

Pastoral Planning

You have undoubtedly heard much about “Set Ablaze” and the new organization of the diocese. There are a lot of pieces that you have probably heard about – regrouping of parishes and reassignment of priests being only part of it. You may have heard a lot of talk about missionary discipleship, the bishop’s vision, meetings that are to be held, building the faith / disrupting the decline, and so on. There’s a lot of pieces that have been put out but how does all of this fit together, *does* it fit together or are they just separate, independent things to do?

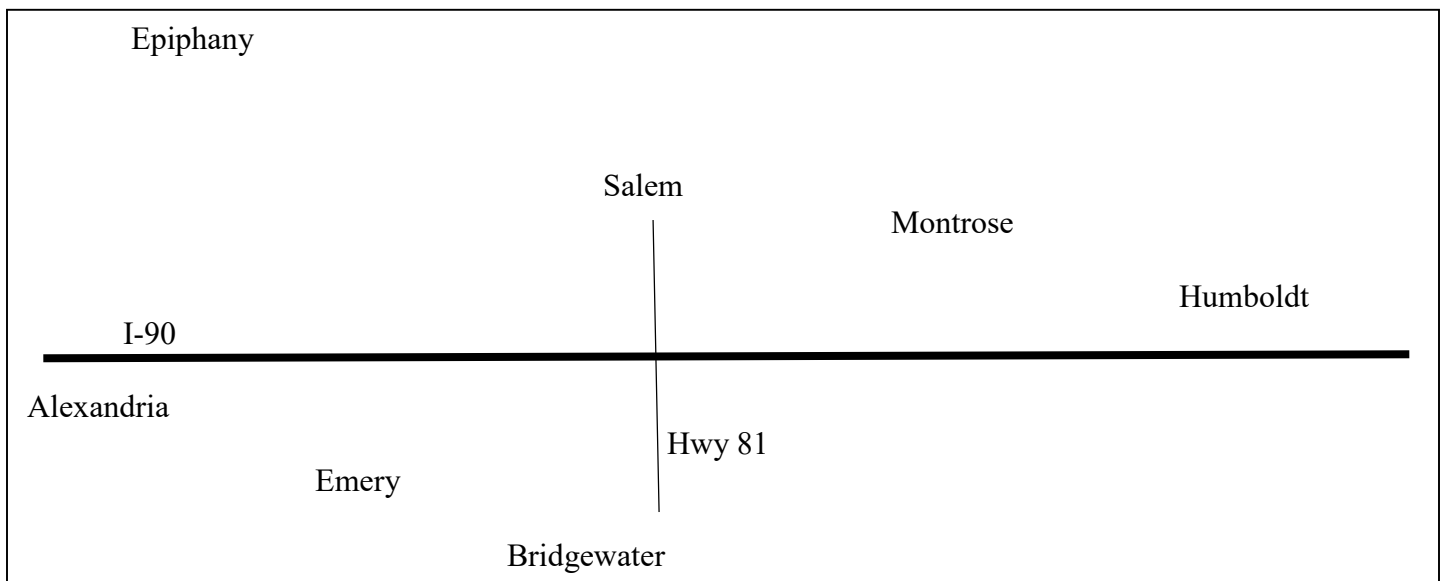
In spite of all the meetings I’ve been to, it has been difficult for me to pull these things together into a unified whole as well. To try to make sense of it all – to organize it, to give some sort of sense of cohesive whole – I have found it helpful to focus on the term “Pastoral Planning.” “Pastoral Planning” is not a theological, liturgical, or canonical term. It is frankly, a bit of a euphemism (“A mild, indirect, or vague term used for something that is considered harsh, blunt, or offensive” – a pleasant term for something that is rather unpleasant). It is a term that has arisen, at least here in the U.S., only within (say) the last 30 or 40 years. It refers (generally) to this question or problem:

- Our diocese has way more parishes than priests
- We can’t possibly cover all of these parishes with this number of priests.
- Parishes have shrunk, with some unable to financially support a parish and/or a priest.
- How can this be dealt with, given the number of priests, people, and financial resources available?

Almost every, if not every, diocese in this country has had to face this question, has had to employ some sort of “pastoral planning.” Although answers to this question have varied, they almost always, if not always, include (and predominately so) the question of which parishes close/merge. As least to some extent, then, pastoral planning has *generally* come to mean: which parishes close/merge and how should parishes be “grouped,” with one “grouping” (whatever that grouping is called: linkage, cluster, pastorate, etc) having one pastor.

