

A Heritage of Hope: Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Worcester

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

“Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Ps. 127). I have chosen these words of the ancient psalmist to guide my reflections as I write this pastoral letter to you, the clergy, consecrated women and men and lay faithful of the Diocese of Worcester. The topic of this letter is pastoral planning. I undertake this task in a spirit of joyful gratitude to Almighty God for the heritage of hope that is at the very heart of the pastoral life of our diocesan church. For over fifty seven years, God has showered our Diocese with his abundant graces that have allowed the mission of the Church to be carried out in Central Massachusetts for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

When I was installed as the fifth Bishop of Worcester on May 14, 2004, I was very pleased to find a pastoral planning process in place. At the beginning of this pastoral letter, I wish to thank Father Michael Rose who has, until recently, chaired the Pastoral Planning Committee with insight and commitment. I also want to thank all the other members of the committee who have, over these four years, served the Diocese of Worcester with their time, personal commitment and pastoral concern for the mission of our diocesan church. Finally, a sincere word of thanks and appreciation goes to all the members of parish committees who have worked assiduously in reflecting on the vitality of their parish life and in helping to form parish clusters throughout the Diocese.

As an integral part of the pastoral planning process, every parish in the Diocese has become part of a cluster. The purpose of these parish clusters was to assist the parishes in promoting pastoral vitality through the sharing and cooperation of parish programs, resources and other pastoral initiatives. I believe that this parish clustering has helped our Catholic faithful to realize an important lesson about what it means to be a part of the wider community of faith that is the Diocese of Worcester. While Catholics primarily experience the sacramental and pastoral life of the Church in their local parish, it is through faith and baptism that every Catholic becomes a member of the universal Church which is present in every particular church or diocese.

The parish is crucial to the life of the local diocese and indeed, the universal church. In fact, the vitality of a diocese is directly affected by the pastoral vitality of the parishes that constitute it. It is in the local parish that the Catholic experience comes to life. Through the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments, the Church grows and is strengthened in her divine mandate to carry on the saving work of Christ in the world today and to be in the words, of the Second Vatican Council, “a light to the nations” (Lumen Gentium, #1)

The local or neighborhood parish has proved to be particularly important in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. I recently read that between 1820

and 1920, thirty million Catholic immigrants came to the shores of United States. During that time, the parish became the place where the Catholic faith of these newly-arrived immigrants was nurtured and protected in a social climate that was not always hospitable to their faith and religious practices. In the case of thousands of Catholic immigrants, the parish served as a type of sanctuary where not only their faith but also their ethnic and cultural customs were preserved. Indeed, many Catholic immigrants were convinced that to lose their native language and cultural practices would seriously weaken the understanding and practice of their faith. Because of this reality, cities throughout the United States saw the rapid emergence of “ethnic parishes” where faith, language, culture and piety were celebrated. This fact accounted for the number of parish churches, sometimes only blocks away from each other, that we have today in cities like Worcester, Fitchburg, Gardner and Southbridge.

Many of us will remember the time, not so many years ago, when the parish with its church, rectory, convent and school was at the very heart of our neighborhoods. Without having many economic resources but rich in faith and love for their Church, Catholics sacrificed generously to construct magnificent churches to the honor and glory of God. Parish schools were often built so that under the instruction of religious sisters and brothers, the children of the newly arrived immigrants could receive an education that would help them become productive members of their Church and society. A profound sense of affection and personal attachment resulted from the significant role that the parish played in the lives of Catholic families over several generations. The most memorable and pivotal moments in the life of countless Catholic families, baptisms, first communions, confirmations, weddings, ordinations to the priesthood and diaconate and funerals, were all celebrated within one’s “home parish.”

In the last generation or two, a number of social, economic and familial factors have arisen that have dramatically affected the vitality and viability of some of our parishes, particularly those in our larger urban centers like the city of Worcester. Parishes that at one time numbered over a thousand families or more have experienced a radical reduction in the enrollment of active parishioners due in some measure to relocation of numerous Catholics to the suburbs or to a shift in demographics. The number of Masses that were celebrated on a Sunday has, in many parishes, been reduced. Even with such a reduction in the number of Lord’s Day Masses, the combined attendance at these remaining Masses is often quite low. In a parish church that seats five or six hundred people or more, there are on a regular basis fewer than two hundred parishioners who attend Mass in the course of the weekend. This pastoral reality, while difficult and indeed disconcerting to acknowledge, has led to the formation of the pastoral planning process that has been at work in the Diocese of Worcester for the last four years.

