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# SAINT LAWRENCE, MARTYR CHURCH

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As you may know, the Fall River Diocese, led by Bishop da Cunha, is participating in a strategic planning process. Bishop da Cunha wrote a letter to everyone in the Diocese discussing this process and has been holding listening sessions throughout the Diocese to hear people's thoughts. Every single parish in the Diocese is going through this process. We, as a Church, a universal Church, are all struggling with the same issues. The fact that attendance is dropping across the board is not surprising to anyone. This brings several different problems to the forefront. We have enormous buildings not being fully utilized and in deteriorating condition coupled with insufficient funds to maintain them properly. We have fewer and fewer people receiving the sacraments; vocations are at concerning low point; lay people are searching for meaningful ways to help serve. The Bishop has asked each parish to assemble a team to be responsible for their parish's strategic planning process and we have utilized our Parish Council and Finance Committee members for this purpose.

Parts of this process actually started back in 2016 with a survey asking about all areas of parish life. The survey was quite extensive and was answered by Fr. Bob with a core team of parishioners from the Finance Committee and Parish Council. It was also available for each individual parishioner to take. The results were compiled and have been given to the team responsible for the strategic planning process. In almost every area questioned, the responding parishioners and the team led by Fr. Bob were on the same page.

The survey commended many things being done well at St. Lawrence. These include the sacramental life of the parish with the Eucharist being central. Homilies are well prepared and relate the gospels to our everyday life giving clear examples of ways to live the Gospel. People who responded feel welcome and encouraged to participate in different ministries, sacraments, and service opportunities for the needy or marginalized, both in our own parish and in our community. Our Religious Education program is considered well organized and the teachers, well trained and prepared. Our Pastoral and Finance Councils are operating according to diocesan guidelines and give annual financial reports to the parish. The majority of responding parishioners also feel that St. Lawrence is a welcoming parish where they feel safe, included, and in which diversity is celebrated.

The survey also pointed to things which could be improved. These include adult education programs like RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), marriage preparation, Bible study, and prayer groups. One area that was also lacking at the time of the survey was youth/young adult ministry. We have since started a Youth Group and are hoping to see it grow. Our biggest struggle is meeting our financial obligations and having sufficient funds to properly maintain our facilities.

Anyone wanting to see the complete survey results can speak to Fr. Bob and receive a copy of them.

The beauty of the Catholic Church is that it is universal. We are more than separate buildings. We are the living, breathing Church that Christ established with his Apostles. “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.” Matthew 16:18.

Jesus built the Church with people. Now we, the people, the Church, are being asked to help in shaping our future. Bishop da Cunha is a very different kind of Bishop. He is coming to his flock humbly, earnestly, and openly. He is being very clear about the need for changes to be made for us to be able to continue doing the work of the Church. He has said that no decisions have been made regarding closures and mergers and is counting on the people to step up with concrete suggestions, plans, and actions that will help him make these difficult, but necessary, decisions.

Many parishioners think that mergers and closures are the only options available to “stand alone” parishes such as ours. There are several other options today including: partnering -- two or more parishes can be “partnered,” keeping their pastors, but sharing ministries and administrative staff; and linking -- two or more parishes can be “linked,” sharing just one pastor, as well as sharing ministries and administrative staff. In both cases they remain full-fledged parishes, but focused on coordinating and building their shared ministries, often at substantial cost savings. This can be a grassroots effort to revitalize our parish and change our path forward. We have the wonderful opportunity to be proactive and help shape the future of our Church!

Here at St. Lawrence we have much to be proud of and to build upon. We have a beautiful building that can accommodate 900 people. Our windows are nothing short of masterpieces. We have a good size parking lot, are easily accessible, and have a restroom. We have a pretty impressive history as well, with our visit from St. Theresa of Calcutta being quite a highlight! We also have the benefit of our school. The Masses that are held with the students bring such a wonderful energy and sense of hope that fills the Church. Let us be open minded and work with Bishop da Cunha in good faith to help strengthen, not only St. Lawrence, but the Church herself.

We will be holding a Parish Meeting after our Spaghetti Lunch on Sunday May 20th to discuss this process and hear from each of you what your hopes and dreams are for our parish. In preparation of this Parish Meeting please think about these 3 questions:

- 1.) What strengths do we have at St. Lawrence?
- 2.) What can we do better?
- 3.) What could we be doing that we're not now?

Ex: Could we join our Youth Group, Ladies Guild, or St. Vincent DePaul groups with others from different parishes? Could we combine our Religious Education Programs with others? Could we share a Mass Schedule with another Parish or hold joint Holy Day Celebrations?

The only way we can be successful in this process is if we are willing to work together and remain open to the Holy Spirit and where He is leading us.

Thank you,

Strategic Planning Process Team