

# Pastoral Principles

*In October 2007 the leaders of the parish gathered to learn about and discuss some of the pastoral principles used in Our Lady of Dolours Parish at Chatswood. The day was organized by the PPC and facilitated by Liz Wallace from the diocese. Input was given by the Parish Priest, Vince Casey.*

## 1. It's the people's parish

- Our Lady of Dolours Parish belongs to the parishioners. It's not Father's parish, not the pastoral associates' and not the Redemptorists' or the MSC's parish. People have invested their lives here - this is where they have bought their homes and raised their children, whereas we clergy, religious and employed staff move on.
- The role of the priests and the staff is to assist the people to shape Our Lady of Dolours into the parish they want for themselves and their kids.
- The shape the parish is taking reflects their desires and gifts. What happens here comes from the parishioners.
- The Parish Pastoral Council has real power to set the vision and agenda for the future direction of the parish. Each group or leader of a ministry can also set their own goals.

## 2. Focus: empowerment of gifts

- The parish's emphasis is on encouraging and using God-given gifts rather than fulfilling needs.
- A focus on people's gifts is uplifting and energising. Preoccupation with 'needs' is self-defeating and patronising.
- Ultimately more is accomplished when we focus on empowering gifts rather than 'answering needs'. By focusing on gifts, more needs are actually fulfilled; but they may not be the needs that we thought were priorities before we began.

- The Lord provides us with the gifts required for what we are meant to accomplish at any given time.
- The gifts are in the parishioners. The task is to uncover, affirm, encourage and develop those gifts. Gifted parishioners do need to say 'yes' to use their gifts for the work of the parish.
- People are more willing to do what they enjoy and are good at. They will spend more time and effort, achieve much more, and be happier with the result.
- Not all needs can be met; but the person with the right gift will emerge - in the Lord's time.

## 3. Parishioners' homes are the parish

- The parish is more than the church, parish office and meeting rooms. It is primarily the homes and lives of the parishioners. This is the 'domestic church' where the paschal mystery is most intensely lived everyday. This is a crucial principle which constantly needs to be affirmed and lived.
- It means that meetings can be in parishioners' homes; a parish strategy can be simple steps people can take at home like family meals and prayers; a celebration of a wedding anniversary is a celebration of parish.
- Improved family life and relationships make us a better parish. It is good to encourage initiatives that support families and to encourage couples and families to take on ministries *together*; and avoid creating 'church widows' and 'church orphans'.

- Individuals are to be discouraged from taking on multiple ministries. A goal can be that every person who comes to Mass is involved in *one* ministry. Likewise, some big tasks might only be taken on for a limited time.

#### **4. Parishioners must feel 'free' and 'safe' in their own parish**

- People are free to fail. Parishioners can try something new, and if it doesn't work out they need to know that they won't be judged a failure.
- Similarly, if a parishioner succeeds but then can't keep it up, that's okay too. Ministries are allowed to stop without people being judged as uncommitted. Equally, the parish is not obliged to continue the ministry in the absence of its initiator.
- People have the freedom to run with a mission. The only restrictive criteria are that it must not harm the parish and it must be in communion with the Church.
- It is important to protect parishioners. Gossip must be nipped in the bud as soon as it starts - trace it, confront the source. Only invite into the parish supply priests and outside professionals who will 'look after' the people. Call each other to account and offer help if someone don't respond well to parishioners.
- Many people in Chatswood have been hurt by the church and its people. Without blaming, let's recognize this, offer opportunities for healing and to open people to new possibilities.

#### **5. Parishioners are accountable for the mission of their parish**

- People have many good ideas and they are encouraged to express them. But they will also be asked '*What can you do to make it happen?*' This question, repeated in various ways, encourages involvement. Parishioners need to know that if they suggest something they will also be asked to take some action.

- The question, '*What can you do?*' also cuts out a lot of whining about what the parish/priest/team isn't doing. We are responsible together.
- Parishioners are free to start something new, but they have a responsibility to ensure the ministry funds itself. The parish will assist with start-up capital and underwrite a project, but is not responsible for the ongoing financial support of the ministry.
- Parishioners are free to try anything, but they must be responsible for their own project. They can't pass-the-buck or presume that somebody else will 'pick up the pieces' if they drop it.
- And if the person doing ministry decides not to continue and no-one in the parish is able to take it on, then the ministry ceases. It is sad but it means that, at this time, the parish doesn't have the resources for it to continue.

#### **6. The parishioners are in charge, not the parish team**

- The leaders of parish ministries are not the parish team (paid staff) but parishioners who act in a voluntary capacity.
- The parish team is there to support, help and assist the parishioners in their leadership roles. The job descriptions of those employed is to support the work of parish leaders. The paid staff provides an infrastructure and administrative support for the parishioners to exercise their leadership roles.
- The parish resources are used to provide physical support such as meeting rooms, computers, phones, photocopiers etc.
- Like the priests, members of the team will move on. The parishioners are there to stay. Our Lady of Dolours is their parish.
- This principle can't just be given lip-service. If there are differences of opinion in day to day matters, they need to be discussed but the parishioner-leader will have the final say.

- In this way the people assume responsibility for their parish and an employee-based hierarchy (or clericalism) is avoided.
- Likewise, when the priest receives another appointment or a team member moves on, the ministry continues.

