

REMARKS WITH THE PRESBYTERATE

PRIESTS' MEETING ON OCTOBER 15, 2010
HELD AT THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
IN NEW BRIGHTON

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

As I was preparing for our meeting today, I happened to see the interview that Our Holy Father had with some seventy journalists on his plane as he was flying to the British Isles last month.

As you know, there had been all kinds of rumors about the hostile reception the Pope would receive in England. Various groups had threatened to stage protests or hold demonstrations and so, not surprisingly, the first question of the interview was whether the Holy Father was worried about the reception he would receive.

Rather than being threatened or defensive, the Pope pointed out that he had made two previous visits, one to France and one to the Czech Republic, in which both countries reflected strong anticlerical sentiments as well as containing few believers, but ultimately he had received a warm welcome in each. So, the Pope stated he was not worried about Great Britain because "there will be a positive welcome from Catholics and believers in general, attention from those who are seeking how to move forward in our time, and respect and tolerance where there is anti-Catholicism. I am going," he concluded, "in good spirits and in joy."

I want to echo those sentiments as we make today's announcements and begin the implementation stages of our Strategic Plan for Parishes and Schools.

One reason, I believe, for being optimistic and hopeful is that for the past 20 months, all of you and indeed, so many, many more have been involved in a grass roots process of study, discussion and consultation. I am told that there have been 159 consultative meetings, taking place in almost every area of the Archdiocese. Pastors, parish staffs, catechists, school teachers, and laity of various backgrounds have come together to express their opinions and present their suggestions as to how we ought to build the future of this local Church. We have also been blessed with a wonderfully talented and insightful Strategic Planning Task Force, made up of committed Catholics from across the Archdiocese, who gathered up literally thousands of pieces of data that

came from many sources. To those members, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for their countless hours of intense and complicated work.

We also have been quite intentional in communicating to everyone who would listen that changes are coming which were aimed at strengthening and renewing us as a local Church. We have also been intent in saying that not all the changes will take place immediately, but rather over a period of time. To my mind, the greatest benefit of a strategic plan is that it gives all of us a direction of where we are going. I used my Catholic Spirit column recently to hold up for our admiration Holy Cross Catholic Grade School in Webster. Forty-one years ago, the three Catholic schools of Veseli, New Market and Lonsdale came together under a combined administration. For the next thirty-six years, they had to make do with their three school sites until there was enough money to build a new educational center. Today that new combined school fits under one roof and the results are stunning. Yes, it took them forty-one years to get to where they wanted to go, but they had a plan, that is, a sense of direction about how they would move in a collaborative fashion.

So, my dear brothers, the essential message I want to leave with you today is that the vision behind all the mergers, clusterings and collaborative projects you have heard about today is far more important than the details of those decisions. What we are about, it seems to me, is far more than just a process of downsizing or an admission that we have to live in a more disciplined way within our means, although these realities are not incidental. But what is ultimately behind all of this is a vision of who we are as Church - - a Church that is defined as a communio, or a communion of her members gathered in faith, hope and love through the Spirit of Jesus. Further, we are called into a unity as one Body in Christ precisely to be sent out in missio or on mission, inviting the world to Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life through our service to the poor, the sick and the stranger. In short, the vision is that of building up the Kingdom of God.

It was for this reason that you and I were ordained. Not to be administrators of buildings and budgets, though good stewardship is a critical part of our responsibilities. But on a much more basic level, we were ordained to be teachers and preachers, pastors and counselors, and most of all, the sacramental agents of God's love, mercy and power, of His call to communion.

In an interview I gave the Catholic Spirit last week on this point, I readily admitted that the present vision is more long term than short. Obviously, over the next several years of the implementation stages, much attention will be given to the practical details of the plan. No doubt, you and I will be asked to offer a compassionate and understanding ear to those who will find some changes difficult. In a few instances, we

may even find ourselves filling the role of a grief counselor in helping some of our people to deal with their sense of loss.

Such negative reactions are totally understandable. We have for several decades told our Catholic people that they need to support their local parish, participate actively in their parish community, certainly to worship there regularly. Now we are asking them something quite different, to think beyond their local parish and to live outside of their comfort zones. And even though these changes can be understood as a call to be more “catholic” or universal in its intent, nevertheless it is a call that is quite different from what they have known in the past. For that reason alone, we should be sensitive to those who find these changes difficult, treating them with compassion and understanding.

