

3504 N 900 E Rd
Shirley, IL 61772

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To Bishop Louis Tylka and the Growing Disciples team,

I have witnessed St. Patrick's in Wapella be a source of joy, community, and conversion for my family. Knowing this great parish was here was a source of peace in making the decision to move back to the area after I had been in New Hampshire for a few years.

I am evidently not alone in seeing the great value and opportunity that this parish represents, as **we have grown upwards of 20% in the past few years**. In an area and age where we are losing parishioners, it seems that more than ever we need to look at where there is organic growth and keep it alive. It is difficult to start authentic, grassroots discipleship – it is much easier to water what is alive.

*“Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.
Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”*
(Matthew 13:12)

You might be asking, quite rightly, what has enabled this growth. One cannot boil it down to a few factors, much as one cannot boil down what causes a human to grow to mere mitosis, but I shall try to convey it: by first understanding the people there.

St. Patrick's in Wapella (SPW) serves a predominantly rural people. **Farmers are an often marginalized and overlooked portion of our population – one with particular needs, desires, and way of life hard to fully understand**. Not only is agriculture the foundation of society from an economic standpoint, but I am increasingly convicted of its foundational nature in the spiritual life – in part motivating my return to this diocese.

We need to learn from the agrarian mindset – which is fundamental to reading sacred scripture.

It is no mistake that Eden was a Garden – that Jesus used agricultural parables – or that He makes Himself present in food. We are organic beings – we need **organic** community centered around the sacraments.

It doesn't surprise me that most farmers tend to gravitate towards independent protestantism and often shy away from organized religion altogether. **Farmers have a real aversion to “programs” and big institutions. However, farmers love this parish, and through it, the Church**. SPW has been a place where these rural people not only belong and nourish, but live. People know one another – they look after one another – they are fed by the Body of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament every Sunday, and are being truly formed into His Body on every day of the week. This might be quantifiable and outwardly-observable as with our adult-education classes, but it may be as quiet as feeding hurting and broken families adjacent to our community. I know of many parishes in New Hampshire where the pastor is burdened as a facilities manager who happens to be able to administer the sacraments – SPW has great laity involvement and not only kept the lights on but grew its community without a resident priest.

You can imagine not just the sadness, but the bewilderment of our parish when it was recommended that our church no longer be in use.

Over half of our parishioners come from north of Wapella – mostly Heyworth area. Closing SPW would fracture the community that has formed and is continuing to grow disciples. Heyworth is indeed fertile ground on 136 for evangelization – which SPW is set up for, and is doing. I know that the proposal we have received calls this a “merger”, but **parishes are not corporations, but organisms**. It is more like a transplant; transplanting the community of SPW into Clinton.

Transplants are risky – the likely outcome is a fracture not just of parishioners towards Clinton and Bloomington, but of some away from the faith altogether, I fear.

The pastoral plan posits “Small parish sizes and resources limit evangelization efforts” as a reality – but this runs contrary to all of my lived experience. I have never met someone who was encouraged to the Catholic Church because of the size of a parish. I have met many who have been drawn to the Church because of her beauty, her truth, and her goodness – and then who were welcomed in not by a program, but by a loving community that they could become a part of. I know a converting family who drove from Rhode Island, across the entire state of Massachusetts, and up to my former parish in New Hampshire because they found the community to be that life-giving. That community has about 150 attendants over the span of a weekend – similar to SPW. I have been a part of a 200-person prayer group that continues to make converts and reverts using borrowed church spaces and zero advertising.

David beating Goliath wasn't an anomaly. Goliaths are big and clumsy. Davids generally win. This story of David versus Goliath is one often worth meditating upon when we feel like we're losing ground.

The fact that personal encounters are the most important avenue for conversion indicates to me that there is more potential for evangelization in three 100-person parishes than one 300-person parish, as a general rule.

If we are trying to curtail costs by closing parishes – what will we be spending the money on instead? At any rate I have little belief in the power of money to evangelize:

‘Then Jesus asked them,

“When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?”

“Nothing,” they answered.’

(Luke 22:35)

The personal encounter is the most effective – and in this plan, least spoken of – aspect of evangelization. It isn't just a model that the LORD used once or twice in the Gospels, it is the continual pattern throughout all of salvation history.

To be blunt: I fail to see merit in the proposed plan for the parishes near SPW. The decision to close a parish is a difficult one. I would hate to advise a particular alternative route. I believe some from Heyworth attend St. Mary's in Downs when they need to attend a Saturday Vigil mass – a partnership that has been explored before and seems worth entertaining. If we do truly need to pull back on the number of priests assigned to different areas, let's look at what's working well and ask how we can strengthen it.

But all of that is just the tip of an iceberg.

We are very disappointed with the lack of vision that the plan and subsequent proposals have. The information presented is limited to a few numbers on parish size and finances. No understanding of demographics is conveyed. How much of the local area is Catholic? Protestant? Muslim? None? Fallen-away or never grew up with faith? Do parishioners commute? If so, do they skip over any parishes? Older or younger? Lots of kids or few? What type of work is the norm? Who is underserved – who is there to be evangelized? Before we act or even recommend, we ought to be understanding. It is not evident that the team has an understanding of these realities.

Even the goals outlined are vague. What constitutes “vibrancy” (this is a word I have never heard in an ecclesial setting)? Can we have examples? Is 101 people receiving poor teaching better than 100 receiving good teaching? Is vibrancy beauty and reverence in the liturgy? Is it warm bodies in a pew – or hearts burning for the LORD?

Resultingly, the recommendation we have received contains zero strategy. It does not identify, in any meaningful sense, the **opportunities for evangelization** in front of us. There is **no reasoning** offered for this recommendation – it appears arbitrary. Lacking this, it reads like the last resort of a dying church, rather than the evangelization plan of a church triumphant. *What is the battle plan? Where is the fight?*

This is the furthest thing from synodality that Pope Francis has urged us to in recent times.

I would love to address and give feedback and insights based upon the thought process that you have; I would love to enter into dialogue and relationship with you, but we are left out in the cold. I fear that even this letter is tone-deaf, but we have not received a tone to acquaint ourselves to. Maybe you have considered these things but we are not on the same page – we are not let in – we cannot have the dialogue you are asking for. Do not couch: speak clearly, fully, frankly, and plainly to us: what do you see?

Regardless of which parishes close, **you must articulate your vision in a more concrete, reasoned way** – or you will continue to lose the trust and respect of all the faithful.

If there is real consideration in **closing down one of the fastest-growing parishes** in the area, you should at least spend some time in St. Patrick’s to understand its success before committing to such a decision – and **have a raw, real, face-to-face discussion** with the parish leadership about the best strategy to shepherd the farmers.

-THAD

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