

**Town Hall Comments/Questions:
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20 May 2023

How can we involve Fr. Pete? Bishop Fernandes has asked Deacon Jeff Hurdley to take the lead for St. Mark in the transition process. Giving Fr. Pete the necessary time, he needs to prepare for his retirement. Fr. Pete will continue to be a valuable resource as the two parishes merge.

Can Fr. Pete and Msgr. Walter help with the Masses? Both Fr. Pete and Msgr. Walter have expressed their desire to continue being active in Sacramental ministry. Those decisions are between Bishop Fernandes and Fr. Pete and Msgr. Walter respectively.

What will happen when Fr. Craig retires? A new rector will be appointed to St. Mary by the bishop.

Can you have other than diocesan priests such as Franciscans and Dominicans etc., help with the parishes? Yes, Bishop Fernandes has brought many new religious communities of priests into the diocese to staff parishes that in the past have been staffed by diocesan priests. Currently the transition committee is unaware of any plans to have a religious community staff any of the parishes in the Lancaster area.

How can we support priests under duress? First by understanding that this is a stressful time for parishioners, and it is also a stressful time for priests and all those in leadership in the church. *Real Presence, Real Future* is a monumental undertaking, which is requiring considerable additional time and energy from priests, on top of their duties both Sacramental and administrative that they are already doing. One of the most important ways parishioners can be supportive is by praying for their priests. Secondly, by being patient and

Understanding that this process will take time. Thirdly, by praying that they themselves will be open to the working of the Holy Spirit who under the leadership of Bishop Fernandes is leading this process for the Church of Columbus.

Deacons should be ordained priests. Allow priests to marry. These two statements show a misunderstanding of the fundamental issue. For the past 60 years there has been a drastic decline in the number of people who are practicing their Catholic faith. The decrease of vocations to Priesthood and Consecrated Life are a symptom of this decline.

The clergy shortage is not a unique problem in the Catholic Church. Most all faith traditions in First World, Western Countries have experienced a sharp decline in the number of priests, ministers, and rabbis serving as religious leaders. This is true for those religious traditions that have a married clergy and those who admitted women to the ministry.

The closing and merging of churches is not unique to the Catholic Church. In 2019, the last year for which there are solid numbers about 4,500 protestant churches closed in the United States. New churches have opened as well but overall, more churches are closing than opening.

I hear about the decline of religious belief, but not much about why. To answer why there has been such a large decline in religious belief in most First World Countries would require a book to answer. Like all changes in society the causes are multiple and complex. 1.) Relativism, the belief that there is no universal truth, has played a large part in the decline. 2.) The belief that science and faith are mutually exclusive of each other. This is something that the Catholic Church rejects. The church has never seen a conflict between science and faith, both have their place. 3.) While many people still profess to be “Spiritual” they understand their faith as something personal and see no need to worship God in a community: i.e., organized religion. There are many other factors besides these three to be sure.

In your research what has been the damage because of priest abuses, has attendance dropped as a result or is it never spoken in the church. The transition committee has not looked at any research on its own concerning the abuse of minors by clerics. This issue is addressed in the church and has been extensively studied by the United States Council of Catholic Bishops. The results of their studies have been published and can be found online. While there is little doubt that the abuse of minors by clerics has had its effect on the decline of Catholics practicing their faith, the larger impact seems to be from those changes which were mentioned in the answer of the previous question. 1.) Relativism, 2.) a misunderstanding that faith and science are mutually opposed to each other, and 3.) a growing belief that faith is something purely personal. These along with other shifts in western culture seem to be having a larger impact on the decline of organized religious practice in the first world countries.

Why are priests being forced to retire? Was Fr. Pete forced to retire? *Real Presence, Real Future*, as mentioned before is a monumental undertaking, that will require a significant amount of time and energy for those in leadership, including pastors. It is true that Bishop Fernandes has ask eight pastors who had been on deferred retirement, seventy or older to retire on July 11 of 2023. While the transition team cannot speak for Bishop Fernandes, it seems logical that part of the reason for this request is to spare pastors who are over seventy the added stress of overseeing the merging of parishes. To ask a pastor who has already given forty to fifty years of his life in service to the church to undertake the monumental project of merging two or more parishes and put his health at risk with the added stress, would seem unjust.

Let priests preach until they don't want to or physically can't. Preaching is not the issue. A priest can continue to preach even after retiring as a pastor. What a pastor cannot do indefinitely is to provide good leadership and administration to a parish. The handling of personnel, maintenance, and financial issues is hard and stressful work. The expectation that pastors should continue working until they are physically exhausted is unrealistic.