

A pastoral letter on our future together

INTRODUCTION



As we move into a New Year, the time is right for us to adjust our vision to “new things” for our Diocese. While what “has been” in our past experience is comfortable, we are a living, changing Catholic community, a changing local Church that is, in St. Augustine’s words, a “beauty ever ancient, ever new (Confessions, X).”

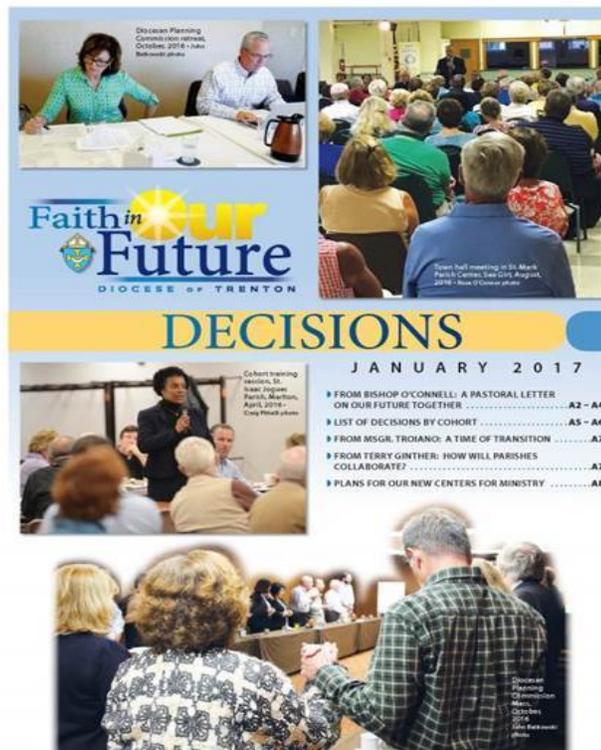
Our ancient faith always remains beautiful, true and eternal although times and circumstances have changed and require us to develop “new ways” to foster, promote and witness to our faith in order to address and re-engage an ever-changing environment. Such adaptation has been the case throughout the Catholic Church’s 2,000-year history and we must now seize the moment again, in our time, in the Diocese of Trenton, “ever new,” as we look forward with “Faith in Our Future.”

THE INSPIRATION OF POPE FRANCIS

I begin this letter with excerpts from two homilies given by our Holy Father Pope Francis several years ago:

“The law of the Spirit ‘leads us on a path of continual discernment to do the will of God,’ and this scares us. A fear that has two temptations: the first is that of ‘going back,’ saying that up to this point is fine, but ‘no farther’ and so in the end, ‘let’s stay here.’.... this temptation of ‘going back,’ because we are safer there. But complete safety is in the Holy Spirit, who carries you forward, who gives you this trust. In this moment in the Church’s history, we can neither go back nor go off the road (Pope Francis, Homily at Casa Santa Marta, June 12, 2013).”

“Jesus tells us that new wine requires new wineskins. In the Christian life, and also in the life of the Church, there are old structures, outdated structures, they have to be renewed! And the Church has always been attentive to this...It always allows itself to be renewed according to places, times and persons. The Church has always done this work, right from the beginning! ...Don’t be afraid of this! Don’t be afraid of the innovation of the Gospel. Don’t be afraid of the innovation that the Holy Spirit works within us! Don’t be afraid of the renewal of structures! ...If we are afraid, we know that our Mother is with us and, like children who are a bit afraid, let’s go to her and she — as the most ancient antiphon says — ‘guards us with her mantle, with her protection as mother’ (Pope Francis, Homily at Casa Santa Marta, July 6, 2013).”



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THE CONTEXT

In recent years, dioceses all over the country have had to come to terms with the changing realities in the life of the Catholic Church and its faithful. It is no longer the Church of “our parents or our grandparents;” it is not even the Church that many of us knew growing up. This realization has not always been “comfortable” or easy — it never is — but change and adaptation has always been necessary for our faith not only to remain strong but also, and more importantly, for our faith to grow stronger. We must acknowledge and endure the “growing pains” that accompany any process of change but we cannot be overcome or discouraged by them. God’s grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit have always seen the Catholic Church through change, and so it will be now and into the future if we open ourselves to God’s grace with a living faith.

THE CURRENT SITUATION IN THE DIOCESE OF TRENTON

To help us understand the current situation in



the Diocese of Trenton, let us consider some important facts gathered directly from its 107 parishes. These facts are sobering but, as Bishop, I do not believe that we are in irreversible or terminal danger. I do believe, however, that we have some genuine causes for concern. Here is why.

