

Bishop Persico introduction

It is good to be with you this evening.

We have come, at last, to the most exciting...although perhaps most challenging... part of our pastoral plan. In fact, by the time it's all said and done, this latest initiative might make parish restructuring look like a piece of cake.

Many of you have attended these vicariate meetings over the past several years, and I am grateful for the leadership you have provided as we've all worked together to restructure our schools and our parishes.

Some of you may be attending this gathering for the first time. I welcome you.

What we are about to share with you tonight is truly at the heart of pastoral planning. With some of the logistics behind us, it's finally time for you to go back to your parishes and your schools, and to stir into flame a renewed passion for the Gospel, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The charge given to the Faith Formation Task Force was to examine how we can support and sustain all parishioners in their lifelong conversion of heart, mind and spirit. We speak of this initiative as life-long faith formation.

I realize that as we take on this aspect of planning, many parishes are still in the throes of all that's involved in merging and partnering. In some cases, new pastors and parishes are still getting to know each other. Considering the monumental changes involved with restructuring, I am pleased that things are proceeding well.

May I also once again say how grateful I am for the work of the Parish Listening Task Force, under the leadership of Msgr. Richard Siefer, that led the way for the essential changes that were made. These changes laid the foundation for revitalization within our parishes.

I'd like to share tonight's agenda so you can see how everything is going to unfold.

After my introduction, Sister Phyllis Schleicher, chair of the Faith Formation Task Force, will give us insight into how the group arrived at its recommendations, including some of the statistics they used.

Next, Greg Baker, who served on the task force, will speak to us about the shift we need to make to deepen spiritual engagement. After a short break, Deacon Marty Eisert, chair of the Pastoral Planning Committee, will introduce the six recommendations of the Faith Formation Task Force.

After Deacon Marty, our vicar general, Monsignor Edward Lohse, will speak to us about the next steps. We have decided to use the same process we used as we developed plans for schools and parishes. After tonight, we will move into a period of feedback before unveiling the revised Faith Formation plan.

Notice I did not say the *final* plan. Pastoral planning is ongoing. It never comes to an end.

We'll finish the evening with a short Q & A to clarify any major points. And then I will offer brief closing remarks.

We have tried to find a balance between overwhelming you with too much information, and being mindful that the more specific we can be, the better. When you leave here tonight, you will have a handout about the feedback process as well as a detailed listing of the full recommendations of the Faith Formation Task Force.

As with all of our planning, the recommendations for faith formation give us a chance to hit the reset button. I am grateful for the seriousness with which the task force took on this work. Under the leadership of its chair, Sister Phyllis Schleicher, they studied, researched, discussed, deliberated and prayed throughout these past two and a half years.

Before I ask Sister Phyllis to give you a brief overview of their work, I'd like to share a few of my own insights with you.

When I speak at confirmation ceremonies, I always remind students that they should not equate confirmation with graduation. Receiving the sacrament does not mean they no longer need to learn about God or grow in their faith.

A few days after I gave one of these homilies, I received a letter from one of the students who had been confirmed. He had listened to my homily and taken it to heart.

But the reason he wrote, was to ask how he could continue on his faith journey.

He said there were no other opportunities for learning and growing within his parish.

That really gave me pause.

That's why the recommendations of the Faith Formation Task Force are so important. People are hungry, but we're not always feeding them. We need to think about the needs of young adults, of parents, of those in middle age, and even of senior citizens. Our parishes must provide opportunities for learning and for growth on the path of discipleship for every age and stage of life.

Tonight, we are going to explore what is required for true faith formation.

What goes on in the classroom will remain an important component of formation. But we also need to create environments where there can be an ongoing exchange of thoughts and ideas.

People of all ages need to come together not just for classes, but to share their faith stories and to share their insights into Scripture, the living Word of God. What better way to find new ways to integrate the Gospels into our lives?

