

Deacon Marty Eisert

As chair of the Pastoral Planning Committee, may I join Bishop Persico in thanking Sister Phyllis Schleicher for her outstanding leadership in chairing the Faith Formation Task Force. The preliminary recommendations I'm about to review are the quality product of their dedicated effort over these past two and a half years.

As *preliminary* recommendations, they are being unveiled to you this evening with the earnest request that you study them, reflect upon them, pray over them, and — especially important — give us your feedback.

Unlike the recently unveiled recommendations dealing with our Catholic schools and parishes which involved changes concerning physical structures such as reconfiguring schools and partnering or merging parishes — changes that we can see with our eyes — the faith formation recommendations deal more with *new directions* about how to form the faith. They comprise changes that we can envision only in our mind's eye. Nonetheless, both types of changes are equally dramatic, necessary, and exciting.

Also, unlike the school and parish initiatives which depended more upon diocesan administration to carry much of the load involving change, the faith formation recommendations will depend upon each and every one of us shouldering the responsibility for bringing about change.

An example is evangelization. Now we've spoken much about this term, but for sake of clarification, evangelization simply means bringing someone into the faith. It's not just the role of the diocesan administration to evangelize. Assuredly the bishop and others on the administrative staff do in fact evangelize within the scope of their ministry. But evangelization is a shared responsibility. Think of evangelization this way . . . we all have family, friends, neighbors and acquaintances who either don't practice their religion, have fallen away or simply are unchurched. Who is in a better position to evangelize than each of us? After all, we are the ones who are often closest to those who need to be evangelized. Isn't this precisely what the early disciples did? Isn't this precisely how the early church grew?

What's at stake is this . . . if we don't find ways to pass on the faith to the next generations, then all we have done is to buy time with the school and parish changes. As the Meitler data we shared early on in the planning process so graphically points out, our parishes are overwhelmingly populated with aging people.

The bottom line is simply — and yet profoundly — this: All of us must find ways to capture the minds and hearts of our youth and young adults so they, too, can have the joy and the peace we know. So they, too, can grow to love and know the Lord. So they, too, can go forth and make disciples of all nations.

And this is precisely the focus of the faith formation preliminary recommendations.

I'd now like to walk you through each recommendation. But before I do so, let me say that in consideration of this evening's time schedule, I will share only the focus and scope of each recommendation. I also will share with you some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback. At the conclusion of this evening's presentation, Msgr. Ed Lohse will explain how the feedback process will work.

Be assured, the recommendations in their entirety will be posted on the diocesan website. They will also be available for you to take home with you at the conclusion of this evening's presentation.

And so we begin.

First recommendation - lifelong formation

This first recommendation — **recommendation number one** — speaks to **lifelong faith formation**. This lifelong approach begins, of course, with our young. But how do we retain their continued involvement in our parishes as they grow into young adults; as they marry; and as they have families?

All too many times our young people see confirmation as a “graduation” from their faith. Being done with classes, many leave the church.

But faith formation cannot end at confirmation. People should experience that they are being formed and are growing in their faith throughout their entire lives.

We must ask ourselves why they leave. For example, have we truly helped them develop a relationship with the God who made and loves them? Have we made them feel welcome; have we made a concerted effort to reach out to them and invite them to be involved in the daily life of the parish? Have we made them feel a valued member of our parish?

The bottom line is that we must address the issues prompting them to leave.

Yes, these are tough questions. Far too many times we have been judgmental of our youth and young adults and have unwittingly turned them away from the very faith that is so important to us; the faith that we wish to pass along to them.

This recommendation, then, challenges us to examine the way we think about the whole way that we form people. We need to pay attention to our youth and young adults, but to everyone else as well.

In examining our thinking, we will be challenged to grow in new ways as well as change in some ways. Neither is easy, but both are necessary if we are to truly grasp the underlying premise of lifelong faith formation. Let that process of change begin this evening.

To be sure, the challenges to grow and change are many. But consider this: if we don't do it, who will?

In summary, then, this recommendation is the crux of what we are talking about this evening, which leads to a renewed vision.

Concretely, this means that we all must:

- Recognize that a vision limited only to forming elementary and high school students is not sufficient.
- Shift the culture of the whole diocese to view faith formation as a life-long process.
- Shift the culture of parish life to be more attuned to the needs of every age group.
- Encourage collaboration to support our many ministries more effectively.

