



Transition to One Priest Plan: Frequently Asked Questions

November 13, 2016

A Message from Fr. Larry –

The Pastoral Plan Ad-hoc Committee and I have received many questions and concerns from our parishioners. Thank you for your input. Below are my summary answers to a few of the most frequently asked questions. Additional questions will be addressed in forthcoming bulletins.

1. What exactly is this all about?

Bishop Soto's August 22 letter states that we are to recommend to him by March 31, 2017, a weekend Mass schedule that can be managed by one priest, as well as submit a plan for the offering of the Mass in all churches in our parish on an annual basis. The Bishop's letter can be accessed on our parish website, stkatharinedrexel.com.

2. How many Masses can a priest celebrate on a weekend?

Diocesan statute no. 92 permits "a priest to celebrate three Masses on a weekday and four Masses on a Sunday, when pastorally necessary in extraordinary circumstances. However, priests are not to celebrate three Masses on a weekday or four Masses on a Sunday on a regularly scheduled basis." Therefore our parish plan will provide for a maximum of three Masses on Sundays. Additionally, Bishop Soto has permitted a maximum of three Vigil Masses on Saturdays.

3. Are we closing any of the churches?

We have seven churches in our county-wide parish. Fr Arlon and I celebrate eight Vigil and Sunday Masses every weekend, one Mass at each church plus the Mass in Spanish. Often funeral, wedding and quinceañera Masses are also celebrated on Saturdays. Clearly one priest will not be able to manage the current schedule. Therefore, some churches will not be able to have a weekend Mass. Does that equate with church closure? Not at all. However, it is up to each local community to provide the leadership and coordination to provide opportunities for its members to gather in other ways. Examples include annual feast day celebrations and Masses, Eucharistic Adoration, Bible study and prayer groups, and social gatherings. The parish staff and I are eager to support these local initiatives.

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4. Why can't the deacons conduct Communion Services?

Diocesan statute no. 95 does not permit "Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest" except in extraordinary circumstances and only with the permission of the Diocesan Bishop. Receiving Holy Communion normally belongs within the context of the Eucharistic liturgy, the Sacrifice of the Mass. I wrote a one-page explanation of this for the Sept. 18 bulletin. You can read it on our parish website: stkatharinedrexel.com. Go to "Developing a One-Priest Parish." You can also request a copy from the parish office.

5. Why can't deacons celebrate the Mass?

In short because they were not ordained by the Bishop to do so. Deacons are clerics just as priests and bishops are. All three "orders" are ministers of the Word, Sacraments and charity, but they do so in differing and yet complementary ways. Just as priests cannot confer the Sacrament of Holy Orders so as to ordain a new priest or deacon, so deacons are not authorized to perform certain sacramental and liturgical actions. These include the Holy Eucharist, Penance, and Anointing of the Sick. A special focus of a deacon's ministry is to service the poor and needy of our community. Reading Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7 provides insight into the foundational reason for the diaconate.

6. Why is our parish being singled out for a reduction?

For many years the Diocesan Bishop and the Priests' Personnel Board have extensively monitored and studied the challenge of equitably staffing all the parishes and ministries in our diocese. The latter includes hospitals, prisons, Newman Centers, seminary formation and the Pastoral Center. We currently have just over 1300 families registered in our parish. The following are parishes that have recently had to reduce from two priests to one:

St. Joseph, Vacaville (2550 families)
St. Mel, Fair Oaks (2061 families)
Sts. Peter and Paul, Rocklin (2014 families)
St. Francis, Sacramento (1862 families)
St. Theresa, Auburn (1350 families)
St. Philomene, Sacramento (1204 families)

In addition, the number of priests serving in special ministries has been reduced to bare bones. For example, only four priests are serving at the Pastoral Center in key functions such as Judicial Vicar, Tribunal Judge, Vicar of Clergy and Director of Vocations. The Newman Centers are now led by lay leaders with the support of neighboring parish clergy. Four priests are serving in hospitals and prisons.

To put it in a broader national perspective, in 1970 there was one priest for every 816 Catholics. In 2015, there is one priest for every 1812 Catholics. There are more than 3500 parishes without a resident priest pastor.