This kind of true fellowship will feed us. It naturally leads to good works, which, in turn, deepens our desire to know our Savior. It's an ongoing cycle: We study, we pray, we serve, we grow.

If you have children who have been confirmed, or who attend Catholic high schools, you know we ask that they participate in service hours.

Unfortunately, sometimes we lose sight of the purpose behind this aspect of religious education. Service hours are not just a requirement that needs to be checked off. That will only lead to a sense of drudgery. We require service hours so our youth can experience what it means to put their faith into action. It should be an outpouring of what we believe, and a way to witness to our faith.

And here's a challenge: do our young people see US integrating service in our own lives? How much more meaningful might service hours be if families got involved together? We need to create more opportunities for intergenerational interaction. I know some parishes are very good at this. As we work on faith formation, we need to share those stories with each other.

Wouldn't it be nice for a family to serve at Mass together? What if the parents read and the children served? It's time for us to get creative, and it does not need to be complicated.

Let me assure you, I do not want to create a bureaucracy.

I look forward to simple, inspiring and Spirit-filled ways in which all of us can grow as disciples. I also want to say that everything being offered this evening is in line with the teachings and recommendations of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. While we Catholic bishops are sometimes portrayed as railing against the culture and the government and the media, we also have authored an impressive array of documents that invite and encourage growth in discipleship.

If only everyone would read them! Fortunately, the task force has done that for us.

Let me share a message the bishops offered in 1999, when they presented a plan for forming communities that are full of life. They gave us three charges that parish communities need to fulfill:

- Invite and enable ongoing conversion to Jesus Christ in holiness of life.
- Promote and support active membership in the Christian community.
- Call and prepare adults to act as disciples in mission to the world.

I want us to keep these ideas in the back of our minds during tonight's presentation.

Really, it's our charge for life.

-- Ongoing conversion. -- Community participation. -- Discipleship, or evangelization and outreach beyond our own communities. This brings us right back to the very first meetings we had about pastoral planning. You may remember people asking what I was going to do about evangelization. Of course, my answer is always a question: What are YOU going to do about evangelization?

But I think this 3-part charge from the United States Bishops reminds us:

First, we must ensure the ongoing conversion of our own hearts. Then we can reach out to others. I'd like to unpack that a bit for you.

In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelization in the Modern World*, Pope Paul VI offered a quote that is pertinent to our discussion tonight.

“Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers,” he wrote. “And if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

So, we have our work cut out for us.

Of course, what we are doing also is in line with what Pope Francis asks of us in his apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*. In it, Pope Francis tells us,

“I encourage each particular Church” – and by which he means diocese – “to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform. The principal aim of these participatory processes should not be an ecclesiastical organization,” he wrote, “but rather, the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.”

Everyone. That’s the bishop. That’s our pastors. That’s our people. That’s our communities. That’s each of you assembled here this evening.

The Faith Formation Task Force does not offer a program or steps to get us from here to there. Nor did I want or expect them to do so. Think of tonight as an introduction.

The real work is going to come from the pastors and the people of our parishes, in part, through your leadership. I am asking all of you to go back to your parishes and in any number of creative ways, gather groups together to brainstorm about these important recommendations. You can do it in small groups, you can have meetings of leaders from all of the parishes in your deanery, you can submit individual responses. I am really looking forward to hearing what you have to say in response to tonight’s presentation. So, let’s get started.

Bishop Persico Closing Remarks

I want to thank you, once again, for being here tonight, and for the work that each of you will do over the next several weeks, helping us to shape the revised plan.

In some ways, faith formation touches so many aspects of parish life that we can become paralyzed.

Let’s remember we can keep much of it simple. Our goal, in a nutshell, is to kick-start the evangelist in all of us so that we can fulfill the mission we’ve been given: to go out and proclaim the Good News.

How can we inspire people and get them engaged in discipleship?

I would like to offer one more quote from Pope Francis' *The Joy of the Gospel*:

"Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way,'" he wrote. "I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their own communities."