But, again, the only way we can point to a more positive future is if we keep the “Big Picture” of what we are doing before our eyes. The resources we have in buildings, personnel, and properties are meant to serve the mission of the Church in building up the Kingdom of God. In several areas of the Archdiocese, these resources no longer serve the mission effectively or efficiently and so we need to make changes. We cannot continue to ignore the fact that in certain sectors of this Archdiocese, the present way we are operating is simply no longer sustainable.

This is especially true in terms of some of our Catholic schools. Now, you know that I am one of the most pro-Catholic school advocates you could ever find. And yet, in the past two years, I have had to accept the local, parochial decisions to close six Catholic schools. In each of these circumstances, the administrators of those schools came to me at the eleventh hour, announcing they were in trouble in terms of their enrollment and consequently their finances. While I have come to appreciate the culture we have here of a de-centralized administrative school system, I have also come to understand that it has its limitations. We need to be more pro-active in assessing and evaluating the sustainability of those schools that are considered both mission critical as well as those in need of urgent reviews. As I have promised, we will not abandon Catholic education in any area of this local Church, but we may in fact have fewer schools than what we have had in the past. At the same time, the ministry of our Catholic schools must be more broadly supported by the whole Archdiocese on a regional basis, whether a particular parish has its own school or not. I realize that this is a difficult concept for some of us to own, especially because the past practice has been so parochial, but I do believe that we *all* have to begin accepting responsibility for our Catholic schools as something that is simply something a good Catholic does. Over the next four months in particular, we will be evaluating a number of our school programs in regard to their Catholic identity, their academic excellence, the quality of their faith

formators as well as their financial sustainability. We will also determine which of these are critical to our mission as Church in evangelizing the total Catholic population including the poor, the immigrant and the marginalized populations within our community.

Likewise, I believe that we have a special calling to reach out to the young adults in this local Church, especially those between the ages of 18 and 35, one age group that we have not, in my opinion, done very well in catechizing or even evangelizing in the past. (This was parenthetically one of the most consistent concerns expressed across the Archdiocese in the consultation sessions that were held.) I believe that this group is critical to the future leadership of the Church and yet I see them, as a whole, not being very intentional in the practice of their faith or in their ability to think with the Church. I believe that this is a cause for grave concern for all of us.

Finally, I must say that a great source of my optimism today about the plan we have announced lies in the support it has received from your representatives on the Presbyteral Council as well as the College of Consultors. When we met four weeks ago to discuss the recommendations from the Strategic Planning Task Force only one recommendation was not accepted and, I would say, 85-90% of the others were accepted by a unanimous vote.

This said to me that you as a presbyterate were overwhelmingly supportive of the direction of this plan. For that support, I am deeply grateful.

While I have only been your archbishop for a relatively short period, I do feel that we are working well together in terms of the direction and vision we share for the future.

Dear Fathers, I know that much of the burden for implementing this plan will fall on your shoulders. We will offer all the support and counsel that we can from the chancery, but you will be out there on the front lines. Your cooperation and collaboration is essential for the success of this plan. I want you to know how deeply I appreciate that fact.

My dear brothers, we are being called by this Strategic Plan to accept a renewed and revitalized vision of what this local Archdiocese can become in the months and years ahead. I ask you not only to embrace the vision of a renewed communion of faith, hope and love, but I ask you, as well, to become an ambassador of this vision for the people you serve. Let them know that, in all that we have proposed, the greatest motivation behind our efforts has been the desire to do God's will by seeking to build up the Kingdom of God in our midst. Let them know how much we want them to

share in our vision of a strong, vital and thriving Archdiocese that relishes in the love that God has for us and is intent on spreading that love to all people in these twelve counties and beyond.

Specifically, I ask you to continue to let your parishioners know of your pastoral care through a renewed sense of your own service to them in preaching and teaching, in your care for the sick and the dying, in your visible concern for the poor and the marginalized. Spend time discussing with your leadership on the parish staff as well as on the parish council and its committees what it means to build *communio* and be in *missio* as a parish and as a part of this local Church. And please continue on the deanery level and at your local gatherings to reach out in brotherly support to one another, continuing to build on those cooperative relationships that began with the strategic planning process. None of us faces the challenges of the implementation stage alone. We are all in this together.

The naysayers who predicted that Pope Benedict's pastoral visit to Great Britain would be a disaster were proven wrong precisely by the Pope's attitude, as he said, of going there in "good spirits and in joy." As we approach this weekend of announcements and begin the challenging work of implementation, let us adopt that same attitude in our own approach, knowing that, above all else, this is a ministry that God has given us to do.

Thank you and God bless you!