

Deacon Steve Washek Remarks
Fall 2018 Vicariate Meetings
Faith Formation Implementation

It truly is with great pleasure that I am here in my new capacity as Executive Director of faith formation. I am eager to begin this exciting work with all of you. I would like to give you a snapshot of who I am, and what you can expect as we begin this process of Faith Formation.

My interest and passion for lifelong faith formation began with a simple invitation, which led to encounter and then to engagement, and then deeper into relationship and finally a sense of belonging or knowing I was home.

When I was a freshman at Gannon University, I was assigned Fr. George Strohmeyer as my academic advisor. This would turn out to be the beginning of a life-changing journey that continues today.

As Fr. George and I met regarding classes and credits, he got to know me well, and asked if I had ever heard of L'Arche. L'Arche is a world-wide movement of faith-based communities where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together in the spirit of mutually transforming relationships. He asked if I would be interested in a part-time position as an activity aide with L'Arche.

Because of fear, my first response was no!

But after some reflection, I did end up telling Fr. George that I would come and see what it was about. I had no idea that I would never be the same again.

In explaining how L'Arche impacted my life,

I often borrow a quote from the Jesuits, which states "I have been ruined for life!" I will forever view humanity in a different light than I did before L'Arche. I now view

humanity as being connected. I may live here in the United States, but I am connected and responsible for my brothers and sisters all over the world.

To me, this is what it means to be Catholic.

As I arrived at the L'Arche home, I was welcomed like I have never been welcomed before. The men were very interested in finding out who I was, and what I liked to do, and if I had a girlfriend. The dinner was a very simple dinner of “tube steaks” otherwise known as hotdogs.

As the dinner wrapped up, we had prayer, where we passed a candle and everyone said his or her personal prayer. People thanked God for their families, their friends, and even for me being there for dinner.

After prayer we began a house meeting. I was invited to stay for the house meeting and what I witnessed at this meeting was the beginning of the conversion of my heart. I heard people state the struggles they were facing that week, apologize for being angry at one another, and even be vulnerable with some personal struggles. All of this in front of me — this stranger at the table. This was a level of relationship and sharing I had never experienced before. I was very moved.

I said “Yes” to the activity aid position, but within six months, my heart had been so drawn in by what I was experiencing that I asked to move in to the home and become a full community member. I was experiencing a place where I was accepted for who I was with all my flaws and brokenness. I was being called to grow and to stretch in personal development, but more importantly, I was being called to growth in my spiritual life. This was the first time in my life that I experienced relationships on that level.

Assistants would come together for daily Mass and lunch. I was invited to attend Mass, even though I was not Catholic at this time.

This was my second invitation of deep welcome. The more I attended Mass, the more I was drawn in, and soon I was asking what I needed to do to become Catholic. I was welcomed into the Catholic Church on All Saints Day 1981. Another step in Faith Formation.

Because of an invitation, which moved to encounter, and then to engagement, authentic relationships developed, which gave me a sense of belonging, a place where I could be me, a place where I felt at home, a place where I could be challenged but also challenge and know that it would be OK.

I knew and felt that I belonged.

I already have had the opportunity to visit many religious education leaders and pastors in the past month and half, to listen to what good work is being done, to what is working and what could be improved, and to explore how the diocese can give support. I have learned much during these visits and expect to discover even more common strengths as well as struggles we can address together, ranging from how to secure catechists, to making relevant resources available, to how to compete against the demands of the busy family. I also have heard stories of how satisfying it is for our catechists, (who by the way are a treasure to our parishes), when their students really connect with their faith.

This is why you do what you do!

I also have learned that religious education leaders do enjoy eating together!

Now that you know a bit about me, you will understand why I am so pleased about the first component of faith formation Michele introduced tonight: welcoming and belonging.

This will be an ongoing commitment, but our main area of focus for 2019. Welcoming and belonging is crucial because it flows in and through all other areas of encounter. The first encounter someone has of our parish or of parishioners is essential. We can

never underestimate the importance of that moment when you make a connection. That moment when the person standing in front of you feels that you have acknowledged them and made them feel special.

As when I was welcomed into the community of L'Arche, I knew and felt it was a genuine welcome, a welcome from the heart.

