



“Hey, that’s an argument I want to have with you!”

Attending the Conference of Australian and New Zealand Pastoral Planners in Wellington last month, I fell into a conversation, over drinks, with Fr Martin Dixon a Melbourne priest who has been very involved with the National Council of Priests.

Martin called for the argument on the details of what makes an effective parish in Australian today. We agreed to catch up over dinner. It was an argument only because we disagreed on some of the finer points of what makes a parish work. How important is the staffing mix, the job descriptions, the role of the priest as leader and or pastor, facilities, joint activities in twinned or amalgamated parishes etc? What programs work and how do they work together? There was plenty to discuss.

The important issue wasn’t who was right or who was wrong, the key was that an intense and (for me at least!) inspiring discussion was held.

My impression from the Conference was that there was a limited understanding, even in that august group of Pastoral Planners, on the science of what makes for an effective parish. Wellington Archdiocese appeared to have the only dedicated, full tertiary course in Australasia for the formation for professional parish workers. There has been no comprehensive Australian book about creating effective parishes.

Australia’s Catholic Church has a Pastoral Projects Office that produces the best research into parish life of any country world-wide. Yet little has been developed from that research to impact parish life. There appears to be a reticence to speak out as the news is so bad about the quality of Catholic parish life when compared with the quality of other churches.

Parish life is absolutely crucial to Christian Life. Catholic life is centred on the Eucharist, it is the ‘source and summit’ of our faith. In practical terms, it is only Catholics, supported by a parish community, who generally live out Catholic values. At the same time, my own calculations from the current data, the average Australian Catholic parish size will be 30 or less in 2050. Australia seems to be heading the way of New Zealand, where today 34% claim in the census to have no religion.

Surely strategic application of the knowledge of what makes a parish effective; in building community, creating disciples, reaching out with the good news, sharing our faith and practical witness should be the no. 1 priority of the Catholic Church in Australia. What could be more important?

Martin Teulan
National Director, Catholic Mission
www.catholicmission.org.au
www.evangelisingparish.com