A question that can and should be asked is: What is the goal or the purpose of pastoral planning? Simply stated, the goal of pastoral planning is to promote further the Church’s essential mission of evangelization, that is, bringing Christ to others by reinvigorating the pastoral life and vitality of a given parish or group of parishes. Some might say that what is driving this process is simply a matter of finances. That is to say, a parish might be closed or merged with one or more other parishes because it does not have the financial resources to remain in existence or survive on its own. To be sure, the economic factor of parish life is an important factor in assessing the present and future viability of a parish. However, there are other factors that contribute to the pastoral

vitality of a parish. For a parish to be what it truly should be, a community where faith is engendered, deepened and lived out in love, then the parish must have a strong sacramental life at the heart of which is the celebration of the Eucharist in a manner that truly builds up the faith, hope and love of the worshipping community. The faith must be passed on to future generations. Therefore, it is imperative that a vibrant parish have an excellent religious education program where all the people of the parish, children, adolescents and adults alike, are introduced to the person of Jesus Christ and then to allow that personal relationship to infuse every dimension of their lives and to express itself in works of charity and justice.

Yet it must be acknowledged that when the vitality of a parish begins to diminish in a number of various ways such as a precipitous decline in Mass attendance or a dramatic drop in the number of sacramental celebrations such as baptisms and weddings or the shrinking of a parish religious education program, the financial viability of a parish soon becomes a serious concern. However, when financial concerns impinge upon the very future of a parish, many parishioners are surprised or even frustrated and angered because, as they often claim, they did not know the precarious financial condition of their parish.

The Code of Canon Law, which is the universal law of the Roman Catholic Church, stipulates that every parish is to have a finance council that meets regularly and is responsible for advising and assisting the pastor in exercising his financial stewardship of the parish (Can. 537). I firmly believe that all parishioners are responsible for the stable financial condition of their parish. Therefore, they have a right to be made aware of the status of their parish's finances. To that end, I have established a diocesan policy that requires that at the very least, every pastor in the Diocese of Worcester must provide his parishioners with an annual financial report that accurately details in a comprehensive way the financial situation of the parish, including savings and debts.

In parishes throughout the United States, the phenomenon of stewardship is emerging and is proving to be a remarkable support for the pastoral life of a diocese and its parishes. For two years, our diocesan Stewardship and Development Office has sponsored a day long seminar on stewardship that has focused on how the generous and committed use of time, talent and treasure, rooted in a profound spirituality of gratitude and Christian solidarity, can contribute significantly to the pastoral vibrancy of the Church.

As I face the challenging decisions that I must make as a result of the findings of our pastoral planning process, I undertake this responsibility in the spirit of stewardship. As your bishop, it is my solemn duty and responsibility to see that the mission of the Church is promoted in such a way that its various resources, especially the irreplaceable resource of our devoted and zealous priests, are employed in the most pastorally effective and responsible manner. With your prayerful support and understanding, I trust that all the decisions that will be made in the months and years ahead will in fact serve to attain this pastoral goal.

As a result of the pastoral planning process, it has become evident that a type of pastoral reconfiguration of some of our parishes needs to be made. At this time, I see at least six types of pastoral models emerging. These models reflect a process of consultation that has grown out of the efforts of the various parish clusters throughout the Diocese of Worcester. I have said from my first days as your bishop that the decisions

that I would make about the future of parish life in the Diocese would be made only after the people of the parish or parishes involved had been consulted. That principle has guided my decision making process in certain parish reconfigurations. For example, St. Andrew the Apostle Parish became a mission of St. Peter Parish in Worcester in June, 2006, and Sacred Heart Parish and Notre Dame Parish in Southbridge are now served by one pastor and a pastoral staff.

