



God's Work, Too!

Edward B. Scharfenberger, D.D.
Diocese of Albany
Friday, June 5, 2015

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

One of the most important things Pope Francis spoke to us about during his first appearance on the central loggia of the Basilica of St. Peter upon his election was the beautiful and intimate relationship between a bishop and his people. We have witnessed many examples of his desire to be close to every member of his flock, especially those who might feel most at a distance or lost in the margins. Who has not been touched by his remark that bishops and priests must, in their brotherly service, acquire the "smell of the sheep"?

Parish-Centered Pastoral Service

Over the past year, I have made it my number one priority to be among the people. To bring this point home, I continue to make every effort to be in the parishes in every corner of our diocese as often as I can, weekends especially, and not just for Confirmations, which I really enjoy celebrating with our young people and their families. I wish I could do more. Thank God for our pastors and parish life directors who look after our parish families every day. Thank God, also, for those who assist them with their self-giving leadership in countless ways as administrators, teachers, catechists, liturgical ministers and generous volunteers.

It is the parish that is the primary center of evangelization, family life, and spiritual and catechetical formation. Grounded in the theology of what the Church is, every parish should be a school of discipleship, a family of families and a family for those without family. Families themselves are often spoken of as the “domestic Church,” the Church in miniature. It is this local parish faith community that supports our families and through which we nurture that personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship manifests itself in courageous discipleship, strong community outreach and the celebration of the sacramental life of the Church.

In light of this, our Pastoral Center exists entirely – solely, I wish to reiterate – to be at your service, to serve the parishes. This follows the model of the servant leadership of Jesus who spoke of Himself as the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in order to seek out the lost sheep. Some of our parishes and parishioners, truth to be told, particularly in the rural areas, feel like lost sheep!

Toward these ends, I have begun a process of reaching out into all the regions of our fourteen-county diocese so that every parish will know the presence and support of your Bishop and his vicars and assistants – not just in Albany County. Like every true disciple of Christ, the focus of our Diocesan Pastoral Center must lie outside itself.

Crucial Role of Parish Priests

What I hear wherever I go, no matter where I go, is clear and consistent: “Bishop, please do not take our pastor away” and “Bishop, please do not close our church.”

A bishop’s collegial and fraternal relationship with his priests – the presbyterate – is crucial for the spiritual and interpersonal wellness of all the members of the diocesan family. Earlier this year, following the retirement of our much-esteemed Father Michael Farano, I appointed Father David Berberian as Vicar General and as Vicar for Clergy. Father David brings considerable pastoral and administrative skills to these offices to help me serve our parishes and parish leaders of our diocese each day. To strengthen my bond with my brother priests, I also have announced a reconstitution of the Presbyteral Council to begin in the fall to facilitate our collaboration.

Needless to say, we must continue to call and develop pastors for the future by identifying potential priestly vocations in our midst. Under the

guidance of Father Anthony Ligato, whom I appointed Vicar for Vocations at the beginning of the year, I am inviting all parishes to call forth vocations to the priesthood and religious life by pro-actively forming local Vocations Committees to encourage all parishioners to pray for and ask those whom God is calling to answer generously and courageously.

Departments Designed for Service

Although I spend a good deal of my time on the road, I am grateful for the dedication and pastoral care of all of the men and women who serve at our Diocesan Pastoral Center. I have enjoyed meeting every member of our service team. Their commitment and their desire to serve is outstanding. They create a wonderful workplace environment. Each and every one of them has been of tremendous assistance to me in ways I cannot even count. But they, like me, are here to serve you, the leadership and the people in the parishes. And I want to help them do their work for you even better.

It is time to make some structural changes in order to serve the needs of our pastors, parish leaders and parishioners even better. These changes follow a year of intensive listening and conversation, much reflection and prayer. In addition, the changes are informed by an extensive independent review of our current structures that was conducted last fall as well as firsthand observations of how parish leaders and diocesan staff interact. Our team at the Diocesan Pastoral Center has heard you and we stand ready now to undertake the changes that are necessary to serve you better.

We have already established centers of learning in four regions of the diocese under the leadership of Deacon Frank Berning with the help of Geralyn Fox and technology experts from our IT department. The plan is to add at least two more and to configure these regions of the diocese along the same lines of the pastoral leadership of soon to be announced Episcopal Vicars. These Episcopal Vicars will work closely with me and the pastors and parish leaders in their region to ensure that the needs and concerns of all parishes are heard and addressed.

Related to technology and the new opportunities it offers, I have hired a special consultant, Mary DeTurrís Poust, to get our social media up to speed and open new avenues of evangelization. Many of you have already begun to notice subtle changes to our website and our presence on Facebook and Twitter. Pope Francis has called social media a "great

gift" to us. I cannot imagine that Sts. Peter and Paul would not be using it if they were with us in person today.

