Reorganization — Ten Years Later

By William W. Hill

Father Lawrence A. DiNardo, Vicar for Canonical Services for the Diocese of Pittsburgh, delivered the annual Monsignor Francis Glenn Lecture for the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Synod Hall, October 17, 2004. In a presentation titled “Reorganization: Ten Years Later,” he reviewed the reorganization of parishes in the Diocese of Pittsburgh instituted by Bishop Donald Wuerl in three aspects: what the reorganization was, what it meant to the diocese, and what was the outcome.

One of the motivations for the review a decade later is anticipation of a new initiative in the diocese, announced in a pastoral letter in September 2004, “Envisioning Ministry for the Future.” The letter and initiative, Father DiNardo noted, make three main points: We will have fewer priests to serve the needs of the people, soon to be at the level of one priest per parish; that does not mean less ministry, the bishop emphasized, but the way that will occur is through greater collaboration of the laity so that the smaller number of priests can focus on their primary ministry of proclaiming the gospel and ministry of the sacraments.

Going back to the parish reorganization of the 1990s, Pittsburgh was the first diocese in the United States to undertake this on a massive scale. In the 1980s, there were 333 parishes and 23 missions, including 93 ethnic parishes, established decades before primarily to serve the needs of various European groups that had become established in the diocese as it was growing along with the local industries. At the same time were many priests in the 1940s and 1950s, so everybody was being served. But that historical model was changing dramatically by the 1980s.

The number of clergy had declined significantly, and there was a similar decline in the steel industry, jobs lost, and a decline in the population of the city. There was an exodus from the cities to the suburbs. Clearly, the church needed to be able to adapt to these changes, and more clearly define its role in the community. “The function of the church always was to provide word and sacrament, not cultural her-
itage,” Father DiNardo said.

Many of the ethnic churches, like others in the city had a much smaller number of parishioners. The church’s role was to be a good steward, to bring neighborhoods together, to help develop a relationship between where people worshipped, and where they lived and worked.

With the exodus from the city to the suburbs, the diocese had to face the reality of declining numbers of parishioners in the city, along with a declining number of clergy. Newly appointed Bishop Donald W. Wuerl in 1988 called for parish reorganization and revitalization in a pastoral letter titled "Renew the Face of the Earth: Future Directions.”

In that letter, the bishop used the image of the diocese being dressed in a big suit, and with a slimmer church, we needed to adjust the suit to fit the present organization. The goals of the revitalization/reorganization process could be summarized in five areas:

1. structural: to reduce the number of parishes and close unneeded buildings
2. programmatic: to maximize the use of personnel and services provided, such as pastoral ministries, care of the sick, bereavement, providing the sacraments -- and to build stronger parishes.
3. The process emphasized spiritual renewal as the focus, not expending all a pastor’s energy in paying debts and organizing fundraisers.
4. The reality and temporal effect of the process was that the diocese was not able to sustain 333 parishes and 23 missions

In the reorganization process, certain assumptions were made and five principles were established: 1) unity — bringing the word of God to people’s lives; 2) proportionality — maximizing the use of clergy — although that continues to require adjustment, Father DiNardo noted, as some parishes continue to shrink and others grow, so that we have one priest for 300 people in a city parish, and two priests for 10,500 people in a parish in Cranberry. 3) lay involvement — more involvement in ministries that do not have to be carried out by a priest. 4) community involvement—the goal is to have parishes situated in such a way as to involve the community — people being able to worship in the same world where they live and work.

Finally, the fifth point is directed toward a very important aspect of the church—the church is not about buildings; it is about sacraments. If we don’t have sacraments, buildings are meaningless.

So what did the reorganization of a decade ago accomplish — what did we do, and what was the outcome? More than 10,000
people were involved, and at the conclusion, we went from 333 parishes including 92 ethnic parishes and no territorial parishes, to 220 parishes with very few ethnic parishes remaining. But we still were using multiple worship sites for a total of 295 buildings in these 220 reorganized parishes, including around 73 of the former ethnic parishes. Seventy-three percent of the parishioners were moved from one place to another, and there has been more lay involvement in the parishes, more interaction with the community, and the diocese is more streamlined as a result.

What could have been done better? Perhaps the group that was least prepared for these changes was the clergy — the priests themselves were being asked to develop parishes in a different way, and in many cases, the parishes they were assigned to were new parishes, newly reorganized, and as such they had no history. They were operating under a different dynamic. The pastors had no training or preparation in how to deal with multiple worship sites, with groups of people who had never worked together, and with trying to combine two or more lay organizations such as two Christian Mothers groups, or two Holy Name societies, two Altar guilds, and so on.

There was unhappiness in the reorganized parishes, because people do not always adjust well to change, especially when they wanted things to be the same as before. The pastors had to bring people together and move them in a different direction. The pastors and the laity had to learn how to work together and figure out what the different ministries were all about — what the priest did, and what the laity could do. In the old model, there were enough priests to do everything, and that is no longer the case. The diocese did experiment briefly with team ministry, assigning two to three priests to a group of parishes, but that was short-lived, because parishioners didn’t know who was in charge, and it was too difficult to get work done.

Because we were one of the first dioceses in the country to reorganize, many other diocese used our process as a model, with one significant difference. They did not keep multiple worship sites for one parish. In looking back, closing the sites all at one time would have been painful, but it would have been completed. As the diocese moves into this next phase of fewer priests, there will be no multiple worship sites, so we will still be closing unneeded buildings in the future.

To summarize, our reorganization was a great visionary program. It looked to the future, and as a result, we have 217 parishes that are generally viable and active today. Without reorganization, the diocese would have been struggling with a smaller number of clergy and the inability to serve the needs of the parishioners. As a result of reorganization, the diocese is positioned to begin the task of envisioning ministry for the future as we prepare to work with fewer priests.

The author, William Hill, is senior staff communicator, Department for Communications, Diocese of Pittsburgh.
The Pittsburgh Catholic eulogized him as “The ubiquitous Father Kriss.” Father David J. Kriss gave generously of his time to many worthy causes — not least the Catholic Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, which he served as a board member from 1986 until his untimely death this fall.

Father Kriss died suddenly in Emmitsburg, Md., on October 6, 2004. He had been visiting his alma mater, Mount Saint Mary’s, to join with classmates in concelebrating a Mass marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of their ordination. Father Kriss collapsed while preparing for Mass.

He had been pastor of Our Lady of the Valley Church in Donora for seven years. Father Kriss previously served as parochial vicar at St. Martin in Pittsburgh’s West End, St. Pius X, North American Martyrs in Monroeville and St. Clare of Assisi in Clairton. He was Latin instructor at Providence Heights Alpha School in McCandless Township and chaplain at Serra Catholic High School. He was recently appointed religious education director for the Washington County East Deanery.

Father Kriss was active with the Knights of Columbus and the Pittsburgh Fraternity of Polish Clergy. He served as the latter group’s president since 1999.

In 1996, he received bi-ritual faculties from Rome to celebrate the liturgy according to the Byzantine Rite. He was Washington County delegate to the Clergy Council. Since 2000, he was also a member of the diocesan Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission.

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