

## Partners in the Gospel

Jesus Christ: Yesterday, Today, and Forever ~

This pastor's column will run for two Sundays in row.

Over the past couple of weekends all three communities in our parish family, Columbia River Catholic, have had townhall gatherings exploring the same questions of "who are we?" I wasn't at any of them, yet the feedback I got was that those seven town hall gatherings varied in tone and answers from a love fest to court room. The compiled results of those seven gatherings and this stage of our journey will be published in a future bulletin and sent to the Archdiocese of Seattle.

A takeaway for me from those town hall gatherings is that a number of parishioners don't understand the why, what, and how of Partners in the Gospel. Perhaps that is because I wrote three pastor's columns on "Partners" in 2023 & 2024 for Holy Redeemer before becoming the pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas and Star of the Sea. That's three pastor's columns, as well as multiple Mass announcements and explanations from the ambo at Holy Redeemer, that newer parishioners as well as St. Thomas and Star of the Sea parishioners did not see or hear. So, I want to apprise or reappraise everyone of the what, why, and how of Partners in the Gospel.

In my own words, Partners in the Gospel is a multi-year process that the Archdiocese of Seattle (Church in Western Washington) is using to consolidate priests and parishes. For the past thirty-five years, dioceses throughout the country have done or are doing something similar. Thirty other dioceses across the United States are currently restructuring due to declines in priests and lay participation. Here is a link to a story I saw last week about the Archdiocese of Detroit announcing that they will be starting their own process of consolidation

<https://www.detroitcatholic.com/news/archdiocese-of-detroit-announces-two-year-restructuring-to-involve-every-parish>.

### The What

Partners in the Gospel began in 2022 when the Archdiocese of Seattle hired a consulting firm that has experience with diocesan consolidations. That firm, *Partners Edge*, created our process of consolidation that we call Partners in the Gospel. Partners was rolled out to the priests of the Archdiocese of Seattle in 2022 and to everyone else in 2023. In that year, all the clergy and laity across the Archdiocese's 168 parishes and missions, discerned together who those 168 communities would be partnered with to form the 60 new parish families that the Archdiocese has today. Why 60 and not another

number? Because 60 is the most optimistic number of parishes that the Archdiocese could staff with priests who are capable of pastoring, as well as supporting priests (vicars). That, as well as 60 being a number spread across Western Washington that could reach Catholics everywhere and consolidate the human and material resources enough to carry on the mission of the Church going into the future.

### The Why

Over the past 60 years the trend line for religious practice in this country has been going down. People attending religious services or even identifying with a religion has fallen dramatically during that time. In 2019, 1500 Protestant churches closed – and that was before Covid. In addition to that, 30% of Protestant churches in America never reopened after the Covid shutdown. In the early 1960's *at least* 67% of Catholics attended Mass on any given Sunday. That number *is less than 10% today*. We all have Catholic family members who no longer attend Mass. In most families the majority of Catholics don't attend Mass. Every category of religious practice has seen steep decline. Mass attendance, baptisms, confessions, confirmations, marriages in the Church, ordinations to the priesthood, etc., have seen huge declines. Here's a shocker: 67% of parishes and missions in Western Washington aren't meeting their budget through ordinary income. Yet the Church in Western Washington is still structured and largely functioning as if its' 1965 not 2025, with roughly the same number of parishes and missions today as then, with half as many parish priests, and far less participation. For over 50 years, the status quo has been failing the Church in Western Washington, and it must change.

**Question:** I can understand why parishes in decline need to change but why do we? Why are parishes with good Mass attendance, financing, and content parishioners having to participate in this Archdiocesan consolidation?

**Answer:** Because we all share the same limited pool of priests. Without priests there are no Masses, no Confessions, no Confirmation, no Last Rites. Without priests who are capable of pastoring there are no parishes. Jesus Christ established the Church on 12 priests, not laymen, not parishes, but priests. Without them, the Church ceases to exist.

The numbers tell the story. Today the Archdiocese of Seattle has 168 parishes and missions being served by 143 assigned priests. At the current ordination rate of two priests per year, in 15 years we'll have 93 priests for 168 parishes and missions. Wait, it gets worse. As of 2028, we'll begin to ordain

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one priest every other year, meaning that in 15 years we won't have 93 priests to serve 168 parishes and missions. We will have 81. Here's a sobering statistic, in the past year the Archdiocese of Seattle buried 22 priests and ordained one.

Priests are human beings. Priests cannot bi-locate. Priests can break too, especially pastors. I am on the Archdiocesan Presbyteral Council. Last week we met and the ten pastors in the room were allowed to speak freely about how they were doing (which was a first). It isn't good. They expressed how the current situation is not sustainable for them. If the status quo doesn't significantly change, pastors could begin to resign or worse. Big changes are needed so that priests can be sane, healthy, present to their people, and an attractive option for young men to consider a vocation to be one.

**Question:** Can't we bring in more priests from foreign countries?

**Answer:** Not more than we already have, and the number of foreign priests is going to decline. We have to prepare for fewer foreign priests, not the same number we have now, let alone more. Vocations in foreign countries like India are falling, and in many countries where our foreign priests come from, there are as many or more Catholics per priest than there are in this country. It isn't fair to have priests come from another country where they themselves have a priest shortage. Furthermore, experience has taught us (with a few exceptions) that foreign priests do not inevitably make effective pastors. They may be wonderful priests, holier than me, doing more good than me, with a higher place waiting for them in heaven than what's waiting for me; but in the complexity of modern American pastoring they are simply out of their league. Pastoring in this country is about a lot more than being present to people. Modern pastoring requires administrative talent, organizational talent, decision making talent, relational talent, and technical skills. In short, modern pastoring is as complicated as being a regional manager of a multi-site company. Most Americans can't handle that, let alone a foreigner without competency in computers, communication, accounting, personal management, staff and customer expectations. A majority of the priests serving in the Archdiocese of Seattle are not pastors either because they are not yet ready or because they never will be.

### The How

Here is a simple breakdown of how we have been and continue to implement Partners in the Gospel.

1. In 2023 parishioners and clergy across the Archdiocese of

Seattle gave feedback on the best combinations of regional parishes and missions to be clustered together. These would be called "parish families" and share clergy.

2. In July 2024, priests were assigned and parish families formed.
3. In 2025 parish family advisory councils were formed and parish families discerned "who are we."
4. In 2026 parish families will discern "who do we want to become" and "how do we get there." Two more sets of town hall gatherings.
5. In 2027 parish families will discern new names and all 168 parishes and missions in the AD will be canonically suppressed (closed) and reestablished as 60 new parishes with their new names.

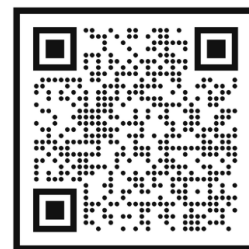
### The Outcome

This is as much as we know at this time. I repeat – this is as much as we know at this time. There are no preset expectations or assumptions about what ministry in the new parish will look like. I do have a hope though that when this is all said and done, that priests, parish communities, and the laity will all have a healthy and sustainable faith life and future. Thank you for your patience, prayers, and understanding as we navigate this uncharted territory together.

Please check out the Archdiocese of Seattle's webpage on Partners in the Gospel for way more information. It can be found here

<https://archseattle.org/partners/>

or by scanning the QR code here.



May Almighty God Bless You,

Fr. Thomas Nathe