

St. Helena Catholic Church ~ Parish Town Hall Meeting ~ April 11, 2018, 7 p.m. ~  
Parish Life Center

Facilitators: Parishioners John Boyle and Valerie Presten

A. Valerie Presten introduced herself and master of ceremonies John Boyle and gave a brief background to the town hall meeting: At a prior meeting with St. Vincent de Paul ministry leadership, Father Gordon welcomed assistance with the transition to a new pastor.

B. Valerie introduced Monsignor Dan Whelton, Vicar General of the Diocese of Santa Rosa and Vicar for Priests, who led the assembly in an opening prayer.

C. Msgr. Whelton described the situation in our diocese with regard to the current clergy shortage:

1. The Diocese of Santa Rosa comprises 6 counties and 40 parishes. There are currently 60 priests active in our diocese, of whom 43 or 44 are incardinated. Priests are ordained either for a diocese or for a religious order. Some of the active priests in this diocese belong to religious orders, such as the Carmelites. The process of incardination (the formal acceptance by a diocese of a priest from another diocese) takes 3-4 years.

2. Of 26 retired priests, 10 live outside our diocese. And because of various factors, some retired priests are no longer able to carry out any priestly duties. In 2018, two priests are retiring: Fr. Gordon Kalil of our parish and the pastor of Resurrection Church in Santa Rosa.

3. As an example of the decline in the number of priests in our diocese, Msgr. Whelton noted that when he was ordained in 1970, there were 22 priests in Humboldt County; now there are 6. He urged us to pray for vocations.

4. Our diocese currently has 8 seminarians in training. Training consists of 3 years of college studies and 4 years of theology (the latter at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, CA).

5. There were no priestly ordinations in 2017 and there will be none in 2018.

6. To fill the current need for clergy, priests are being brought to our diocese from Mexico (10 or 11), India (8 or 9), the Philippines, and two African countries.

7. With the increasing Latino population in our diocese, most parishes offer Masses in both Spanish and English. However, priests vary in their ability to acquire a second language and be fully operational in that language.

D. Msgr Whelton described the selection process for replacing a pastor:

1. In addition to the Priests Council (which was reconstituted 2-3 years ago to include all priests in our diocese and which meets 4 times a year), there is a Clergy Personnel Board comprising 4 priests, 3 of whom represent the 3 groups of priests organized according to length of time since ordination. When a vacancy occurs in a parish, the Clergy Personnel Board considers nominations to fill the post of pastor and then gives its recommendations to the Bishop. The priest who is selected by the Board can decline to accept the post, giving his reason(s) for doing so, and the Board will try to honor his wishes; but the final decision belongs to the Bishop.

E. Msgr. Whelton's responses to questions from the assembly regarding the selection process:

1. The selection process is occurring now. It is hoped that a decision will be made by early-to-mid-July of this year.

2. The average age of priests in our diocese is around 50-55 years. The youngest is 28-29 years old.

3. In response to a question about acquiring priests from other dioceses, Msgr. Whelton said that other dioceses are short of priests, too, and "We don't want to go poaching. However, if a priest from another diocese wants to come here and has the approval of his bishop, we can certainly consider him."

4. When asked what description of our parish would be given to prospective replacements for our pastor, Msgr. Whelton replied that they would receive input gathered from tonight's meeting, a profile of the parish, and the parish's annual report.

5. The new pastor of our parish would ideally be bi-lingual in English and Spanish, but that is not yet determined. However, younger priests now go to Mexico for two to three summers to learn conversational Spanish.

6. Bringing in priests from other countries is not easy. It takes 5-8 months for them to obtain a religious work visa (they cannot work in the U.S. on a visitor visa).

F. Questions to which parishioners were invited to respond:

1. *What are we proud of as a parish? What about parish life is "working" for us?*

- Having a bi-lingual, bi-cultural parish.
- Our parish's collaboration with other local faith communities.

