

# **Report on the Post-Synod Session**

**Jamie Dance**

The first of a series of follow-up sessions to Synod 2014 took place on Dec 5th, 2015. Bishop Caggiano called the session to order at 8:15 A.M. We began with Morning Prayer that included a scripture reading by Anne Pollack, one of our board members.

Bishop Caggiano introduced this session as a “Snapshot of the Diocese—December 2015.” He said that the amount of change underway since the closing Mass is breathtaking and that much of it is tangential to what we did as a Synod. Next, Bishop introduced his new Vicar General, Msgr. Thomas Powers. He is a native of Newtown, where his family still resides and attends St. Rose of Lima Parish. Bishop described him as his alter ego, having the same vision and commitment to the diocese, and as a man of deep faith who loves the people of God. Msgr. Powers comes to us from Rome, where he worked under two popes, Benedict and Francis.

Patrick Turner next took the podium to speak on the strategic and pastoral planning process. He announced that Rev. Michael Dogali has been appointed Director of the Strategic Planning Commission. Patrick explained that the commission is designed to bring business leaders together to advise the diocese on issues facing the Church. The objectives of the commission are four-fold: To foster servant leadership in the work of the Curia; to allow the Curia to be more efficient, responsive, and cost-effective; to oversee pastoral planning in all its aspects; and to position the Curia to respond more efficiently to the needs of the parishes as they implement the Synod recommendations and develop pastoral plans. One of the possible initiatives regards integrating our communications systems to make the diocesan message consistent and available. The second initiative is to improve IT capability. The third is a new system to collect and store data from across the diocese and do away with multiple forms for multiple offices. These three reforms will enable the diocese to respond quickly and accurately to multiple needs. Patrick also announced that communication using social media would continue in order to engage and educate the people of the diocese in discipleship.

The Pastoral Planning Process has gotten underway, having held two meetings, one for priests and the other for parish leaders and priests. The object is to provide the priests, religious, professional staff, and lay leaders of each parish the opportunity to engage in ongoing, systematic and comprehensive planning towards the establishment of each parish’s plan for long-term pastoral vitality. Each parish will be asked to create a planning team/task force for its pastoral plan.

Plans for the Catholic Leadership Institute are in process in twenty-nine selected parishes. The Institute will have a twofold purpose: to provide ongoing, systematic formation and support for all current Church leaders in their various pastoral works, and to provide theological and spiritual education and formation for every adult who wishes to grow in knowledge of the faith and personal relationship

with the Lord. In the next few months, the diocese will hold listening sessions in these parishes to ask how the Synod's five Global Challenges are being implemented. This will help the diocese assess priorities and frame the response.

At this point, Bishop Caggiano took the podium to underscore the importance of the data to be collected in this survey. This will be critical to the training sessions for members of the Leadership Institute. Of greatest importance is the assurance that each parish has an effectively functioning parish council, finance council, etc. Each parish needs to assess its long-term viability and stability, and create a five- to ten-year business plan. For this to work, it is imperative that all parishioners be engaged in decision-making and implementation. All will be asked to discern and then offer their gifts and talents to enrich their parishes. The results of the data accumulated from all parishes will be synthesized into a "snapshot," a common template to display the results.

Bishop Caggiano then addressed strategic planning for the diocesan Catholic schools and education. High school enrollment has increased, but the elementary schools are still experiencing financial difficulty and accumulated a \$2 million dollar debt last year. The issue here is declining enrollment. Schools across the diocese have been asked to provide a snapshot of issues and challenges. The goal is to maintain the schools we have, although the closing of one school may have to be contemplated. Since four times as many children attend non-Catholic schools, a Catechetical Task Force has been formed to discern and present models of faith formation suitable for each parish's needs.

Bishop announced that a diocesan summit was held in November for commissioners overseeing real estate, finances, and planning to discuss three issues: establishing operational financial stability, eradicating accumulated debt, and identifying investment income. He announced that the diocese still has \$8 million in inherited debt. (Some \$7 million has been repaid.) Diocesan (not parish) real estate has now been identified and divided into three groups. First is "mission central" property that will remain untouched. Second is "not mission central" property that can be sold. Third is "not mission central" property that can be leased to generate income. One of the properties in the first group is the Jewett Avenue headquarters property. Its sale would generate funds that would create long-term financial stability.

Further addressing finances, the bishop said that \$22 million in parish debt is owed to the diocese. This is the key weakness in the diocesan financial structure: the diocese is the payer of last resort, making no parish too big or small to fail. The two largest annual budget items for the diocese are medical premiums (\$12 million) and the pension liability (\$30 million). Bishop said that there are only two revenue streams for the diocese: the *cathedraticum* assessment from offertory collections and the Annual Catholic Appeal. He said there should be two more: income from affiliated organizations such as the Catholic cemeteries, and foundational assistance like "Faith in the Future." He said we need these to support our mission, to be financially stable, and to give aid to poorer parishes.

Patrick Turner took the floor to discuss the Comprehensive Pastoral Planning Process, designed to create a mechanism by which every aspect of parish life is intentional, mission driven, and open to periodic evaluation and improvement. Once again there will be a template for gauging success that all parishes will follow. He also announced that there are fifteen pilot projects underway (in five high schools, eight parishes, and two universities) toward the establishment of the Catholic Service Corps. Open to youth and young adults, this Service Corps will focus on fostering and guiding parish- and diocesan-wide opportunities to realize justice, peace, and charity.

Patrick next noted that staffing for the various commissions is underway. Among them are the Leadership Institute, the Council of Religious, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and the Presbyterial Council. Most will be fully staffed by mid-April.

The final part of the program was dedicated to an explanation of the changes to the Marriage Tribunal and an update on the new annulment process. Msgr. Dariusz Zielonka, Adjutant Judicial Vicar for the Diocese of Bridgeport, announced that there are several changes that apply to the general procedures of the Tribunal. First is the removal of the automatic appeal to the Second Instance Tribunal, meaning that the decision of the First Instance Tribunal becomes executable after 15 days if no one appeals. The second is the removal of the fees for annulments. Third, the new law changed or added new grounds for a marriage nullity process. These changes were urged by Pope Francis to promote a faster, more pastoral process.

The Post-Synod meeting closed at noon and lunch was served to the attending delegates.