

THE CRYSTAL BALL VS. DATA ANALYSIS

by Rev. Peter Mahoney

Do we sometimes wish Merlin, Nostradamus, or some other fortune teller would visit our parish and tell us what the future holds in store?

Will there be a modest surplus next year? Will more students be enrolled in the school or the religious education program? Will more people come to church on Sunday? Will there be more priests available for the parishes? So many questions about the future! Perhaps we wish all such questions would go away! And play the ostrich for the day!

We are moving toward a future which is uncertain, but which ultimately rests in the providential care of God. As we look ahead we find consolation in knowing that we are part of the unfolding of salvation history. We are living out the ongoing story of the Church in the here and now. Ultimately, the future is not in our hands. We are led and strengthened by the Holy Spirit who has always and continues to sustain the Church. But we must do our part, use our gifts and prayerfully examine the world around us to make choices for our future.

So how do we, as church, examine the world and make these important choices? Professionals have their own methods. Health professionals deploy epidemiology; financiers track the indices; WalMart, point of sales. We use some similar tools as we look at the "Signs of the Times" and seek to reveal how we are called to be church in the future. We at the Pastoral Planning Office, with the help of the parishes, the many diocesan offices,

and the NYC Department of City Planning, have gathered a great deal of information about ourselves and our neighborhoods. These are the "Signs of the Times". We will present these reports to the parishes after they have completed a cycle of the Pastoral Planning Council training. The information is grouped as follows:

1. ***The People of the Parish and its Neighborhood:***

age, gender, race, language spoken and English ability, marital status, household size, including the number of children under 18, household income: compiled from the survey of those at Mass on a Sunday, and from the US Census 2000.

2. ***The Sacraments:*** numbers of Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations over several years; Mass attendance.

3. ***Education and Religious Formation:*** school enrollment (if applicable), religious education, RCIA.

4. ***Incomes and Finances:*** parish operating income, expenses, fund balances, and diocesan parish subsidy (if applicable); household income reported in the parish survey; median household income for the neighborhood; percent of poor people.

This information, coupled with the consultation of parishioners, is the "Signs of the Times." Veiled somewhere in this data and within our stories is a course of future action that will enable us to more faithfully live out the Gospel in the days and years to come.

The data, which we will provide, is more than a compellation of numbers and charts. The "Signs of the Times" tell a story of who we are as a people and points to a place where we are called by the Spirit. The question which remains for each of us to answer is simple: What will be our response as a local church in Brooklyn and Queens to these changes we see? In a very real sense, examining the "Signs of the Times" will enable us to write a prescription for the health and vitality of each parish and for our entire Diocese.



I see a modest surplus in the fourth quarter...