Of course, we want to give people a "feeling" of welcome.

But the real challenge is then to move them into a sense of belonging. This is much deeper than a feeling. Belonging includes a sense of commitment, of ownership. This is my parish, and these are my people.

As we heard at the beginning of the evening, we are facing challenging times in the church today. Trust has been broken, and some are understandably asking the question, "Why should I stay in this church?"

You might be thinking that we are out of touch by launching an initiative focused on welcome and belonging. But in fact, this initiative is the very thing we need, to rebuild relationships, which is the foundation to belonging to "my" parish. We need to ask ourselves why anyone would want to come to our parish.

Why do people belong?

How do they know they belong?

How did you know you belonged?

When did you know that?

Do you know it?

Remember the path of invitation:

— encounter

— engagement

— relationship

— belonging!

(PowerPoint photo of empty front porch)

So, what does a front porch have to do with faith formation across generations?

Thanks for asking that question!

About 100 years ago, the front porch was the place where you gathered.

It was the place where neighbors conversed with each other while watching the kids play. It was where you discussed current events, and yes, probably gossiped a little too.

As we became more of an individualistic society, front porches seemed to fade away. Back decks with privacy fences replaced those big front porches. With that shift, the natural building of neighborly relationships began to diminish. It has become commonplace to not even know your neighbors.

Research has shown that front porches bring people out in the front of their homes, where they are more aware of what is going on, and more likely to be in relationship to their neighbors. The front porch is a concept I am using to demonstrate what I mean by a pathway to faith-formation.

Let's imagine for a moment that you are sitting on your front porch, and a person who just purchased the home down the street walks by. You wave and say hello. The person waves back and says hello. You have had an encounter. Fast forward a couple weeks, and you have progressed to how are you, and talking about the weather, learning each other's names as well as profession. You engaged this person, and as the engagement becomes deeper, so does your connection.

The front porch was a very special place for me as I was growing up. When I was little, I would sit with my grandmother on her front porch swing. Through stories and simple moments, I learned a lot about what it means to be a person of faith. As I grew older, conversations over coffee grew deeper. I learned more about faith and

family through the stories of struggles, sorrows, and joys that my parents shared with me. It is these simple, everyday moments that can help us change the world.

If we can envision our parishes as front porches, and invite someone into that initial genuine encounter, we could have parishes that look more like this:

(PowerPoint photo of front porch filled with friends and family.)

So where do we go and how do we get there?

As you are aware, much data has been collected from a variety of sources during the pastoral planning process. All of the research points to the need for us to pay attention to faith formation across the lifespan. It also points to the need to re-engage families as active, engaged participants in the faith formation process.

Going back to the four areas of encounter for faith formation that Michele described, I am going to give you a very simple project to address between now and the beginning of January.

With the support of Bishop Persico, I am inviting each parish to begin looking at how they might refine the culture in their parish regarding welcoming and belonging.

All I'm asking at this point is that each parish identify two concrete examples that the parish is either doing or would like to be doing to enhance their commitment to welcoming and belonging. One activity that involves welcome, and one activity that involves belonging. There are resources listed from various sources in the handout that is available for you this evening. It also includes a few more details about what I'm looking for from each parish.

In the spirit of welcome and belonging, I think the more people you can engage in this preliminary conversation the better. But I recognize Advent and Christmas and snowstorms will be upon us very quickly. So, I recommend that pastors, parish council

and religious education leaders think about the best way to complete this project. Who might contribute to the conversation and how?

An open meeting? A suggestion box introduced during a homily on the topic? A session with staff members? And then, beginning in January, I am going to organize meetings where parishes will be invited to bring representatives together for brainstorming and sharing on the topic.

From there, I will work with parishes to be a resource in terms of implementing the ideas.

It's just the first step. But from all I've shared with you this evening, I trust you can see how essential it is to everything else we hope to accomplish. If we do not get welcome and belonging right, then the other three areas of focus, catechesis, sacramental preparation, and service will not be as fruitful.

Thank you very much for your attention and I look forward to launching our faith formation efforts together. Please be sure to take a handout on the way out so you have some notes from this evening, as well as guidance as you begin work on your welcoming and belonging assignment.