- The presence in the parish of lay women with advanced degrees in theology/religious studies who lead groups and offer classes in our parish and other churches.
  - Our Deacon.
  - Concern and prayers for the plight of refugees, many of whom are women and children.
  - The availability of Mass in Spanish, support for cultural traditions such as Posadas.
  - The parish as our faith home where parishioners are supported.
  - The generosity of our parishioners in sharing their time, talent, and treasure.
  - The welcoming openness of spirit of parishioners. People have moved here because of our parish community.
  - The people of this parish and the diversity of socio-economic conditions.
  - The historical legacy of this parish.
- Our parish school, which provides a strong Catholic education that is good preparation for life and work.
- Strength of the community in working to try and save our school.
  - Our beautiful liturgies, including music, and the dedicated volunteers who take care of/maintain the church.
  - Our many and diverse ministries.
  - Our youth ministry and the merging of our youth groups.

## *2. What are the needs of our parish? What needs improvement?*

- More lay leadership and more parishioner involvement in ministries.
- An elected pastoral council.
- Getting to know parishioners who attend Masses other than the one we attend.
- In view of the decline in Mass attendance, more of a sense of a parish “family.”
- The community feels that there is a crisis in our schools and in attendance of people, especially kids, at Mass. Want to work at changing that.
- This is our parish, but it is first Gods – we are here to serve Him.
- Focus on youth and their needs; encourage them to come/come back to church.
- Reopening of the parish school at some time in the future. Catholic education is very valuable.
- The return of Thrifty Manor, which contributed to financial support of our parish school and provided social interaction.
- A pastor who communicates with the various constituencies in the parish.
- Connection between youth and the pastor, a pastor who can bring youth back to the parish.
- A bi-lingual youth group.
- Focus on the writings of Pope Francis – thoughtful, easy to read, meaningful.

- Small groups that will get together and discuss Scripture, etc. It builds community.
- A more graceful transition to the new pastor than happened previously. Especially in this time of transition, we need, people to step up and assist in whatever capacity they can to help us get through the next few months and beyond. It's too much for just the priest to do on his own.

### 3. *What qualities do we want in a new pastor?*

- Holiness, spirituality.
- A priest who will evangelize and “feed My sheep.”
- A flexible, energetic pastor who is able to administer ‘rules’ with care and compassion.
- A good communicator to the various groups: youth, young and older adults, young families, seniors.
- A priest who will attract young families.
- A pastor who is a native speaker of English.
- A bi-lingual priest who is available to the people.
- A pastor who lives in St. Helena and does outreach to the wider community, including ecumenical activities.
- A pastor who lifts laypersons to leadership roles and supports outreach to the community, especially those at the margins.
- A priest who will teach about Church history and culture and changes that have occurred.
- A nonpartisan priest.
- A priest who will affirm the work of the laity and, as time permits, interact personally with parish ministries.
- A pastor who will establish a Parish Council, be adept at community-building, and encourage small groups.

### 4. *What is our vision for the parish?*

- Let the pastor know that the parishioners are here to support him.
- Remember that we are here to serve God.
- Recognize that circumstances in the parish are changing (with, for example, the influx of people whose home here is not their primary residence and tourists who participate in our community only by attending Mass).
- Be aware of the need to support the pastor, because parish priests can be both isolated and criticized.
- Establish small groups that bond and support each other.

G. Msgr. Whelton's closing remarks:

1. Was impressed with the number of people in attendance at the meeting, but noted the dearth of young people present.
2. Acknowledged that Mass attendance is down generally and that clergy sexual misconduct is one contributing factor. However, the laity can counter the decline in church participation by inviting family members and friends to come to Mass and by encouraging parents to bring their children to Mass.
3. The first role of a priest is as a teacher who "walks the talk," and parishioners can help him to do so.

H. Msgr. Whelton's recap of what members of the assembly are requesting, to be shared with the Clergy Personnel Board and the priest candidates for our next pastor:

1. A bi-lingual pastor.
2. A pastor who will collaborate in Christian dialogue with the Christian community at large.
3. The establishment of a pastoral council.
4. A pastor who is a good communicator and able to reach out to people of various age groups, interests, languages and backgrounds.
5. An experienced leader and administrator – as regards the spiritual life and the growth of the parish, as well as to the 'business side' of parish affairs.
6. Supports youth ministry.
7. Encourages more involvement of lay people in leadership roles in the parish.
8. Supports Catholic education, looks to the possible re-opening of the school.
9. Willing to consider opening a thrift shop.
10. Lives in SH.
11. Flexible, forward-thinking, energetic

I. Closing prayer by Msgr. Whelton.

Meeting minutes compiled from notes taken by:  
Theresa Meyer, Mary Miroglio, Valerie Presten