

The Journey that needs a compass

The viewpoint of

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Part III

Location, location, location. That's what they say is paramount in the real estate business.

No priests, no priests, no priests. That's the mantra of the Diocese of Buffalo as it continues on its downsizing plan called the Journey in Faith and Grace.

Ironically last Thursday the Syracuse Post published an article about Bishop James Moynihan traveling to Poland. Here's an excerpt:

"Recruit, recruit, recruit. That's the name of the game," Moynihan said Tuesday before a confirmation service at St. Cecilia Church in Solvay.

"Moynihan will visit four Polish dioceses and said he hopes to recruit at least three men who would minister in the Syracuse Diocese for five years. If he recruits seminarians who are ordained here, they will be able to remain in the Syracuse Diocese." The article states Syracuse plans on closing about 40 churches in the next few years.

The issue of priests is key to the process here which makes the comments by some priests at the Western Niagara Vicariate meeting on May 29 in Niagara Falls so interesting.

An issue of contention at the meeting was the change in the vicariate level proposal to keep Holy Trinity open by the Diocesan Commission (which will at some point make a recommendation to the bishop). A retired priest suggested the former parish school be "redeveloped for something" and the church basement be made into a hall or a gathering space. He felt it was feasible to keep the rectory, convent and church buildings. "I think historically it is worth considering," he said.

This same priest mentioned he and a friend were retired priests living in Niagara Falls. He said, "We are charismatic, energetic... (which brought a round of laughter from the crowd.) I would like to recommend the commission look to the utilization of native Niagara Falls priests who are retired. to fill in at some of these smaller locations, It looks like we're going to be putting together a bunch of... a few mega-churches. Is there room for smaller churches? Churches that are viable, churches that have a presence in a certain community?"

He continued: "I mentioned before that the utilization of permanent deacons as administrators with the retired priests filling in at other locations is a possible option."

This priest, who sounded like he knew the community like the back of his hand mentioned that St. Charles was given permission to build a brand new building just a few years ago. The current proposal calls for St. Charles worship site to no longer be used. "It looks like we don't know what we're doing," he said.

"Finally being from Niagara Falls, we're talking about the new parish of Sacred Heart and St. Teresa's - 'the new parish should be challenged - I love that word - to continue to social justice and outreach ministry as part of parish life at Sacred Heart.' You have two chances of doing that - slim and none in my opinion."

As he continued, he said: "When I saw that St. Bernard in Youngstown and St. Peter's in Lewiston should remain

independent parishes, I thought of one thing - dollar signs."

Sr. Murphy responded by saying the number of students in religious education were a factor in that decision.

When pressed again on the issue of smaller churches vs. megachurches, Sr. Regina said, "A real mega church is 10,000 or more." She said Niagara Falls currently has 14 parishes. "We can't possibly support that. So we know we need fewer churches that will possibly be larger churches. And, can we afford smaller churches? I don't know. I think we have to consolidate our resources." Sr. Murphy then went on to quote a study of Protestant churches and the level of activities at larger churches.

Another priest, dare I say middle-aged, voiced his concern over the high percentage of elderly and a lot of poor in the East Side Cluster where six parishes would be merged into one using two sites.

He also had reservations about how the new parish would handle the elderly, the poor and all these properties before they were sold or torn down. This priest said that when people who are parishioners of the inner city churches find out that their church would merge they would stop coming.

"Then you have a further drain of people and resources," the priest said. "You say you don't know what is going to happen in 3 to 5 years. But what you're doing is insuring that that area will fall apart."

Sr. Regina questioned what would happen if they left all the buildings open and suggested they "try to pool resources."

"Even with six churches there," she said, "it's plummeted in terms of value of property, population loss, poverty and so on. Hopefully if you pull your resources and you can market the buildings any kind of income could be dedicated to social service or outreach ministers."

So, here we have a priest, not me noting that Sr. Regina Murphy does not know where she's leading the "journey." On one hand she talks about how deplorable the conditions are and on the other how those building will be sold.

And, when asked about smaller churches; the response was "I don't know" all the while being "heaven-bent" on closing them.

Finally, the response that begins with "I think." A wonderful nun used to drum that terminology out of me. "Don't tell me what you think, tell me what you know," she used to say.

I must mention in closing the part, that another nun had written to me stating that quoting the priest who called the journey "assisted suicide" in Part I was an "abomination in the eyes of God."

I certainly don't believe that and wrote her a nice note suggesting she was incorrect. I believe that priest and the two priests I quote here spoke honestly and from the heart. There is nothing wrong with that. I hope someone listens to them. I publicly apologize to them should there be any repercussions from this column. My only job is to shed a little light in the darkness.