

PASTOR'S PONDERINGS

What I appreciate the most about Pope Francis is that he seems to put much importance on pastoral ministry and on creating a ministry of presence within the church. I am reminded of something that my priest/pastor/supervisor/ said to me in my diaconate assignment in 1978 which was a year before I was ordained a priest in 1979. When he and I sat down to discuss what my ministries, duties, and responsibilities would be, he said, "Jim, the only thing I want you to do is to create a ministry of presence. Whatever you do just be present to the people."

A ministry of presence begs an important question: what does it mean to be present to someone or what is a ministry of presence all about? I confess to you that it took all my time as a deacon to explore this, and it is taking all my 42 years as a priest to try to answer this question.

Any answer that I attempt to give, I have learned by trial and error. I am still learning what a ministry of presence is about, but I understand more what a ministry of presence is not about. A ministry of presence cannot just be about trying to be at every parish event, service, meeting, and function. A ministry of presence cannot always be about trying to please everyone and make them happy. A ministry of presence is not about always being in control or needing to be the center of attention all the time. In fact, a ministry of presence has little to do with my presence and it has more, if not everything to do, with the presence of God.

At any given time and any given place, no matter where we are or who we are with, God is present with us always in our midst. A ministry of presence always involves being aware of God's presence, calling upon God's presence, deferring to this presence, living with this presence, and giving thanks and praising God for this presence. When we are present to one another, we are in the presence of God, and we bring God's presence to each other and help one another discover and appreciate the presence of God in every one of us. When we are pastorally present to another, we love that person as we know God loves us. What would it take to wash their feet symbolically and figuratively? The ministry of presence must be the ministry of parish leadership and of every baptized Christian.

The theme for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati's bicentennial celebration is Radiate Christ. Our Archbishop is calling all of us to become people who radiate Christ. He says, "if each of us is called to radiate Christ, we must be rooted in a strong, vital parish that forms us as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ at every stage of life and faith." This sounds very much to me like our Archbishop is inviting our parishes to create a ministry of presence.

There are many factors which, when taken together, diminish parish life and a ministry of presence forcing our parishes to be more about maintenance than mission. For example, religious practice is declining nationwide. Fewer people are actively engaged in their faith. In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, the average Sunday Mass attendance is about one-third full. Demographics in the Midwest are changing. Live births are declining, and the population is moving south. In the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, our resources are spread too thin. Our current infrastructure and schedules were built for a different era. Out of necessity, priests are appointed as pastors sooner than is optimal. As a result, most of our church buildings are grossly underutilized, our priests are stretched to the limit, and many of our parishes are not the vibrant communities of faith Catholics need them to be.



To address these factors positively, Beacons of Light is the name given to a multi-year process of pastoral planning for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Groupings of parishes will come together as one faith community. These new "Families of parishes" will be stronger, with the resources to focus more on mission than maintenance.

Through Beacons of Light, 50 -60 parish groupings will become Families of Parishes throughout the cities and towns, suburbs, and rural communities of the 19 counties in western and southwestern Ohio. Pastors and parish leaders will then plan for the future of their Family of Parishes.

Six principles (Eucharist, Church, Leadership, Stewardship, Evangelization, Love in Action) guide the planning in every Family of Parishes. In Family of Parishes, we will grow closer to God, follow Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit and radiate Christ throughout our lives.

This is a major undertaking, and it must be rooted in prayer. Please keep the vision and purpose of Beacons of Light in your daily prayer. Just imagine people united on a journey of missionary discipleship. Full churches. Joyous liturgies. Priests who have time to be present and attend to the needs of the people. Parishes that are alive in faith, filled with vitality, ready to form people to radiate Christ and ministering with his presence always.

~~Father Jim



St. Leo's Prayer Wall is a place where all, regardless of age, race or creed, are invited to sing God's praises, give Him thanks, and/or call upon His presence for help in times of need. The wall, a place of prayer for all peoples (much like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem), captures the faces of the community, as well as peacemakers and saints who have inspired us through the ages.

The Wall is a place for staff and volunteers, youth groups, community meetings, and for individuals who pass through our parking lot on the way to work, school, etc., to pray, reflect and pause. We invite you to share in this special way of prayer, joy, and thanksgiving. Praise God! God cares about every need in your life and knows what you need even before you ask Him for help. Our St. Leo the Great parish community promises to remember you in our private prayer, as well as in our communal prayer, which is to say that we are praying for you all the time.



All prayer requests are held in strictest confidence. **Send your prayer request to:** Saint Leo the Great Church, 2573 Saint Leo Place, Cincinnati, OH 45225.