brooks in the New York Times of May 25, "The Catholic Boom". He quotes from a journal article written by Lisa Keister, a sociologist at Duke, "...preliminary evidence indicates that whites who were raised in Catholic families are no longer asset-poor and may even be among the wealthiest groups of adults in the United States today..."

<sup>xix</sup> LaBroad, "...Parishes in the diocese of Springfield do not forward excess revenues over operating expenses to the diocese: they are maintained by the parish. Parishes are canonical entities which are expected to be self-supporting through the financial contributions of parishioners ...when parishes cannot pay the cost of insurance, pension, school and other costs, they begin to spend their savings, if they have any. Often the

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diocese is forced to pay for some parish costs from its own savings thus creating significant debt on the part of the parishes to the diocese..."

<sup>xx</sup> compare the articles on St. Ann's opening and closing in the Catholic Observer, June 22, pg. 4, and August 24, pg. 3.