

# THE CARDINALS' FORUM



## @ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

*an annual gathering that advances the academic formation of seminarians and provides continuing education for the lay faithful about a topic of contemporary concern*

Tuesday, **August 27, 2019** in the **Vianney Hall Auditorium**

on the topic of

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

presentation by

***Rev. Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S.***

***The John Cardinal Foley Chair of Homiletics & Social Communications***

As panel discussions go, this one is certainly a challenge!

I'm still not sure what to say, and I'm the one who proposed the topic! I'm also the one who imposed the time limit on the speakers, so let me get right to it.

The multiple factors needing to be taken into consideration when we consider the future of Catholic parishes – including geography, demographics, and finances – are not going to be sorted out tonight. But the data demand that we address the question ... if we want to have a future.

My brief intervention will be based on additional data. But first let me state my one and only real point: in the Catholic parish of the future, **worship should be our work**. Perhaps the only work. Certainly the primary work.

Catholic parishes have been and are many things to many people. Yet the one thing a parish has and does – the one thing that people cannot “get” elsewhere in society – is worship of God, particularly in the Mass and the sacraments. Other activities abound, and through them much good is done, but worship remains the unique and distinctive “business” of the parish.

People know that. And people want that – as they have told us. In CARA research on “Parishioner Evaluations of Parish Life in the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> ...

- The top-ranking elements that *attract* parishioners to a parish are the community, in terms of its welcoming spirit and a sense of belonging. and the worship, in terms of the quality of the liturgy and of preaching.
- Likewise, parishioners who rate their experience as “excellent” say that the top two things their parish *excels* at are celebrating the sacraments and providing hospitality to all.
- Finally, when asked what areas their parish should *prioritize*, parishioners put at the top of the list the sense of community within the parish and the celebration of liturgies and sacraments.

The pattern is loud and clear. In the future we will need to heed it more intentionally, perhaps even more drastically.

Making worship the only, or at least the primary, work of a parish has numerous implications ...

- on the parish budget: what percentage is devoted to worship?
- on parish personnel, both clergy and lay ministers: are those connected with worship full-time and well-trained staff?
- on local church facilities: how beautiful is the parish church, whether old or new? how well does it actually function for liturgies?

To make worship the only, or at least the primary, work of a parish may also require significant changes, including

- the elimination of secondary programs and activities so as to dedicate human, financial, and material resources to the primary purpose of worship;
- and possibly the introduction of new ideas and technologies that will facilitate the very best liturgical and sacramental experiences for the greatest number of people.

Speaking of the greatest number of people ... I read with interest this year's "Mindset List" of the Class of 2023<sup>2</sup> – you know, that annual list of things that have "always" or "never" been true in the lifetime of those entering college this year. Two noteworthy entries caught my eye.

- One is that to them Cal Ripken, Jr., has always been retired – and that's just sad.

- The other is that by their sophomore year, their generation will constitute one-quarter of the U.S. population – and that’s downright scary!

Clearly, we need to get that younger generation back into parish life. How to do that is anyone’s guess ... and everyone’s responsibility. Perhaps we should ask them ... and listen carefully to their answers.

In any case, we have to give them something to come back to and something to stay for. We have to give them God ... in an experience of worship that is vibrant and engaging, reverent and relevant, mysterious and wondrous.

Christian Smith, perhaps the foremost authority on the religious lives of young people, has said that “they think the Church ‘does not offer them anything unique that they particularly need” and that the Church’s core worldview just does not fit the deep and pervasive “cultural assumptions of materialism, mass-consumer capitalism, scientism, secularism, and postmodernism.”<sup>3</sup>

The only way we’ll change that is to give them what, in fact, they do need (even if they don’t yet know it) – the God who comes to them and to everyone in a parish through Word and Sacrament, celebrated as best we can.

Offering a vibrant liturgical life, along with shaping a community to worship together, this is our purpose, our mission, and our hope. It should also be our top priority ... so that Catholic parishes can, indeed, have a future.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Gray, Mary L. Gautier, and Melissa A. Cidade, *Views from the Pews: Parishioner Evaluations of Parish Life in the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2013), cited in Charles Zech, Mary L. Gautier, Mark M. Gray, Jonathon L. Wiggins, and Thomas P. Gaunt S.J., *Catholic Parishes of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 122, 123, and 126.

<sup>2</sup> Online at [www.marist.edu/-/marist-news-the-first-marist-mindset-list-is-released](http://www.marist.edu/-/marist-news-the-first-marist-mindset-list-is-released)

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Alex Norcia in “The Catholic Church Has No Idea How to Win Over Young People,” VICE (1/24/19), [www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/3kgz5b/the-catholic-church-has-no-idea-how-to-win-over-young-people](http://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3kgz5b/the-catholic-church-has-no-idea-how-to-win-over-young-people)