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Pastoral Planning: The process is painful, but it doesn't have to be hurtful and divisive

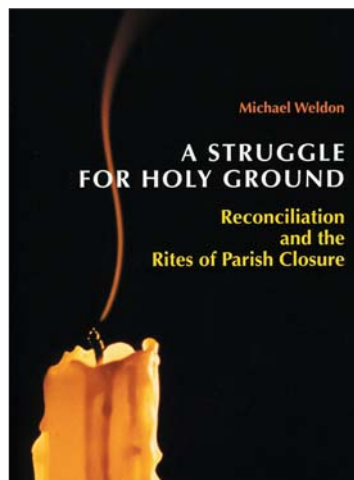
By FRANZ KLEIN
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STEVENS POINT – The closing or consolidation of a parish is often a painful experience, a fact brusquely thrust into the public consciousness last year in places like Boston and New Orleans, where small groups of parishioners conducted round-the-clock sit-ins in a desperate attempt to keep open their parishes after they were officially closed by diocesan authorities.

This is why a Subcommittee on Parish Transitions has been established in the Diocese of La Crosse as the diocese prepares for the implementation of its own pastoral plan, a plan calling for the consolidation of a number of parishes on an as-needed basis as future circumstances warrant.

“There will be pain, and there may be hostility when parishes close,” acknowledged Father Tom Lindner, pastor of Newman University Parish in Stevens Point. “But if we anticipate that, speak about it, and have mechanisms in place, maybe we can soften some of that negativity. It might not be what we would choose, but we can make the best of what it is, and pray that it will be something positive and encouraging.”

A member of the steering committee responsible for establishing protocols for the plan's implementation, Father



This is the cover of Franciscan Father Michael Weldon's "A Struggle for Holy Ground: Reconciliation and the Rites of Parish Closure" (Liturgical Press, 2004), a book the transitions subcommittee is using to prepare for the faithful for the implementation of the diocese's pastoral plan, which calls for the consolidation of a number of parishes on an as-needed basis.

Lindner is also chairman of the transitions subcommittee comprised of priests, religious and lay faithful. The subcommittee's goal, in Father Lindner's words, is "to help people anticipate the pastoral plan, to be aware of it and, ultimately, to help parishes adapt to the changes that will come with the consolidation of parishes and the creation of new parish communities."

"Ultimately, when we're talking about the implementation of the plan, it might be several years down the road for some parishes," Father Lindner said. "In the meantime we're focus-

ing on initiating conversations, helping people understand the plan and anticipate it as best we can."

So far, the transitions subcommittee has gathered three times. They are currently exploring the possibility of hosting meetings in the parishes directly affected by the plan and, eventually, in all the diocese's parishes. "I think that when this is implemented, it will affect all of us, even if we belong to a parish that is thought of as being untouched by the plan," he said. "The goal would be to talk about our parish – to find out where we're at, to talk about our history and tradition, what some of our fears are – and then to talk about what the implementation of this plan might look like."

As a basis for its discussion, the subcommittee has read and discussed Franciscan Father Michael Weldon's "A Struggle for Holy Ground: Reconciliation and the Rites of Parish Closure" (Liturgical Press, 2004). Father Weldon was responsible for consolidating two parishes in San Francisco following a devastating earthquake in 1989, and combines this personal experience with his research and personal conversations with people involved in Chicago-area parish consolidations.

"I thought the book had some helpful things that could provide a foundation for us," Father Lindner said. "Father

Weldon's experience has been that consolidations are often very painful and divisive, but his point is that it doesn't have to be that way."

In part, parishioners' negative reaction in places like Boston and New Orleans has come from their perceived lack of involvement in the decision-making process. In the La Crosse Diocese, the faithful were consulted in deanery-wide meetings prior to the plan's approval last May. But the decision to consolidate won't ultimately be in parishioners' hands, according to Father Lindner. "That's a significant barrier in this process that will have to be overcome," he said. "Our goal is to adapt as best we can to something that has already been determined – to be positive, to be honest with ourselves, and to look at the realities of the Church."

"Are there better ways to do this? There probably are," Father Lindner said. "But at the same time, a decision had to be made about how best to proceed, and that decision has already been made. Now we need to ask what we can do to make this work."

"Will there be divisions? Will there be those people who will walk away and say, 'They're not doing things the way that I want and I'm not going to be part of it'? I regret that there probably will be, but it doesn't have to be that way."