

In the Heartland

Welcome and Security

By Bishop Richard Pates

Bishop of Des Moines

What a difference a year makes! A few Sundays ago, a rather typically dressed man came into one of our churches during Mass and walked halfway down the aisle before seating himself. A good number of eyes carefully focused on him.

In light of the mass shootings that have occurred, in a few Churches in the south, suspicions about this man surfaced. Was he capable of some disturbance, of a crime, of violence? Eventually, the individual left. He was intercepted on the way out by an usher. It turns out the man's intentions were very legitimate.

Because of the fear that has been generated through gruesome, violent images on 24 hour media, we have come to be unsettled and hypersensitive about our security. Just think, most likely a year ago this man would have been taken for Jesus whom we are called to welcome!

Fear is real and it undermines feeling safe. Thus in our churches we are called to address security concerns in a manner that is reasonable and enables us to fully celebrate our liturgy and to be hospitable communities so that visitors and searchers feel warmly welcomed. Jesus teaches us in John 13:34-35 to love one another just as he loves us so that others may witness that we are Disciples of Christ. This teaching is further given clarity by *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II,

where the mission of the Church is defined as both social and spiritual: a sign and an instrument of our union with God, and the unity of all humankind. The Church, therefore, seeks to imitate Christ's love for humanity by opening wide our arms to welcome all those who wish to seek out Christ.

The Churches of the Diocese of Des Moines are united in this mission and are places for all who wish to enter to seek Our Lord. Yet, we are fully aware of the reality and challenge that we face in a world filled with brokenness, which could lend itself to physical dangers for those gathered in these spaces. Many have contacted members of the diocesan staff and me about this situation. What are the diocese and our churches to do?

Several experts familiar with the situation have helped us to identify three specific situations which call for our attention in providing security. In order of likely occurrence they are:

- health emergencies
- natural disaster/weather emergencies
- active shooter/intruder emergencies

In light of the foregoing, the Diocese is creating and implementing a crisis action plan for each of the foregoing possible emergencies in order to provide as much security as feasible.

A special committee is developing a "security template" that will be taken to each of our schools/parishes in order that it might be implemented on the local level. A project director or team will be identified to attend to the important role of introducing the template to each parish.

Secondly, an ad hoc security committee comprised of community professionals, namely Chief of Police John Quinn of Waukee, Chief Dana Wingert and Police Major Alan Tunks of Des Moines and Melanie Tyrce a representative of Catholic Mutual, Father John Ludwig and diocesan attorney, Frank Harty, have met to apply best practices to church safety issues.

This group provided five security measures for all parishes and schools of the Diocese which will be incorporated in the “security template.”

- 1) All parish/school campuses will be declared “weapons free zones” with active police officers in their official capacity exempt from any ban on weapons. This exemption includes off duty officers but not retired officers.
- 2) Signage should be posted in prominent places declaring that the campus is a “weapons free zone” and language to this effect should be included in parish and school policy.
- 3) Hiring of law enforcement officers to provide security at parish liturgies must have the specific permission of the bishop. This does not include those retained for traffic management.
- 4) Ushers are a critical ministry in the Church and they will have an important role in a total crisis management plan. Training on how to react in a multiplicity of situations will be undertaken and should include instructions to have a phone available to call 911. Off duty police officers should not be asked or scheduled to be a safety officer during liturgy.

5) Parishes should utilize the same doors for both entering and exiting the church for liturgies. These should remain open during services while paying close attention to any “out of the ordinary” participant. Other doors can be locked throughout the service and be used only for exit in emergency situations.

The Diocese of Des Moines is grateful for the “template” committee as well as the quality consultants who bring expert guidance in our efforts to introduce measures of safety to our church practice while retaining the “welcoming” spirit of Christ which is at the heart of our mission.