

FORWARD TOGETHER IN CHRIST

INTRODUCTION:

Forward Together in Christ was initiated to help the Bishop of Hamilton discern the best way to move the Diocese forward after the struggles and limitations imposed by the COVID 19 Pandemic. Once a committee was established, consisting of representatives from the clergy, chancery staff and a lay pastoral minister, it was decided to gather the Priests serving in the Diocese, the Permanent Deacons of the Diocese and the paid Lay Pastoral Ministers of the Diocese to consult them on three questions.

1. What needs to be “rebooted” in the Diocese?
2. Where would you like to see the Diocese in 3-5 years?
3. How can you help us move *Forward Together in Christ*, to move from where we are to where we would like to be?

These gatherings took place over a period of several weeks. Bishop Lobsinger led the discussion with the Permanent Deacons. He also began the day by explaining the process to the Lay Pastoral Ministers, but then they had their discussions among themselves. The Priests of the Diocese met under the direction of their respective Deans. The results of these meetings was collected, discussed by the organizing committee and is here presented.

GENERAL COMMENTS:

For the most part, all three groups were happy to have been asked to participate in this process. Some wondered the reason for beginning this process at this time, citing the fact that our Bishop is only two years away from retirement, but most understood the need for a vision to help us all move ***Forward Together in Christ*** as we rise from the Pandemic restrictions. By the results, it was obvious that all groups actively engaged in the process and openly shared their thoughts and concerns about the Diocese. Some found it difficult to move beyond a parochial view to a Diocesan view, yet it was clear that the concern of those who participated was for the Diocese and not just their own parish.

The main overall concern that arose was communication: communication between the Chancery and Parishes, Bishops and Priests, Priests and Deacons, Clergy and laity, Parishes and schools, mainline and marginalized parishioners. There seems to be a growing sense of “us and them”. The idea of being together, on the same side, seems to be far from the perceived reality. This struggle of communication showed itself, to be part of all the areas for further discussion that arose and includes a need for greater clarity on relationships and roles among the various groups. From the discussions with the Priests, Deacons and lay Pastoral Workers, seven main areas requiring attention emerged. In no particular order they are:

1. Laity
2. Communication/Relationships
3. Catechesis
4. Schools
5. Hospitality/Outreach
6. Liturgy
7. Clergy Care

We will now look at each of these areas in brief.

THEMES:

1. Laity

This topic covers a broad spectrum of ideas. The relationship between clergy and lay pastoral ministers and all parish staff needs to be strengthened and defined roles established. There is a sense among the pastoral ministers that they are not invited to share their gifts and talents as co-workers with their pastors, that their dedication and service is not always appreciated or recognized. This also extends to other active parishioners. There needs to be a further development and openness to engaging the laity in the ministry, mission and maintenance of the parish. The development of Parish Councils according to the mind of the Church needs to be revisited. Discussions will be needed to discern how to more fully engage the laity in new ways, inviting them to share fully in the mission of the Church.

2. Communication/Relationships

The development of better communication, as stated earlier, was found to be needed in all areas of the Church's life and ministry. We all need to become better at helping each other understand the "why" behind decisions. The sending out of memos from the chancery only stating policy and rules have made Priests feel as if they are simply employees and not co-workers with the Bishop in the vineyard of the Lord. Memos sent on Friday afternoons are not helpful. Deacons feel the Priests do not share with them or invite them into the strategic planning for the parish and that Priests do not allow them their proper role in the liturgy. It was felt by some, that schools do not talk to Parishes and Parishes do not talk to schools. The Bishop needs to be more

visible and accessible to parishioners at Sunday Mass. We need to find a way past the “us and them” mentality that is steadily becoming more entrenched. Better communication, leading to a healing of relationships, hopefully will lead to deeper trust and a sense of being together in guiding and leading our Diocese, and so it will be important to carefully discern how that communication will look.

3. Catechesis

It was clear that we need a better way of catechising and evangelizing. A clear sense emerged that, our general Catholic population does not know the Faith. New ways of preparing for the Sacraments and evangelizing people into Disciples of the Lord needs to be developed at both the Parish and Diocesan level.

