

**Diocese of Worcester**  
**Office of the Bishop**  
49 Elm Street  
Worcester, Massachusetts 01609

March 5, 2010

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

More than six years ago, the Diocese of Worcester began the process of pastoral planning for more vibrant parish life in order that we might give more meaningful witness to the mission of the Catholic Church in Central Massachusetts. As a result of this critical process, many changes have already occurred in various parts of the Diocese of Worcester, and I am grateful to the people of our diocese who have contributed to this effort with their time and insights.

As you may know, the process has been underway in earnest in the City of Fitchburg for nearly a year. Parish profiles were developed along with on-site visitations, followed by monthly meetings with representatives of each Fitchburg parish and their pastors. This enabled the city-wide focus group and the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee to develop a pastoral plan. I value their insights and recommendations for establishing a clear mission and vision for the Catholic Church in Fitchburg.

The Fitchburg committee identified the following needs for the Catholic Church to provide a stronger presence in that city: religious education for all ages; outreach to the poor and Hispanic members in our neighborhoods; and more human, financial and pastoral resources available in parishes to assist pastors in addressing various ministerial needs. The committee also saw a need for greater outreach to our youth, to the local college community and to those who struggle with physical disabilities to participate actively in parish life. That same committee underscored the rich faith life that is part of the heritage of the Catholic Church in Fitchburg, including many ethnic devotional practices and social activities, as well as the celebration of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass. Lastly, there was an overall realization that the charters of our parishes in Fitchburg have changed over the decades. Today there are different ethnic communities to serve and a significant change in the makeup of our neighborhoods leading to different pastoral challenges. To that end, the process developed recommendations for new parish configurations that would best serve all these needs today and tomorrow.

Following this extensive process and having reviewed all the recommendations, I have decided to establish four new territorial parishes in the City of Fitchburg effective July 1, 2010, essentially ending the charters of all eight existing parishes, whether national or territorial. The four new parishes will be as follows: St. Bernard Parish worshipping at St. Camillus de Lellis Church and serving the northern part of the city; St. Anthony Parish at St. Anthony Church serving the downtown area, St. Joseph Parish at St. Joseph Church serving West Fitchburg including the Cleghorn neighborhood, and St. Francis Parish at St. Francis Church serving the south and east neighborhoods of the city.

The patrimony, including assets and liabilities of St. Camillus de Lellis Parish and St. Bernard Parish, which includes St. Bernard Elementary School and St. Bernard Cemetery, will all be part of the new St. Bernard Parish at St. Camillus Church. The patrimony and traditions of Immaculate Conception, Sacred Heart of Jesus, Madonna of the Holy Rosary, as well as their assets and liabilities, will be assumed by the other three newly established parishes. Over the coming weeks, the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee will meet with parish focus groups and, together with the Fitchburg Planning Committee, will present recommendations for the assignment of patrimony and specific territorial boundaries. One of the new parishes will also welcome those celebrating the Mass in Latin using the Extraordinary Form. There has also been discussion about the possible use of an available site in the city of Fitchburg as a Religious Education Center for the entire city. More discussion must happen on this topic before a decision can be made.

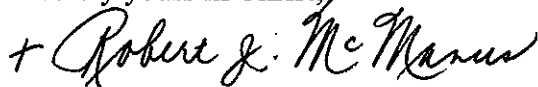
I know that it is hard to hear that a beloved parish church is being closed, since, for many Catholics, parish life is an extension of our family life. Yet I remain convinced that these decisions are necessary at this point in the life of the Catholic Church in Fitchburg in order for the Catholic community to grow and meet current and future challenges. This pastoral reconfiguration can effectively provide the foundation for the shared vision which the planning committee developed over the past year. As recent liturgical readings on Sunday mornings have reminded us, we must keep our eyes fixed on the Lord, as we seek the Kingdom of God. We cannot rely on our past accomplishments but must take up the mission of the Church in our day to spread the Good News of salvation in our neighborhoods.

I extend my sincere thanks to the pastors and the parish focus group volunteers who have helped me in my pastoral responsibility to guide the Church through times of change and renewal. It is natural during a process like this for rumors to spread and for some to question both the intentions and integrity of the process. People involved in pastoral planning and many parishioners recognize deep down that change is needed so that our pastoral efforts and resources do not continue to be consumed by the need to maintain buildings at the expense of ministry.

Please join me in praying for the continuing mission of the Catholic Church in Fitchburg as well as our entire diocese. As St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, "We boast in hope of the glory of God. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:5) May our shared commitment to renewed parish life which we cherish so deeply become a beacon of Christian hope in our homes and in our neighborhoods.

With every prayerful best wish for a blessed season of Lent, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert J. McManus".

Most Rev. Robert J. McManus, S.T.D.  
Bishop of Worcester