Again, these recommendations are offered in greater detail on the handouts you will receive tonight.

Now, here are some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback.

- *How can we be more welcoming to youth and young adults?*
- *How can we reach out to those who feel disenfranchised?*
- *How might your parish move in this direction?*
- *How can the diocesan offices help?*

Second recommendation - broadened vision

The second recommendation deals with a broadened vision of faith formation.

In times past, many of us equated faith formation to educating, through religious education programs, those of our youth not attending a Catholic school. Assuredly this valuable part of our tradition will continue, but we propose creating a unified, collaborative, diocesan-supervised approach that encompasses all age groups and all audiences. And yes, this includes those who feel disenfranchised from our church. We must be prepared to ask the tough questions of ourselves as to why some people have left the church; why they no longer feel welcome.

The focus is on *lifelong faith formation* that begins with birth and ends only when we draw our last breath.

Included in this broadened vision will be a parish model of faith formation that embraces both existing efforts such as religious education, youth ministry and sacramental preparation, as well as faith formation efforts yet to be developed. This model is especially important considering that the parish is where we principally live out our lives as Christians. It is where we attend Mass, receive the sacraments, and otherwise share our faith lives with other people.

Lastly, we also propose bringing existing ministries such as Pre-Cana and Engagement Encounter under the umbrella of faith formation to help bring about this unified approach.

The bottom line is that we need to recover an integrated Catholic vision of life-long faith formation.

Concretely, this means we must expand our vision to understand that:

- Faith formation is a life-long process.
- Almost everything we do in one way or another forms people in the faith.
- Religious education programs are but one part of faith formation.
- Many existing programs are also part of life-long faith formation.
- Worship, service, and community are also part of life-long faith formation.

Now, here are some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback:

- *What areas of parish life can be enhanced by this expanded vision of faith formation?*
- *What are some groups of disenfranchised people that we need to reach out to?*
- *How can the diocesan offices help parishes bring this recommendation about?*

Third recommendation - role of parish leadership

The third recommendation focuses on the role of parish leadership. The key to this recommendation is that every parish should have access to trained professionals in faith formation. May I state at the beginning that we strongly urge parishes to collaborate in bringing this recommendation about. In these times of limited resources, it behooves parishes to join together in sharing trained professionals. Offered as an example is the sharing among two or more parishes a trained religious education director.

The term "professionals" embraces those who are already trained as well as those who will be trained to coordinate, promote, and assist in some parish ministry or apostolate whether it be to youth, young adults, religious education, worship, sacramental preparation, adult Bible study or campus ministry, to cite a few of the rich and varied ministries.

Of course, as with all of these recommendations, may I offer that one approach doesn't fit all parishes. We must adjust each recommendation according to parish size, location, and culture. We must consider whether it has recently been merged or partnered. Assuredly, however, collaboration among parishes will be key. The days of parishes being entities unto themselves are behind us.

I want to say that while the concept of having access to trained professionals is not new, the task force is recommending that we commit to making it happen. This will require a reworking of budgets and, in some cases, new investments of money. But it is an investment that will pay great dividends, and one we cannot ignore.

In summary, then, on the parish level, the vision for the role of parish leadership would evolve.

Concretely, this means that:

- Every parish should be able to call on the help of a trained professional.
- The trained professional will work to implement the integrated vision.
- Religious education programs will be part of a much broader vision of life-long faith formation.
- The DRE and the trained professional could be the same person, or two separate people.
- Collaboration is widely encouraged.

Now, here are some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback:

- *What do you need personally to implement this vision?*
- *What does your parish need to implement this vision?*
- *What are some ways in which we can collaborate with other parishes?*
- *How can the diocesan offices help?*

Fourth recommendation - diocesan leadership

The fourth recommendation shifts the focus from parishes to diocesan administration. It involves diocesan leadership in helping parishes develop standards for the selection, hiring, training and supervision of professionals in faith formation under the supervision of the appropriate diocesan staff position. The Faith Formation Task Force sees a need for consistency throughout the diocese in this area.

