

Abp. Hughes: Reconfiguration is response to priest availability

By Peter Finney Jr.
Clarion Herald

The prospect of adding another burden to Catholics already laboring to recover from Hurricane Katrina represented the biggest challenge Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes faced as he made his final decisions on the second phase of a major restructuring plan for parishes, schools and ministries in the Archdiocese of New Orleans that will take effect July 1, the archbishop said.

The plan, which provides a facilitation process lasting up to six months to allow parishioners to discuss the impact of mergers and closures, affects dozens of parishes but results in a small overall decrease in the current number of Sunday worship sites in the archdiocese.

Presently there are 117 parishes and five missions operating in the archdiocese – a total of 122 Sunday worship sites. After the plan takes effect, there will be 108 parishes, nine missions and two university campus ministry sites, a total of 119 sites for Sunday Mass.

"The losses in the Katrina and post-Katrina experience have been a very difficult cross for people to carry, and the last thing in the world I want to do is to complicate



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Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes believes the restructuring plan for archdiocesan parishes and schools is a responsible way to move forward after Katrina.

that for people," Archbishop Hughes said. "I know how much people look to the Lord, to his church and to their local churches for strength and comfort."

Archbishop Hughes said it was "very, very difficult" for him to lead a process that examined what was the "most responsible way" for the archdiocese to move forward given a limited pool of priests, damaged parish facilities, limited financial resources and shifts in population.

Thorough review

The archbishop said he had a "significant responsibility" to lead the process "with as much consultation and thoroughness in reviewing the criteria and at the same time with the strength to make the decisions that for the long-range vitality of the archdiocese are important to make at this point in our history."

"It is my faith conviction that there is no victory without the cross," he said. "I embrace that. I want to make sure that those who may be most disappointed with the decisions that are made understand my desire to walk with them to provide ways to assist them in moving through the transition ahead."

Overview of plan

Here is an overview of the plan:

► Twenty-five parishes, including six parishes that are currently operating, will close and merge with other parishes by Dec. 31, 2008.

► The six parishes currently operating that will close and merge with others are Our Lady of Good Counsel and St. Henry (merging with St. Stephen); Blessed Sacrament (merging with St. Joan of Arc, New Orleans); St. Francis de Sales (merging with Holy Ghost); St. Julian Eymard, Algiers (merging with Holy Name of Mary, Algiers); and St. Lawrence the Martyr, Metairie (merging with Our Lady of Divine Providence, Metairie). St. Lawrence will be available for the celebration of the Mass in the extraordinary form (Latin Mass).

► Nineteen of the 25 parishes that will close and merge with other parishes have not reopened since Hurricane Katrina, largely because of damage to their church buildings and the lack of returning population.

► In addition to the 25 parishes that will merge by Dec. 31, two Kenner parishes – St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Nativity of Our Lord – will close and merge by June 30, 2009.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PASTORAL PLAN

Q My parish is scheduled to close and merge with another parish. What will happen to my church building?

A Nothing has been decided. First of all, the church will continue to offer the celebration of Mass during the transition period, which begins July 1 and could last through Dec. 31. The transition period will give parishioners the chance to discuss the future of their new faith community.

"It's really been inappropriate for us, before finalizing the final plan, to begin to dream of concrete possibilities for those church buildings," Archbishop Alfred Hughes said. "We want to first ask ourselves if these properties can serve the church's mission, particularly in the neighborhood where they exist. Secondly, if that's not possible, can they serve some wider good in the community at large? It is only after those two possibilities are exhausted that we would look at other possibilities such as commercial enterprises."

Q Where will I go to church?

A The most likely answer is to attend Mass at the church that will serve as home to the newly merged faith community because it is geographically close to your current church. Remember, all churches that are closing and merging will continue to offer Mass until the official facilitation process is completed and one new parish is formed – no later than Dec. 31.

Q Was there proper input from parishes and parishioners?

A "The first phase of the plan was promulgated 18 months ago, and people understood this was going to be taking place," said Edmundite Father Michael Jacques, who has coordinated the pastoral plan process. "Pastors were invited to participate and to invite people into the process. We trust that pastors did that. They were given instructions, opportunities, criteria and benchmarks to meet. Then they were formally given until September of last year to come up with a parish plan, and then the deanery started putting together its plan in January. It was understood that there would be a decision made for the good of the deanery."

Q How will the facilitation process work?

A "It's going to be the glue that holds it together," Father Jacques said. "It's going to provide an opportunity for people to let go of some things, healing some things, sharing of hurts." A main facilitator has been hired to train about 40 others facilitators, who will be assigned to work with individual parishes and then to call together the parishes that are involved in a merger. They will work on a new mission statement and set goals and objectives for parish ministries – "all the things that will make them become one parish." The process could last until Dec. 31.

Q What is a merger?

A A merger occurs when two or more parishes come together to form one parish. The boundaries of a new

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