

A Personal Vision for the Parish Fall 2004

*Presented to the Parish Pastoral Council for Reflection and Discernment by Fr.
Tom Newton, Pastor*

In laying out his vision of parish, Fr. Tom chose to share three stories: a wise man's, his own, and finally, what they mean for the parish. The telling of the first story, concerning the building and subsequent changing of the mission of rescue stations along a seacoast, was intended to raise the possibility that in some ways parishes have moved away from their original mission. Fr. Tom believes that a return to the original purpose of Christian community (parish) is in order.

The second story Fr. Tom shared was an account of a rites of passage experience he shared in the mountains of New Mexico at age 42. Fr. Tom was at a time in his life when he knew that he was ready for something more. God was leading him to a spiritual depth to which he had not been. God brought him to a deep place within. And in that place he encountered God in a new and powerful way. He found peace. It was a peace that the world cannot give and that, once encountered, the world cannot ever take away.

Finally, Fr. Tom believes that the parish can provide a sacred place, a container, for real transformation. The parish's task is to provide a place where all men and women can come to a more profound experience of the Divine. For most people, at a certain point in their lives, they realize that the normal ways of making sense of life do not work any more. Therefore, the parish's primary reason for existence is to help all who yearn, members and non-members alike, to come to know the peace that God alone can give and that the world cannot take away. Fr. Tom raised the possibility that the mission of parish may have changed over the years. Parish has to be something more than membership, attendance, and belonging. Parish has to be about transformation of soul. Fr. Tom believes that the Church does not possess God. God possesses us. The role of parish is to help all come to know that they are possessed by God. In community we celebrate the God we have come to find in the deepest recesses of our being. To touch God is highly charged and transformational. Everything a parish does is to help to bring about and celebrate this transformation. The highway to God, Fr. Tom believes, is fraught with many obstacles – the unbalanced need for power or possessions or prestige, sickness and suffering and addiction, and the deterioration of relationships, just to name a few. In addition, some in the Church itself seek to impose even more obstacles. Fr. Tom's vision of the parish includes his belief that the parish must help to clear a highway to God.

Fr. Tom believes that the parish must provide a wide variety of ministries and programs to create an environment and a place whereby men, women, and children can touch the living God. These programs and ministries must be of the highest quality possible. They must be open to all who come to us on their search. In addition, in imitation of Jesus, we are called to a ministry of outreach, especially to the poor and marginalized of our society and world. Our parish community must be characterized by a

spirit of both action (ministry on behalf of others) and contemplation (personal and communal prayer).

In conclusion, Fr. Tom believes that the most important work we do as a parish (and as a Church) is to celebrate together the Sunday Mass. The celebration of the Mass requires our very best. It demands our most important resources. For when we Gather, Proclaim, Break, and Send we do what Jesus told us to do. His guiding principal of parish ministry is summed up in the following quote from the liturgy document of the Second Vatican Council:

“Still, the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the source from which all the Church's power flows ...”

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy
Vatican Council II

The Pastoral Council developed an Overall Vision of Parish from the above Vision presented by Fr. Tom