The first model would be the one that has been most familiar to us. This would be the single parish that would conduct its pastoral life as has been the case since its foundation while still participating actively in its parish cluster. The second model would be the joining of two or more parishes that are served by one pastor and a pastoral staff that may include an associate pastor, one or more deacons or consecrated persons or laypersons in various pastoral ministries. This model has been lived out for some time in the Diocese and has seen new examples in the last several years. A third model would entail the formation of a new parish from two existing parishes. This model is in the process of coming to fruition in the case of Holy Angels Parish in Upton and St. Michael Parish in Mendon that are forming a new parish, St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish.

A fourth model would reflect the situation in which a parish becomes a mission of another parish. It might, in fact, be the case that the newly established mission had originally been part of the parish to which it has been canonically joined. As mentioned above, St. Andrew the Apostle Mission in Worcester and St. Martin Mission in Otter River are examples of this model. A fifth model would involve a parish that is canonically suppressed, that is, closed. Its people would then become a part of a neighboring parish or a parish that is geographically proximate. A sixth model would call for the establishment of a new parish in a part of the Diocese where there has never been a parish before. At the present moment, I do not see this model presenting itself, but it is always a possibility that cannot be dismissed or overlooked in the pastoral planning process.

In coming to any decision about the future of some of our parishes, I shall try to the best of my ability to rely on the objective data and observations that have emerged and have been presented to me through parish cluster reports and recommendations. I have already found such reports very helpful in making some decisions about the combining of parishes, the establishing of parish missions and the placement of our priests. In the very near future, parish visitors will be going to all of our parishes in the city of Worcester to attend the Lord's Day Masses to gain a sense of parish vitality in relation to Mass attendance and the condition of parish churches. These parish visitors are people from our own Diocese. Some of them are members of our Diocesan Pastoral Council and our diocesan Pastoral Planning Committee. I hope their visit will contribute to the objectivity of the decision making process concerning future parish reconfigurations. I ask you to receive them with Christian hospitality and respect for the responsibility they have so generously assumed.

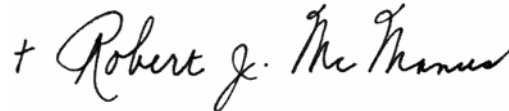
I am well aware that the pastoral decisions that I have to make in the next several months concerning the future of some of our parishes, most immediately in the city of Worcester, involve deep feelings and emotions. I would be dismayed if our Catholic people were not keenly concerned about their parishes and how their parish life will be affected. Yet I firmly believe in the faith and good will of our Catholic people in the Diocese of Worcester who wish to be part of vibrant and flourishing parishes where the

faith that has been handed onto them will be passed on to their family, friends and neighbors. As our late beloved Holy Father, Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical that looked forward to the dawning of the third millenium of Christianity, “We, as a Church, must face the future with trusting optimism, but without underestimating the problems we face...What awaits us therefore is an exciting work of pastoral revitalization, a work involving all of us.” (Novo Millenio Ineunte, #29). In reconfiguring some of our parishes, no doubt something cherished will be lost in the transition. It is my fervent hope that at the same time, much will also be gained in terms of parish vitality.

When the Diocese of Worcester celebrated its Golden Anniversary in the Jubilee Year of 2000, a history of the Diocese was written. In that narrative, our forebears in the faith here in Worcester County were referred to as “giants in those days.” In every age of the Church, members of the Catholic community are called upon to live the precious gift of faith authentically and to promote the mission of the Church in a way that will be pastorally effective and ultimately help people to grow in holiness of life. Our forebears in the faith did it in their time. Now it is our time to do the same. We honor the achievements of our Diocese’s past by fashioning a vision for its future that will preserve, strengthen and invigorate the heritage of hope that has been bequeathed to us.

As I close this pastoral letter, I ask you to join me in confiding our pastoral planning process and the decisions that will flow from it to the powerful intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church. May Our Blessed Lady bring our prayers and petitions for serenity, pastoral cooperation and mutual understanding in the Diocese of Worcester to her Son who is Head and Good Shepherd of the Church we truly love.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert J. McManus". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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

October 15, 2007
Memorial of St. Teresa of Avila
Doctor of the Church