## **7. Employment issues**

- The parish team exists to support the parishioner-leaders. With appropriate support parishioners are willing to take on even the 'biggest' jobs.
- The parish team's tasks will eventually be divided according to a 'cradle to grave' strategy so that every age is supported by a minister.
- In the parish we have professionally written job descriptions; follow CCER guidelines; provide an desk, computer and phone for each team member; where applicable we take advantage of employee benefits with FBT exemptions; we try to be family-friendly, offer job flexibility, supervision, support and training.
- Good communication is essential. Each week the team meets for lunch and a business meeting. As parish priest I try to meet with each team member at least once a month.
- Each ministry in the parish has a team member who is the support or contact person. The goal is to have a different parishioner-leader as the contact for each ministry with the team offering support only. There must be clear areas of responsibility. If a new ministry not covered by one of the team then a review of the job descriptions is required.
- Education of people and the priests in the idea that the parish priest may not be the person responsible for organising an activity in the parish (e.g. baptisms or maintenance) is an ongoing challenge.

## **8. 'Soft' evangelisation**

- The statisticians tell us that only 20% of catholics attend church regularly. It is true, but the other 80% do have some contact with the parish. If they have a positive experience they will be more likely to

come back again. I call these opportunities 'soft' evangelisation because the people come to us, we don't have to go out to them.

- Sometimes the opportunity might be a simple request like ringing for Mass times or a signature for a school enrolment. A positive, helpful response to their need is a step in the evangelisation process.
- The parish has a role at significant times in a person's life such as marriage or baptism; or crisis times of illness and death. At these times people are open to the gospel message and more responsive to the genuine concern of its ministers. Parish structures and its ministers need to be able to respond to their openness.
- A week can be full of these interactions. They are opportunities for the 'new evangelisation' that JPPII spoke about and that are part of our diocesan pastoral plan. When these opportunities are used well our parish church becomes increasingly full of 'returning' catholics.
- The movement back to the church and to greater involvement in the parish is a journey of many gradual steps. A positive experience at a Baptism may open a distanced catholic to the possibility of a Christmas Mass; and if that was enjoyable then a Sunday Mass might be considered. Every liturgy, every meeting, every activity of the parish is an opportunity to welcome someone back.
- It is important to recognize the whole catholic presence in Chatswood – schools, Vinnies, CCD, Centacare etc - has a role in this evangelisation process.

## **9. Sunday worship: one size doesn't fit all**

- Each Sunday Mass is different with its own unique style directed to a particular congregation. The vigil is a middle of the road Mass; the early morning Mass tends to be quieter; the 9am Mass is directed towards families with young children; the 10.30am Mass is more traditional; the Sunday evening Mass is youth-oriented. There are also Masses for different ethnic groups.

- The people know this and the celebrant for next weekend's Masses are advertised in the bulletin to give people maximum choice as to which style suits them best. If parishioners don't like the style of worship at one Mass they are encouraged to attend another time.
- Ministries have developed to support the style of celebration at each Mass. Eventually each Mass will be supported by a team member.

### **10. Planning is essential**

- All activities need to be directed towards a parish vision. This vision ideally comes from the Parish Pastoral Council. It needs to be a simple vision that is well known and referred to often.
- The diocese has a pastoral plan for 2005 – 2010 and we have our own plan to implement the diocesan plan in this parish. The PPC has named the goals the parish would like to achieve in the next five years; and listed three priorities for 2007 - spirituality, resources and WYD08.
- Planning is essential for the parish and for each ministry. Without a plan we can become very busy just maintaining the good things we have already achieved. Planning keeps us moving forward.
- Succession planning is necessary for each parishioner-leader to ensure continuity in the ministry.

### **11. Praise builds up, criticism kills parish life**

- The greatest blessing of this parish is its parishioners. We need to look for every opportunity to affirm and thank people. They are so good, prayerful and generous. Before any 'should dos' and 'must dos' they need to know how good they already are. People are open and responsive when they know they are appreciated and the truth of their goodness is recognised.
- The flip side to this emphasis on affirmation is to stop negativity and gossip. If people have a complaint they need to be encouraged/challenged to address it with the appropriate person

rather than to allow wounds to fester. Rumors have to be traced back to their source and confronted. The shortcomings of others such as Christmas and Easter Catholics, unresponsive parishioners or diocesan imperfections must not become our focus.

### **12. Little things count**

- Little things - like a tidy church foyer, up-to-date notice boards, a phone that is answered by a live voice - create first impressions and send out subtle messages: 'This is a parish where people care; you are important'.
- People are to be encouraged to familiarise themselves with parish premises and treat them as they would their own home: feel free to open and shut windows, turn on lights, use the notice boards, move furniture. Likewise, if you see a mess, clean it up; if something needs fixing, take action. Sure, sometimes this means things get put in the wrong place, but so much else can happen automatically.

### **13. Parish: a choice to belong**

- We have gained some parishioners from surrounding parishes and loose others to nearby parishes. It is important to be open and non-possessive about people's choices of where they want to worship. Anyone is free to join parish liturgies and groups; likewise, people are free to go elsewhere if they wish. What's important is that each person participates in a community. Don't go parish-hopping. Wherever you choose to settle: belong, contribute, build relationships.

