

Michele Smith Remarks
Fall 2018 Vicariate Meetings
Faith Formation Initiative

Thank you, Deacon Marty.

Let me begin by saying there are many wonderful things going on in faith formation all across our diocese. Whether we are reading stories in *Faith* magazine, noting the work of our school principals, gathering together to study a current topic, or celebrating Mass in our parish communities, it's clear the Catholic faith is being embraced and lived out deeply and beautifully in northwest Pennsylvania.

So the faith formation work we are about to begin in earnest has a firm foundation.

We've been talking about faith formation since we first outlined our pastoral planning process in 2015. I know all of us are ready to put some meat on the bones of this component.

Because it's been a while since we gathered together, I'm going to briefly go over the recommendations that are the framework from which we developed the tangible steps we're about take in faith formation.

In addition, I want to say that we have a handout for you to take on the way out this evening, that gives you an overview of the information I'm sharing. So I invite you to just enter into the moment tonight as we refresh our memories.

As Bishop Persico said, we know we are in need of renewal in the Catholic Church. He has made it clear all along that he is not interested in a flashy new evangelization program. Programs begin and end.

We are ready for something much more radical: a new lens through which to view the great privilege of sharing the saving message of God's love in Jesus Christ with all those who cross our path.

People are hungry for a spiritual life. Let's give them what they want—ways of connecting with God personally, new ways to pray, mentoring relationships, meaningful, honest dialogue about topics that matter, and vibrant community life.

Catechizing our children is one important aspect of this. But our formation efforts also must include robust adult education, and special resources, personnel and emphasis for youth, young adults, families, empty nesters, and senior citizens.

Some of our parishes do this very well already. Others will need to do some significant rethinking and reworking. But accepting this approach across the board means we will be able to help one another.

Let's do a quick overview of the recommendations we first presented last year:

Recommendation number one is very basic: We must commit to faith formation as a lifelong endeavor. We all need to be formed and to grow in faith throughout our entire lives.

The second recommendation builds on this notion: we need a broadened vision of faith formation. Catechesis is vital, but faith formation must go beyond the classroom. We need a new approach to faith formation that encompasses all age groups and all audiences.

The third recommendation focuses on access to trained leadership for parishes. Every parish should be able to call upon or access trained professionals in various aspects of faith formation.

This does not mean every parish faith formation leader is going to have to earn a master's degree in their discipline. But we need to increase the access parish leaders have to those who *are* trained, to ensure that our people are being properly formed.

Of course we all will be flexible, adjusting each recommendation according to parish size, location, and culture.

The fourth recommendation focuses on diocesan administration. It means diocesan leadership will develop standards for the selection, hiring and training of the leaders who are assisting parish faith formation personnel. This will parallel the diocesan role when Catholic schools hire principals. We are not talking about parish staff or volunteer catechists. This is for those trained leaders I referenced in the third recommendation. This will help ensure that parishes receive consistent service throughout the diocese.

As we review the fifth recommendation, we consider how we might best serve the family. Families come in all sizes and shapes, so again, we recognize the need for

flexibility. But this is another shift we need to make: How can we best be present to families and support them as they live out their daily lives in the domestic church?

How can we support couples in their married life? How can we encourage parents to be involved in all aspects of the child's faith formation, from preparation for the sacraments to the child's Catholic education—whether it be Catholic schools or religious education? What activities might we facilitate for the extended family? We know listening to them will be key.

And finally, we come to the sixth recommendation. It deals with the broad topic of lay ministry. We need to invite the laity to a fuller understanding of what it means to be an intentional disciple. How do we draw out their gifts in ways that help them live out their vocations in every aspect of their lives?

This also is where we are talking about parish staff and volunteers. How can we ensure the roles of laity and clergy are complementing each other in our parishes? What practical steps can be taken so that we all are able to fully respond to our calling?

These six recommendations — solidly rooted in documents from both Vatican II and the bishops of the United States — form a strong foundation as we move forward. But that's what they are—a foundation. They are not an end in themselves, they are a means to an end.

We will keep them in mind as we take steps to infuse our parishes with new life, with vibrancy...with possibilities.

How do we live out these recommendations? We do so in four key areas. These areas are not new. But there is always room to improve and refine. The four areas of encountering Christ that we will explore, one at a time, over the next four years, are:

- Welcoming and belonging, which means building personal relationships conducive to growth in discipleship.
- Catechesis: imparting the faith to people of all ages
- Sacramental preparation. Encountering Christ in the sacraments and worship.
- And fourth, service: living out what we have experienced through community, catechesis and the sacraments.

In 2019, we are asking parishes to consider the first of these: what it means to welcome and what it means to belong.

I'd like to share a short video with you, featuring people in some of our parishes who already are experiencing what it means to be welcome and to belong to a parish community.

VIDEO

Welcoming and belonging obviously occur in hundreds of different ways at all of our parishes. But stepping back to consider how we might strengthen this fundamental aspect of parish life will reap great benefits.

After we take a five-minute break, Deacon Steve Washek will explain in a little more detail how we are going to tackle this first area of encounter, welcoming and belonging.