

# ***Inclination of the Heart***

## *The Essential Role of Prayer in Pastoral Planning*

### **History of Change – Pentecost**

From the very beginning, the new Christian church was different. It reflected a new way of worshipping God for his people. The Pentecost story (Acts 2:1-47) reveals a community of inspired people, led by the apostles and elders, preaching to all who could hear the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ. For all involved, it was a monumental change in how people were in relationship with God. Change was incorporated into the very fabric of the Christian Church.

### **Who's Church is it?**

Very simply, it is Jesus' church, not ours. The Catholic Church is built upon the "cornerstone rejected by the builders" (Acts 4:11-12, 1Peter 7-8), Jesus himself. We, as Christians, are the building blocks assembled into the Church as the "people of God" (Ezekiel 36:28, Lumen Gentium-Chapter 2). We recognize that God is in charge and has guided his people through the 2000 years of an ever-changing church by calling his people to do their part. But we recognize that we are his sheep, and he is the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), and we trust that he knows where his church is going. We follow the Shepherd's direction.

### **A Method of Prayer for Pastoral Planning**

Pope Francis in a homily (St. Peter's Basilica Sunday, 10 October 2021) has given us a way to pray in his encouragement of the synodal process (walking together as a people). In essence, it consists of three prayerful movements:

- To Listen or Observe
- To Judge or Discern
- To Act

#### **To Listen or Observe**

For us to understand the pastoral planning process, or any aspect of life, we need information. We gather information through our senses, especially hearing and seeing. The prayerful act of listening to others is termed "Active Listening". This process involves listening not only with our ears but also with the "ears of the heart". Active Listening first begins with removing any preconceived ideas about the person speaking, to not judge the speaker, to not anticipate what the speaker may say, and most especially, not to interrupt the speaker as they express their ideas. This is hard for most of us as we have been trained to interrupt and engage the speaker because we want to express our own ideas. To Actively Listen is to allow the speaker to fully express their ideas without interruption or comment. This takes practice on our part to sharpen our skills as an Active Listener, but it benefits us and the Church to allow a free flow of ideas. It allows us to respect others and their opinions and assures all people that they have been heard.

#### **To Judge or Discern**

After we have Actively Listened and Observed, we need to process the information we received and come to some decisions. This involves Discernment or a way to judge the information obtained. Discernment consists of seven steps that allows the listener to prayerfully make decisions about what was heard from others. The following steps are defined:

1. **Conformity** – Does the decision we are making conform to the teaching of God and of the Church? Is God’s will revealed in this decision? We can know his will through scripture, tradition, and teachings of the Catholic Church.
2. **Conversion** – Does the decision draw us closer to God? Does the decision call us into deeper relationship with God and make us holy? Continued prayer is the gateway for conversion and allows us to make decisions through a deeper Active Listening to God through prayer.
3. **Consistency** – God is consistent, he communicates with us in consistent ways, he does not throw us “curve balls”. Does our decision “fit” with how God has communicated in our past? Does it fit our normal way of life and is it consistent as how God has worked with us in the past?
4. **Confirmation** – To make good, prayerful decisions, we need to seek out others’ opinions as well. We can try out our decisions with others who are close to us and then Actively Listen to their views and recommendations. Other confirming events can be of benefit such as the opening of doors once closed to us, resources becoming available, possibilities turning into reality. All these will confirm our decisions based on God’s will.
5. **Conviction** – Does the heart say “yes”? Conviction is a test of the heart, does it “feel right”? Does the decision make us know deep inside that it is right? Conviction often takes time, but don’t press it. Continue to pray for your heart to open to the decision.
6. **Consensus** – Our decision can have impacts on others around us. Consensus involves all the other steps in decision making. Are others in agreement with your decision? This is especially important for ministers in the Church as our decisions will affect others’ ministries as well. A consensus of others allows us to be confident in our decision-making process.
7. **Christic** – Is our decision like the mind of Jesus Christ? The question of “what would Jesus do?” has a direct bearing on our Christian life. If the decision mimics the heart of Jesus, we can be assured that it allows us to be more like Christ in our lives.

## To Act

After listening to others and prayerfully discerning our decisions, now is the time to act. Many times, people’s actions within the Church are spur of the moment decisions. The saying “ready, shoot, aim” describes these actions well. Each action we do involves others in the decision-making process. An ill-timed and ill-informed action can influence others and can be an inhibiting and irritating factor that hampers our journey as a church. Ministry in the Church must come from the prayerful process of Active Listening and good Discernment. If we as ministers of the Church can act in this way, we will be the Body of Christ on earth and others will be attracted to our way of life. The Franciscan saying of “Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words.” is good advice. The way we act in our lives speaks volumes to others who need to hear the Gospel and obtain salvation. This is good, sound evangelization.

## Conclusion

The above process of Listening, Discerning, and Action is a spiritual discipline, a practice, that can be incorporated into our own prayer life. It takes time to get good at it so be patient with this practice. And in the long run, the future of St. Boniface Parish is assured when we as the People of God are disciplined and practiced and make good decisions that will carry us into the future. A future that ensures that God is with us.