At the Pastoral Center itself, beginning July 1, we will have the assistance of a new Parish Services Coordinator, Renée Morgiewicz, who will be reachable at a dedicated number and whose mission it will be to ensure that all of our agencies at the Pastoral Center are as responsive to the vicars, pastors and parish leaders as the parishes in their care require. She will also be responsible for the coordination of program resources.

New Resources, New Directions

One of the amazing things that I have learned over this past year is how wisely and creatively pastors, parish life directors and other parish leaders have used their resources to craft and develop programs from a variety of sources – printed, digital and online. The Office of Evangelization, Catechesis and Family Life (OECFL) has also been piloting some such programs with the cooperation of selected parishes and clusters. How much richer we will all be when we can learn from all those experiences and share the successes of parishes which have been doing great work in forming Christian disciples, often on their own initiative.

Last week I announced the reallocation of the many resources of the OECFL, also as of July 1. All of the persons or services in that department that you may have been accustomed to accessing have been reassigned to other departments and will continue to be available to you. You may continue to contact them, directly if you wish, at the Pastoral Center, or you may contact Renée in Parish Services who will direct your inquiry to someone who can help you.

On May 28, Jeanne Schrempf, Director of the OECFL, who has served our diocese and beyond for well over thirty years, submitted an announcement of retirement. Jeanne will continue to be available to assist us in this time of transition.

I have appointed Elizabeth Simcoe as Diocesan Chancellor, effective July 1. She will also serve us as director of the newly constituted Office of Catholic Faith Formation Services. All matters logically falling under this title will be entrusted to the mission of her office. Under her supervision, for example will fall catechist training and formation through the Catholic Schools Office, marriage preparation through the Office of Ministry Formation, and support for parishes in the area of sacramental formation,

Christian initiation (R.C.I.A.) and ongoing formation of adults through the Office of Prayer and Worship.

Toward the end of the month, I expect to approve and distribute an organizational “flow chart” that will show where all of the service agencies of the diocese lie in a structure of mission and administrative accountability. I am very grateful for your patience and understanding in this time of transition that for some, I know, may be very difficult and will take some time to get used to. With the help of our new Parish Services Coordinator, I will look forward to your feedback.

Some may characterize this process of reallocating personnel and material resources from an Albany-centric to a more parish-oriented approach a variation on the theme of corporate decentralization. There is some truth in this. All bureaucracies have a tendency to expand and fortify their own boundaries over time. We have all heard of the silo effect wherein departments seem to function as little islands unto themselves with little knowledge of what their potential collaborators in the cubicle or department next door are doing. Sometimes the whole administrative center seems to be surrounded, as it were, by a moat. Reorganization tends to shake us out of our comfort zones. It has to do that so that we can grow as disciples in mission. For that reason, it is God’s work, too, and we must pray for the graces of patience and perseverance!

Working Together

For us Catholic Christians, this kind of reorganization is only natural since our focus is not on our own comfort but on our mission of service. *Ecclesia semper reformanda* (the Church must always be reformed) was a founding principle of Vatican II. So are the complementary principles of collegiality and subsidiarity. Doing things collegially means consciously working together in a collaborative manner, respectful of the gifts and interdependence of everyone. Subsidiarity means, essentially, that nothing should be programmed or administered at a higher level that can better be done a lower one. By organizing and working under these principles we are doing structural theology together.

In the weeks and months ahead, I look forward to hearing from you as to how our changes are helping you in your ministries and, most of all, in your personal growth in the faith. Obviously, not all changes that need to be done are at the diocesan level. Parishes also must continue to find ways to serve the faithful better. People write to me every day wishing that a

local parish, for example, had a weekday Mass at noon to accommodate nearby workers or a Saturday Mass to promote devotion to Our Lady. One of the most frequent hopes expressed is that churches would stay open more for prayer and meditation, before the Blessed Sacrament, if possible. To make any of this happen, of course, requires an act of commitment and great generosity of time and spirit.

In closing, I want to say that nothing is more central to our discipleship than our personal, daily encounter with Jesus Christ. This means taking the time to pray and to be alone with Him every day. It also means, as Pope Francis always reminds us, not getting away from the world but being in the streets – out there with our neighbor, particularly where we may encounter Jesus in the poor and the suffering. Sometimes that neighbor is closer than we think. It might be the person in the house or office next door to us. It might even be the stranger we share our home with, who spends more time looking at a screen than looking into our caring eyes. May we be open to see the presence of Christ before us in everyone and in all the moments of our lives.

May God bless you in all the good work that you do. May it be God's work, too!

Your servant in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "+Edward B. Scharfenberger". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Edward B. Scharfenberger
Bishop of Albany