

Continuing Pastoral Plan for Catholic Faith Communities in Belt, Raynesford, Centerville

Introduction: What we are already doing

In the sense of having clear goals and a good sense of what we are doing, we have had a pastoral plan in effect since not long after I arrived at St. Mark's on 1 July 2011. I read and understand the diocesan plan, and it has given me and a few of our councilors and parishioners a few ideas for continuing spiritual formation.

In general, our pastoral plan focuses on doing what pastors have done and written about for centuries: **caring for souls**. What our people need is ongoing spiritual formation, an continuing infusion of the life of the Spirit into their souls and daily lives. And that is what we aim to provide. I prefer the old-fashioned phrase "care of souls" because it helps to draw attention to what matters first and foremost in the life and work of a parish priest.

I. Spiritual Activities. Our main spiritual activities include: First and foremost, offering at least 7 Masses weekly in these parishes, with four full Masses on each week-end; in the summer months, one of these Masses is offered at Monarch, rather than giving Belt two Masses each weekend, as we do during the rest of the year. The three week-day Masses are offered at St. Mark's, Belt. Occasionally, such as on a solemnity, an additional Mass may be added, but after a number of years here, I have learned that attendance is considerably better if additional Masses are added at St. Mark's or at St. Mary's, Raynesford. Most of our parishioners who live in the Gulch and surrounding ranches do not seem to have developed a practice of attending daily Masses, or special feasts; those few who attend week-day Masses are in the habit of doing so in one of the parishes in Great Falls. A sizable proportion (50% or more) of those who attend Holy Trinity, Centerville, each week-end, are not from "the Gulch," but from my other parishes or especially from Great Falls (mostly from the former St. Joseph parish); these parishioners will attend Masses in Belt on occasion, or in Great Falls.

In addition to frequent Masses, most of the time I have been in this assignment, I have been offering adult faith class on a weekly basis: either at St. Mark's, Belt; or more commonly now, at Holy Trinity, Centerville, immediately following the

Sunday liturgy. Once again, out of about 15 in regular attendance, 1 or at most 2 of the adults are from the Gulch, all the rest live in Great Falls or in the area East of Belt. Furthermore, I have taught a number of adult faith courses at St. Mark's, Belt, on various evenings of the week, but attendance suffers from the over-arching role of sporting events in Belt. Presently I teach weekly adult faith class at Holy Trinity, and sometime in the next several months, I am planning to offer another series of classes at St. Mark's.

Eucharistic liturgies and adult faith class constitute probably the two most important ways that the spiritual lives of the faithful are enriched. Furthermore, with fairly frequent funerals, I am able to reach not only parishioners, but unchurched Catholics and Protestants as well. Parishioners tell me that the outreach done during funeral services (vigil services, funeral Masses, burials, receptions) have proven an effective way to proclaim the gospel to many who are not regular parishioners. Feedback on these occasions has been strongly appreciative. Weddings and baptisms do not constitute a major part of my ministry in this area. On the other hand, this month I celebrated a wedding at the Cathedral in Helena, attended by young people from different countries in the world, and given the response, it served as a good outreach to persons not accustomed to Catholic faith and worship. Also, during Lent, we offer stations of the cross every Friday at St. Mark's and at St. Mary's. And at each of the Masses offered at St. Mark's, faithful gather before Mass to pray the rosary.

Another form of regular outreach is sharing in community life, meals, receptions, coffees, home visits to the sick and elderly. Especially in Belt, I have frequent contact with a good number of non-Catholics. This kind of activity is a form of outreach, but not as planned or as forced as knocking on doors or visiting homes when an invitation has not first been given. Being available to speak with all sorts of persons at public events is an important part of one's life and ministry in our small communities.

Through a professional webmaster, who is also a parishioner, we maintain and regularly update a website with much information for parishioners. I write a number of blogs which are posted for their benefit, as well as photographs. As good as this website is, and as much work goes into it, a problem remains that many people here either do not have access to the internet, or do not trouble themselves to peruse the website.

II. Care of facilities. Given what I inherited at these parishes, a considerable amount of time-consuming effort has gone into financial work and providing for the repair and maintenance of facilities. For the past several years, the faithful, the finance councilors, and I have developed a smooth-working “machine” for overseeing worldly affairs in our parishes.

In my five years in these parishes, we have re-roofed 3 buildings: St. Mary’s, Raynesford; the rectory at St. Mark’s; and part of the parish hall at St. Mark’s. We have also been patching the roof at St. Mark’s, and are planning to re-roof the entire building with metal in the next year or two, as needed.

Furthermore, new clear and efficient windows have been installed on the south side and east sides of the St. Mark’s church. The worship space is now considerably lighter and more attractive. As for St. Mary’s and Holy Trinity, regular maintenance has been done by the faithful as required, and St. Mary’s will be painted afresh in the next coming months. Parts of the facility at St. Mark’s have been freshly painted.

Special attention and work has gone into beautifying the property at St. Mark’s, with a life-sized metal statue of Mary with benches and a meditation garden, new flower gardens around the church and rectory, other plantings, and a sizable vegetable and flower garden which the priest tends. A parishioner has been appointed as grounds master at St. Mark’s, and he does a wonderful job taking care of the grass and plantings. Similarly, volunteer parishioners regularly cut grass and take care of the property in Raynesford and Centerville. Whatever is needed, we make sure is provided.

