

Listening at the Listening Session

Last Friday evening at St. Julie Billiart Church was quite an inspiring and exciting gathering of committed Catholics from the New Bedford area parishes. Close to 400 people gathered in the church along with many of the area pastors in order to pray together and to give the Bishop and opportunity to hear the thoughts and concerns of the laity.

I suppose that one could evaluate such an event from, at least, a couple of points of view: The content of people's ideas and concerns, as they were expressed to the bishop, would be one area of focus. Another way to consider it could be from the point of view of the turnout that night and the fact that there were that many committed Catholics, on a Friday evening of a vacation week, interested and enthusiastic to be there.

The brave souls who took hold of the microphone to offer their ideas and express their concerns had many valid points of view to offer the Bishop. It was good that the moderator had provided guiding questions to steer people away from the all-too-easy tendencies to complain, on the one hand, or to promote their own parishes or agendas. Still, in my mind, many or most of the comments involve complex realities which don't lend themselves to simple solutions or programs. I'm not sure how the bishop could have walked out of there with a "to do" list when the responses to any given concern or idea could not be simple, program-in-a-box, sort of responses. Many or most issues are bound up in the dynamics of our culture. For as much as we need to enact changes in the Church, we need to, somehow, promote cultural change. This is no small task.

One monumental challenge we face in regards to many suggestions that were made to the bishop is to get families to make faith the top priority and to accept the responsibility of actually raising their children in the faith. An important subset of this challenge is the need to cultivate a personal consciousness of "intentional discipleship." Better catechetical programs, training of catechists, youth ministry opportunities and adult faith formation programs are all important goals but these require people who are willing and desiring for such things. Whatever we offer will be in competition with a multitude of other things cluttering peoples lives. And, if we programmatically "insist" on taking it to

the next level, we may just end up throwing down a gauntlet of obstacles in front of people who are not in a place to do what we require. Individuals and families will need to be brought to a place where hard decisions have to be made: In order to commit more time and effort to faith and Christ's Church, sacrifices will likely have to be made in other areas.

The one thing which was clear at this "listening session" was that there are many caring and passionate people in the Church. Whereas we are frequently demoralized by the large numbers of non-practicing families and individuals on our roles and the frustration of faith formation programs packed with un-churched kids; we could be edified on this night by the passionate faith of so many, young and old, who came out on a Friday night. I, for one, was energized simply by the spectacle of so many and the great turnout of priests who came in support.



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We all have a lot of work to do. Soon I will have to shepherd our parish into a pastoral planning process aimed at our growth and revitalization. Youth Ministry will need to be rethought in terms of best practices and successes, wherever we find them. The cultivation of "small discipleship groups," will, more than likely, be part of our strategy to encourage, fortify and embolden people in the pews to become more intentional witnesses to Christ.

The leadership training I have been undergoing for the past twelve months has provided me many tools to apply to a process which will help us come up with a five year pastoral plan to accompany our plans to renovate the parish hall and the other elements associated with it. It is my intention to "reboot" our Parish Pastoral Council in service to this end and, thereafter, to form an "implementation team" to help us formulate a clear vision and to take the necessary steps to move toward it.

Thanks to all who came out on Friday to be with the Bishop, and to all who attended one of the other sessions.