

**THE CARDINAL'S FORUM**  
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

**August 27, 2019**

*“Empty Pews and the Future of Catholic Parishes?”*



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introduction by

**Rev. Robert A. Pesarchick**

*Vice-President for Academic Affairs*

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*Welcome to the fourth annual Cardinals' Forum at Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary!*

Through this series, we begin the year of intellectual formation at the seminary by offering continuing education about a topic of contemporary concern in the Church.

We call it the “Cardinals’ Forum” in reference to the first endowed faculty chairs here at the Seminary, which were named in honor of two distinguished prelates in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. This year we’ll be adding a non-cardinal to that list!

For this 2019 Forum, the topic to be discussed is: **“Empty Pews and the Future of Catholic Parishes”** – a source of concern for all of us!

Note that our topic is about the future! Our shared goal tonight will be to ponder what parish life could or should be in the years to come. To do that well in our allotted time, we cannot spend time looking nostalgically to the past or lamenting the present state of affairs. Rather, let us focus on what we can do moving forward. Of course, we cannot predict the future! But we do need to confront the challenge the lies before us.

To give you a sense of that challenge, consider just these few data points:

- The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate reports that the Church now operates close to 1,500 fewer parishes than it did 50 years ago, with the largest reduction taking place right here in Pennsylvania.
- CARA researchers also point out that two out of three parishes in existence today were built to meet the needs of the PRE Vatican II church. ... and that the average Catholic church (nationwide) is filled to (only) 47% of parish capacity over the course of a weekend.

- Finally, here in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, the trend in Mass attendance continues to decline, as it has for the past five years, with the most recent survey indicating that only 18% of registered parishioners attended Mass on a weekly basis last year.

Of course, numerous factors play into these numbers. And there is no silver bullet or quick fix. Yet we believe that the Holy Spirit will guide us, perhaps in dramatically new ways.

To see where the Spirit may be taking us, we will now consider those “Empty Pews and the Future of Catholic Parishes” using this simple format:

- Each of our panelists will be given five (5) minutes to offer his thoughts on what the future holds for our parish life.
- After that we will open the floor for about 45 minutes to all of you to pose some ideas or raise some questions or advance the discussion however you think we should.
- Then we’ll conclude with summary thoughts from the panelists and a final blessing.

So, let us begin ...

Our first speaker tonight is the newest addition to the panel. Last Fall, **Dr. Nathan Knutson** was appointed the first holder of the *Lucille M. Franceso Chair in Sacred Music*. Dr. Knutson earned his Doctorate in Sacred Music from the Graduate Theology Foundation and now serves the Seminary as its Director of Sacred Music. Please welcome Dr. Knutson ...

Our second speaker this evening holds the *John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics and Social Communications*. **Fr. Thomas Dailey**, a priest in the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, inaugurated this faculty position in 2013 and joined the seminary full-time in 2018. Please welcome Fr. Dailey ...

Our third panelist holds the *John Cardinal Krol Chair of Moral Theology*. After recently retiring as President of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, **Dr. John Haas** has returned to Overbrook to take up the faculty position he inaugurated back in 1990. Please welcome Dr. Haas ...

Our final speaker needs no introduction ... I hope! Please join me in welcoming the *Archbishop of Philadelphia*, the **Most Reverend Charles Chaput** ...

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With thanks to each of the panelists, I’d like now to open the floor for discussion. Please keep in mind our focus for this evening ... on the *future* of Catholic parishes, not the glories of the past or the challenges in the present.

I invite you share your thoughts briefly, by offering a related comment or raising a specific question in relation to what think or what you have just heard. To do so, please make use of the microphone located in the side aisle. One or two of our panelists will respond to each speaker. I ask us all to please be direct and succinct, so that we can engage in this discussion all those who wish to speak.

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Our topic is large, but our time is too brief!

I thank you all for joining us this evening. I hope it has been informative and beneficial as we move forward. And I urge you all to pray for the guidance and grace of the Holy Spirit as we seek to follow the Lord in our future as the Church.

And now I invite Archbishop Chaput (or Bishop Senior) to conclude our evening together with a Benediction.

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