4. Schools

The area of schools is always a difficult area to discuss. Though schools are a part of parish/diocesan life, they are not run by the Church. Pastors have limited influence in the schools associated with their parish. There was a sense from some, that we should finally admit the truth that our schools are no longer Catholic and be done with them, while others saw their parish schools as great opportunities to evangelise and express the need to spend even more time and effort with the schools. The concern that schools do not seem to want us as much as we want them was expressed. The relationship between schools and parishes is not in balance and this creates tensions that some feel are not worth the effort to heal or correct.

Include in this section is the need for greater attention to Youth Ministry. Intentionally inviting and engaging our youth is seen as being of great importance. This topic could also have come

under Catechesis since, the need to help our youth see the teachings of the Church, as a real and viable option for living their life is so necessary.

5. Hospitality/Outreach

So many of these topics deal with being more intentional. How do we intentionally welcome back our parishioners? How do we intentionally invite those who have not returned to Church? How do we intentionally reach out to those who have left the Church? How do we intentionally invite people to consider joining the Church? How do we intentionally serve those on the margins or who feel rejected by the Church? How do we intentionally create welcoming parish communities? How do we as leaders, clergy and lay, intentionally present ourselves as welcoming and inviting? How do we find the balance between being open and pastoral and still being faithful to our Catholic teachings?

Community does not just happen by accident. We need to develop methods of consciously reaching out, welcoming back and drawing in. We need to help our people claim some “ownership” for their parishes by greater involvement and stewardship. This intentional effort will go a long way in helping to bring healing to those who feel hurt and excluded. Some of the many people needing support were seniors, families, and the many and varied people who are vulnerable. Finding ways to reach out was an important message that came up repeatedly.

6. Liturgy

The Eucharist is the source and summit of our Christian Life. It is during the celebration of the Eucharist and the other Sacraments that our people have their most profound and fulfilling experience of God’s activity in their lives. Liturgy needs to be celebrated well, in such a way that

it is helpful to the community of worshippers and faithful to our Catholic tradition. There needs to be a renewed love and understanding of the liturgy among the clergy and the laity. Some standard and consistent catechises on liturgy would be helpful. Further discussions will be required around what is needed to help us reach full and active participation in the liturgy. We will also need to continue discussions around the use of technology in the liturgy and the use of virtual Masses.

7. Clergy Care

We have not yet fully, or even halfway, understood the affect that COVID 19 has had on the human race. This is also true of our clergy. We know that the shutdowns, lockdowns, the isolation, the rules, the limitations and the lack of socializing among the Presbyterate, have all had an effect on our clergy. The lack of vocations requiring Priests to take on more work with higher expectations creates a demand on our Priests that is draining their energy and their resilience. Many Priests are experiencing burnout, as Bishop Ustryzski would say, “Weariness of the good.” Conversations will need to occur to determine what our Priests and Deacons need to help them on their healing journey, to help them remain healthy and to determine what they need to assist them to be Shepherds after the Heart of Jesus in the Church today.

FORWARD TOGETHER IN CHRIST

So now comes the great work of moving ***Forward Together in Christ***. We have heard from our clergy and lay pastoral workers as to what are the main issues the Church in the Diocese of Hamilton is experiencing, so now together, we must find the way forward. How do we heal the hurts that have occurred? How do we re-balance the relationships between Bishop and clergy,

clergy and laity, school and parish, faith life and secular life? All of these relationships will need to be discussed and together, we will find the way forward. This seems like a daunting task, but we are called to go ***Forward Together in Christ***. We do not have to do this alone. Christ is our Shepherd, our King, our healer. Where He leads, we the sheep of His flock will follow. We know that He will lead us into good pastures: pastures of healing, unity, forgiveness and abundance of new life. Each of us, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Pastoral Associates, and laity must be open to allowing the healing and forgiveness of Christ to wash over us and be willing to offer this same healing and forgiveness to all we meet, and especially those we feel have hurt or wronged us.

If we go ***Forward Together in Christ***, we know that we will go in the right direction and that we will truly be living as disciples of Jesus, living as builders of His Kingdom.