Specifically, help to parishes comes by way of the administrative offices of the diocese, in collaboration with the pastors, assuming primary oversight of training and support for the trained professional leaders in faith formation. The goal here is for diocesan administrators to provide standards, and to assist parishes with implementation. In our listening sessions, early on, people said they wanted more services from the diocese. In essence, then, this recommendation offers one way in which the administrative offices can serve the parishes. This recommendation is a response to that feedback.

In summary, therefore, and concretely, this means that the diocese will:

- Provide standards for the training of professionals.
- Certify properly trained professionals.
- Oversee the role of professionals, through appropriate diocesan guidelines.
- Help to coordinate collaboration between parishes, ministries, etc.

Now, here are some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback.

- *How would this work for you?*
- *Can you help us distinguish what should be done at the parish level versus what should be done at the diocesan level?*
- *What do diocesan offices need to do to implement this vision?*

Recommendation number five - role of the family

As we unveil **recommendation number five**, we once again shift the focus; this time to the family.

From a sociological viewpoint, the family — however defined in these changing times — is the core unit of all civilized society. The church well recognizes the central role of the family in the formation of faith by calling it the "domestic church." The family — the "domestic church" — is where the children — the future of our society as well as our church — learn basic life values, the central one of which is their faith.

So, it is our recommendation to involve parents in all aspects of the child's preparation of the sacraments, the child's Catholic education— whether it be Catholic schools or religious education— and in the "daily life" of the parish.

This recommendation involves supporting the family in a wide variety of ways such as developing rituals and traditions of faith practices within their family as well as supporting the family's involvement as a core unit in the life of the parish.

As I mentioned, but bears repeating, "one size doesn't fit all." The new directions that will be developed — with your input — need to, and will be, adjusted accordingly. In fact, we believe it is likely the end product that we develop will offer an array of ideas and approaches from which parishes can select.

With respect to the role of the family, a renewed integrated vision must see families as a priority.

Concretely, this means that we all must:

- Seek to involve parents in all aspects of their child's faith formation.
- Recognize the diverse family structures existing in our parishes, schools, etc.
- Recognize the need for flexibility in our efforts.
- Encourage families to maintain or develop faith traditions and rituals in their home.

Now, here are some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback.

- *How can the parish support the family?*
- *Are we inclusive of all types of families in our approach?*
- *How can the diocesan offices help?*

Recommendation number six - lay ministry

And now we come to the sixth and final preliminary recommendation. It deals with the broad topic of lay ministry.

The concept of church evolved from the Greek word, *ekklesia* which means the "ingathering of God's people." In essence, we are the Church — the "ingathering of God's people." As members of this ingathering; this church, we all have a role to play in its daily life.

Underscoring this involvement is the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*). It was issued by Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965. He opened the document by writing, "The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it."

Bishop Persico adds that we are challenged to live up to our baptismal call by becoming involved in the church. The task force, and the bishop, are in agreement, by the way, that this has nothing to do with the number of priests in our diocese. It is our baptismal call.

Hence, we must take steps to assume our rightful roles in working with the pastor to provide helpful collaboration for every apostolic and missionary undertaking sponsored by their local parish. This recommendation seeks to help bring this about by making available the training necessary for lay leadership.

With respect to the recommendation on lay ministry, it involves a renewed integrated vision to assist lay persons in responding to their baptismal call.

Concretely, this means that we will:

- Train lay leaders to assume leadership positions in various ministries.
- Encourage training and development for others involved in any type of ministry.

- Encourage collaboration for every apostolic and missionary undertaking sponsored by a local parish.

Now, here are some questions for your consideration in giving us feedback.

- *What training does your parish already offer?*
- *What obstacles does your parish face in expanding its offerings?*
- *How can the diocesan offices help?*

To be sure, these recommendations involve much change, beginning first with the way we think about our parishes, our pastors, and especially ourselves. Christianity was always about building up the Church together. It always involved shared responsibility. While this is perhaps new thinking for our diocese, in many respects it is a call to return to the early apostolic church when the faith was new and fresh and exciting. Indeed, these are once again exciting times for our diocese.

I want to conclude by emphasizing that there are indeed parishes within our diocese where many good things are happening; where some of the activities and ministries contained in these recommendations are already taking place. The thrust of the recommendations, however, is to assure the growth of these success stories; to make our parishes the rich and vibrant faith communities that they can become.

And now it's my privilege to introduce Msgr. Edward Lohse, the vicar general of our diocese, who will speak about the feedback process.