



Renewing Parishes

Some Key Characteristics of a Healthy, Vibrant, Renewing Parish

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The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented. (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, par. 28)

Building on the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis calls us to the renewal of our parishes and communities. What is said below of parishes is meant to apply as well to all eucharistic communities in our archdiocese, including Aboriginal and migrant communities. It also applies to parish schools and to other Catholic schools in ways that are appropriate to their different contexts. The following are some key characteristics of parishes in the process of renewal:

- 1. The parish is a community in which each member is called to a personal relationship with Jesus.** The parish is directed towards discipleship, and understands itself as a community of disciples, and as a school of discipleship. It is a place of prayer and of formation that enables parishioners to embrace what the Second Vatican Council termed the universal call to holiness. Each of the baptised is seen as having a gift of the Spirit given for the sake of all. Each one is different, but all are participants: “To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Our parishes, schools and communities will need to be places where members can learn to pray, to know and understand the Scriptures, and our Catholic tradition. They are places where we learn to discern and to use our gifts in the cause of the kingdom of God in our world. All are involved in evangelisation, bringing the gospel of joy to the world.
- 2. Eucharistic liturgies are prayerful and fully participative.** The full and active participation of the whole people of God, men, women and children, that the Second Vatican Council called for should be evident in all our celebrations, along with the various lay ministries, and the ministry of the deacon where possible. In ways that are open to us, our actions and our language need to witness to the full equality of women and men, of girls and boys, both in our eucharistic assemblies and in broader parish life. As parish communities we need to give priority to preparing well for each of our liturgical celebrations. Good music is important. Many people are drawn to liturgies where there is inspiring music, times of silent prayer, as well as good preaching. If priests are to give themselves fully to prayerful leadership of the Eucharist it may be necessary to limit rather than simply add on more Masses for our priests.
- 3. The Word of God is proclaimed in good preaching.** We need to become communities that listen deeply to the Word of God. Our focus on the biblical text in our Sunday gatherings will need to spring from the way our parishes are places of the Word and of prayer during the week. Preaching emerges from profound listening to the Word of grace offered in the text, and from listening to the community. We need time for proper formation and prayerful preparation not only for those who preach the Word, but also for those who read the Scriptures in our assemblies. All those involved with the ministry of the Word need to be conscious that, by the manner of their proclamation, they mediate the grace of God to those who listen.

4. **There is a warm sense of community outreach.** While many of our parishes have worked hard at community-building and hospitality, Pope Francis urges us to go beyond ourselves, and our own natural groups, to others, above all to those in need. We are called to engage ecumenically with Christians from other denominations, praying and working with them in the cause of the Gospel. We need to find ways to make all kinds of people welcome, including the young, not only by welcoming smiles and words, but also in the whole experience of our churches, our symbols, our liturgies, our language and our actions. Our parishes need to witness to the mercy and generous love of God revealed in Jesus. We need to make sure that all feel welcome and loved, including new migrants, parents with sometimes noisy young children, those who suffer from mental and physical disabilities, people who are shy, and those who might tend to feel excluded because of their relationships or for other reasons.
5. **The parish community is visibly engaged with those who experience poverty and need, and with those at the margins of society and church.** Pope Francis has said: “Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures” (*Joy of the Gospel*, par. 49). We need to be a Church that constantly witnesses to mercy. We need to take the risk of acting for justice. Our parishes will need to go out to both their own members in need, including those who are old, isolated, sick, and those who are in need in their neighbourhoods and in the wider world. Pope Francis tells us that he wants “a Church which is poor and for the poor” (*Joy of the Gospel*, 198).
6. **The parish witnesses to God’s love for all the creatures of Earth.** When the community gathers for Eucharist, we bring the whole creation with us. We pray at the beginning of the Third Eucharistic Prayer - “All you have created rightly gives you praise.” Pope Francis says: “Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist itself is an act of cosmic love” (*Laudato Si’*, par. 236). He tells us that we are all called to ecological conversion (*Laudato Si’*, par. 217), and this is a challenge in our parish life. School and parish can participate together in this conversion, and witness to it, in their use of resources, like water, and in many other ways, such as by using solar power, recycling, supporting community gardens and tree planting.
7. **The parish is led by a priest with a pastoral team.** These small teams may involve lay leaders, religious, deacons and priests. They may take on a variety of roles such as coordinator of the community, manager of the parish, finance officer, youth worker, as well as pastoral associate and pastoral director. Leaders in Catholic schools will often be part of such teams. Appointed by the Archbishop to each team there will be a priest, who may be a parish priest, or a priest moderator. Other priests may be part of the team. There will be a need to plan for the teams of the future, identifying, supporting and providing learning experiences for lay leaders. Each parish will need to nurture the vocation of those called to lay ministries, religious life, as well as continuing to nurture vocations to ordained ministry. The pastoral team, along with the whole parish, will exhibit the values of openness and transparency. It is essential that the pastoral team be truly and visibly collegial, and so contribute to building up authentic communion in the parish.
8. **Eucharistic communities that are viable will be enabled to continue.** There will be times when there will be a need to discern whether particular communities remain viable. But smaller eucharistic communities can be closer to the people, and are to be maintained in our new and emerging pastoral structures, as long as they have the capacity, and the ministers, to be a genuine centre of Christian life, formation in discipleship, outreach to those in need, and life-giving eucharistic celebrations. It is important to recognize the value of other forms of prayer in such communities, including services of the Word, and liturgies of the Word with Holy Communion. There is value in keeping local communities in place, and we need to respect the identity, language and culture of such communities.