III. Additional Pastoral Planning Activities for 2016-2017

In added to the previously noted activities aiming at the care of souls, community outreach, and the upkeep of our church properties, parishioners and I have decided to develop several different avenues for pastoral care. Let it be duly noted that what matters above all is being clear-sighted about our goal: the care of souls. All other activities are secondary and liable to be changed as required to achieve the primary goal.

1. Prayer for vocations. I composed a brief prayer for vocations, posted it on our website, and will have it printed and made available to parishioners by Christmas 2016. The prayer emphasizes our common call to enter into the life of God.

Given the recent history of these faith communities, prayer focusing on “vocations to the priesthood” would be counter-productive.

2. We are preparing a single parish directory for all of our parishioners, and are doing so in two stages: First, we are assembling all names, email addresses, home addresses, and phone numbers for those willing to offer this information. Sylvia Halko of Holy Trinity is coordinating and overseeing this stage of preparing a directory (apparently the first in perhaps 12 years or so). We intend to have this proto-directory completed and distributed by Christmas 2016. Second, once we have lists of all willing parishioners, and have circulated copies, some of us with digital cameras will take images of parishioners by family. Once we have the images and photos and organize them, and I edit them as needed, the photos / images will be compiled with the data of the proto-directory. Then we will have copies printed in Great Falls for all parishioners. We plan to have this second stage directory completed by 1 June 2017.

3. In addition to continuing adult faith class at Holy Trinity, I have had requests to rebegin classes at St. Mark's. Tentatively, a new series will begin in the fall, after parishioners return to Mass from summer vacations (In this area, a number of parishioners and many of our children are not in the habit of attending Mass during summer months, when schools are on vacation.) I have not yet chosen the theme or problem for the next series or two of adult faith classes. One possible subject is the spirituality of art (graphic, music, literature).

4. I will continue to write and post blogs / short essays for the spiritual benefit of parishioners here and for interested non-parishioners. Writing is an important part of my ministry. Furthermore, I compose a meditation and add it to our weekly or biweekly parish bulletin. Once again, a problem is that a number of parishioners do not bother to pick up, let alone read, the bulletin. I may try writing and circulating meditations for their benefit in another format, beginning in the fall of 2016. But if interest is low, I will not spend time or parish monies with this project.

5. At my request, Deacon Mark Zenner recently trained about 6 of our parishioners to lead Word and Sacrament services in the absence of a priest. Given our location, there has been a clear need for this ministry. It means that if I am ill or unable to reach a given parish on a week-end (on account of unsafe driving conditions), I can write a brief homily, email it to someone, and have it read at the Word and Communion service.

6. We are planning to cut down all dead branches and trim the overgrown trees on the property at St. Mark's, Belt. We expect to do this work before school resumes in the fall. As the equipment will be fairly costly to rent, we will have a sizable crew of parishioners and priest on hand to cut and remove the wood. Some of the hard wood can be seasoned and burned in the winter of 2017-2018.

7. Two parishioners and I will begin cutting fallen trees near Monarch and laying up a supply of seasoned wood to heat St. Mark's rectory for the winter months. That work takes us several weeks each August-September.

8. We will continue to offer weekly potluck meals at Holy Trinity following Mass—mainly for those who attend adult faith class, but no one is turned away—and monthly breakfasts at St. Mark's, prepared by the Knights of Columbus, served during the months of the school year. Furthermore, Raynesford St. Mary's will continue to offer its annual pie and ice cream social each fall, and occasional meals, raffles, socials, as they have been doing for years.

9. Because we have so few children in our parishes, offering CCD classes has become a growing challenge. The two or three children who attend Holy Trinity receive Catholic classes at Holy Spirit, as do some children from St. Mark's and St. Mary's. For the remainder, we will continue to offer some kind of CCD program provided we have interested children and available parents to teach. Once our children are confirmed, they often stop attending CCD as well as regular Mass. From what I have been told, that has been the pattern in these parishes for years. A few parents and I are still discussing what we might possibly do to encourage our children to attend Mass faithfully. Furthermore, the sacristan in Belt has trained a number of children to begin serving at Mass, and they have been doing so over the past several months. It is one way to encourage attendance and active participation for these children. St. Mary's, Raynesford, has had the long-established practiced of rotating adult men as acolytes; they also have a rich abundance of talented and well-trained lectors. No CCD classes have been offered at St. Mary's in recent years; they attend classes in Belt, sometimes taught by St. Mary's parishioners.

10. St. Mary's, Raynesford, has an excellent music program to enhance worship. They also provide musicians for St. Mark's every other week. A talented parishioner at St. Mark's plays piano and sings on alternate weeks. Unfortunately, we have no musicians to accompany our singing at Holy Trinity. We are considering alternatives to provide music.

IV. Overall observation. The damage done to these parishes in their recent history was enormous. Even worse than the misappropriation of parish funds was the spiritual neglect of the faithful, something I did not experience directly, but have heard much about, and have seen the effects. Furthermore, a number of parishioners left our parishes, some still cannot deal with the problem of theft, others just drifted away. On the other hand, for those who attend Mass regularly on week-ends, and for our sizable daily Mass attendees, real benefits are visible. A sizable number of parishioners in each of our faith communities show genuine interest in their Catholic faith and practice. The condition of our properties also testifies to vitality in our parishes. We are recovering and prospering, with the help of God.

Respectfully submitted,

Fr. Wm. Paul McKane

St. Mark's, Belt

St. Mary's, Raynesford

Holy Trinity, Centerville