This explicit statement of what “pastoral planning” really means is rather blunt. On the one hand, we need this straightforwardness in order to be clear about the task at hand. At the same time, it is somewhat incomplete. So let us step back a bit and frame the issue of “pastoral planning” in a little more complete way:

- The mission of the Church is to teach and sanctify.
- This is the central issue – the mission of the Church; hence the emphasis you have heard on building faith
- This is our grouping of parishes – “Pastorate 16”



- The bishop has set a number of “parameters” (or just things) that are fixed for each pastorate; examples:
 - The maximum number of weekend Masses for any priest = 3
 - Each pastorate is slotted to ultimately have a certain number of priests, for this pastorate that is 2.

- These parameters, along with a few others, are non-negotiable.
- The issue of pastoral planning, then, is this: How is the mission of the Church to be carried out in this linkage of parishes, this “pastorate,” given the “parameters” laid out by the bishop?

With this in mind, let’s step back a bit and notice that part of “pastoral planning” is already complete – the grouping of parishes and (re)assignment of priests to groups. There are, however, numerous practical questions left – operational questions, how to carry out the “day-to-day” workings of the pastorate. There are, for example, staffing questions; the bishop is requiring a minimum of 3 positions – someone for maintenance, “business management,” and faith formation. This is just one example, there are others – smaller ones like bulletins and where should priests live, as well as bigger ones like teaching the faith. And, of course, Mass coverage as well as Mass and Confession times need to be decided on as well.

So again...pastoral planning is the question of how to carry out the mission of the Church and it involves a good number of practical or operational questions. But the bishop has added another dimension to this, what you might call building the faith – this is the missionary discipleship that he speaks of. It means truly making the Lord first and foremost in my heart, mind, and soul; forging real union with the Lord, like that between husband and wife in a good marriage, so that “it is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me,” as St Paul put it. The bishop’s instruction, then, has been to start with these questions: what can we do or do better to really build the faith (this is what bishop et al. are calling “aspirational goals”), and then let the answers to those questions guide and direct the practical, operational questions. Coming up with “ways” to build the faith is a tall task. To facilitate this, the bishop has laid out 4 areas to address: Worship, Evangelization, Community, and Service. In this, we really need to be well anchored in what God has revealed, what He teaches in and through His One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, and the instructions of the Church. To some extent, but *only* to some extent, the 2 things: “aspirational” and operational are separate – they won’t perfectly coincide. Nonetheless, practical/operational aspects should be guided and directed by the goal to build the faith. This has always been the case in the Church; the discipline (practices) of the Church always flows out of what God has revealed. For example, fasting and abstinence; these are not dogma or doctrine but they are good practices that flow out of what God has revealed. We are most decidedly not here to reinvent Catholicism. This was done by our Lord and it’s not ours to change. Rather the issue is how to carry out the God-given mission of the Church.

Another dimension that the bishop (and to some extent the Holy See) has introduced into pastoral planning is to broaden the scope of involvement. Typically the blunt part of pastoral planning (which parishes and grouping of parishes) involved only the bishop, a few select priests, and often some outside group hired to formulate a plan based mainly on demographics. This was done in this case as well and the current pastorates are part of the result of that. But for the rest – how the pastorate operates (e.g., Mass coverage within the pastorate) and “aspirational” questions – this is to include: the priests and laity of the pastorate, as well as what are being called facilitators. How can this involvement be accomplished? The main avenue for involvement of the whole pastorate is what the bishop is calling **“town hall” meetings**, which will be an opportunity for people to express some thoughts (especially aspirational ideas, but also practical ones) in each of the 4 areas that the bishop has put forth for building the faith: Worship, Evangelization, Community, and Service. To that end, this pastorate will have 2 initial town hall meetings:

- **Sunday, November 5, 3 – 4:30 pm, in St Patrick’s (Montrose) parish hall**
- **Sunday, November 12, 6:30 – 8 pm in St Mary of Mercy (Alexandria) parish hall**

The main role of the “facilitators,” assigned by the diocese, is to “facilitate” these meetings. Take some time and effort to prepare – to really pray and think about building the faith (this will be the thrust of it). This is not a time for me to present my likes and dislikes or to just “get my way” but rather to set myself aside and really think about what would help people become a real disciple of the Lord. Disciple, as Scripture scholars point out, means student. But a student of the Master is not just someone who learns facts or information; the student does that but that is only a first step; the real student really studies the Master, spends time with Him, watches Him, consults with Him, participates in His life, so much so that he becomes like the Master, to the point of even taking on His characteristics. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.