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Big changes ahead for Catholics in Twin Cities

By **JEFF STRICKLER**, Star Tribune

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The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis is launching an extreme makeover that promises big changes for the Twin Cities' 650,000 Catholics.

"Every parish will be impacted to one degree or another," Archbishop John Nienstedt announces in a short video being shown at public hearings. "Everyone must be prepared to make sacrifices for the greater good of our local church."

Those sacrifices could mean mergers or even closures of parishes and schools. A 17-member task force is holding hearings throughout the archdiocese to address everything from population patterns to finances to societal influences. With an annual operating budget of \$37 million, the archdiocese includes 217 parishes in 12 counties. There are 93 elementary schools and 14 secondary schools with a total enrollment of 36,000. It also includes four hospitals, six nursing homes, six monastic communities and 10 retreat centers.

The task force's job is to reshape the archdiocese from a 19th century model -- when people walked to daily mass at neighborhood churches -- into an organization that will thrive in a 21st century landscape dotted by big "destination churches" that people drive to attend.

Nienstedt isn't sugar-coating the prospects. "It is possible that some parishes and schools will be merged, realigned, or even closed," he warns.

Some of the archdiocese's challenges are the same as those confronting other denominations: Churches in the inner-city and first-ring suburbs are facing declining and aging memberships while churches in the outer suburbs are stretched to capacity with an influx of young families.

Other issues are unique to the Catholic church, in particular a surge of Hispanic immigrants. On an average Sunday, 16,500 people attend Spanish-speaking masses in

the Twin Cities. On a smaller scale, there are also masses offered in Hmong, Vietnamese, Korean, Filipino and French.

'No preconceived ideas'

People get nervous when they hear talk about mergers, acknowledged the Rev. John Bauer, rector of the Basilica of St. Mary in downtown Minneapolis and co-chairman of the strategic planning task force. Some of the uneasiness comes from assuming that the decisions already have been made.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," he said. "We went into this with no preconceived ideas. People think there already is a plan out there, that everything has been decided. Nothing has been decided. There is no plan yet."

But there will be a plan, most likely by next summer, and that is why Bauer is encouraging people to speak up now. By the time the task force presents its proposal to Nienstedt, it will be too late.

"This is their opportunity to give us input," Bauer said. "That's all we're doing right now: gathering information, listening to parishioners, to clergy, to lay people, to teachers. If you can't come to a hearing, send us an e-mail or a letter. We also have a voice-mail line." (Contact information is on the archdiocese website, www.archspm.org.)

Recommendations due in July

Despite the trepidations he is hearing from the people in the pews, Bauer is upbeat about the coming changes.

"I realize that people are very worried about how this is going to impact their church or school," he said. "But if you look at the bigger picture, it's going to help us. By combining some functions, we're going to be able to free resources for other things. I'm very excited about the possibilities."

The task force's timeline calls for the information-gathering to wrap up by the end of the year. Then it will spend the first six months of 2010 preparing a set of recommendations, which will be presented to Nienstedt in July.

"Not everyone is going to be happy" with their plan, Bauer conceded. "But I'm hopeful

that, in the end, people will feel that they had a voice in the process. They might not agree with our decision, but at least they can understand how it was made and why it was made."

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