In the Diocese of Trenton, it is estimated that there are between 673,500 and 774,000 Catholics living in the 107 parishes in our four counties, with 267,416 registered households. In the past, the Catholic population was estimated at 830,000. The average parish size includes approximately 2,500 of these registered households, with the lowest parish count of 250 households and the highest parish count of 7,436 households.

Present statistics drawn from annual parish reports reveal a weekend Mass attendance of between 17% and 18% of Catholics in the Diocese. Sadly, the numbers have steadily declined within our lifetime.

Participation in the Sacraments of Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmation and Marriage has also declined. Surprisingly, even the number of Funeral Masses, once considered a faith obligation of families of deceased active Catholics, has also decreased.

That having been said, the Gospel has not changed; the Church's teachings have endured; and obligations incumbent upon Catholics — for example, the commandment to "keep holy the Sabbath" — have remained in place, but their compelling importance in the daily life of Catholics today has diminished or, at least, wavered significantly. Add to that the declining enrollments reported each year in our Catholic schools and parish religious education programs and we discover a generation or two of Catholics who are largely unfamiliar with the tenets of the Catholic faith. We cannot neglect youth and young adults in the Diocese and our parishes. They are the best, the only, hope for our future.

National research studies among baptized Catholics born after 1980 dramatically bear out the developments we see locally. When society replaces faith and religion with secular alternatives that are directly opposed to Church teaching and practice, Catholics do not know how to respond, defend against or resist such alternatives. They have become "cultural Catholics" or "Catholics in name only." This is not to say that they are not good people doing good things but, rather, they are simply uninformed about their faith and the influence that faith should have in their lives as Catholic individuals and as Catholic communities within the local Church.

As a consequence, we also see that young Catholic men and women are no longer pursuing priestly or religious vocations as in the past in the kind of numbers needed to

minister to and serve Catholics who DO want to practice their faith, who DO hear the Gospel at Mass, who DO receive the Sacraments, who DO reach out in service to the poor and DO perform the Church's works of mercy. Currently, there are 163 active Diocesan priests serving Catholics in the Diocese, and 266 religious women and 57 religious men. At the same time, priests and religious currently serving in the Church but reaching retirement age seem to be the only numbers steadily increasing. Twenty-three priests have retired in the last five years and 63 priests are eligible for retirement in the next 10 years.

With these sobering spiritual realities confronting us in the Diocese of Trenton and beyond, and the constantly shifting Catholic demographics within the four counties of the Diocese — Monmouth, Burlington, Ocean and Mercer — it simply does not make any sense to cling to sentimental memories of “the way we were;” or to nostalgically fantasize about a return to “the good old days.” Time moves forward and it is not possible to go back. We must forge ahead to meet and embrace the future with a living, dynamic and active faith.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to these spiritual circumstances, we must also acknowledge that the economy has not been on our side in most of the parishes of the Diocese. Families have also experienced similar financial burdens in their homes. Parishes — our “spiritual homes” — are not much different. The costs of operating our Catholic churches, schools and institutions continue to escalate while the condition of physical plants and buildings deteriorate in many of our 107 parishes, regularly draining already limited resources with expenses that parishes just cannot afford.

While the Annual Catholic Appeal helps fund Diocesan operations one year at a time, it, too, has experienced a significant downturn. For the first time since 1992, the Diocese has embarked upon a major fundraising campaign, “Faith to Move Mountains,” the sole purpose of which is to endow the wide-reaching spiritual works as well as the “mountainous” material needs of the Diocese and its parishes for a future that we “can have faith in.”

The Catholic Church in our Diocese is not simply about raising money, as some suggest. It is impossible, however, to continue to support current ministries to our parishioners or to establish any new faith-based initiatives without the resources necessary to provide what people want and need from the Catholic Church. On average, only 42% of registered households in the Diocese give financial support.

We also need to be aware of the multicultural realities that are part of the changing landscape of the Diocese. Statistics indicate that our Catholic population is now 15% Hispanic or Latino requiring ministries specific to these growing numbers. Six of the 10 parishes with the greatest number of baptisms in the Diocese have significant Hispanic populations. Attendance at Masses celebrated in Spanish has increased by 45% over the last four years. Currently, in addition to English and Spanish, Mass is celebrated in 10 other languages throughout our four counties.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

So what do we do? Giving up is not an option. The Lord Jesus assured “Where two or three gather in My name, there am I in the midst of them (Matthew 18:20).” Losing faith is not an option. The Lord Jesus promised “I will be with you all days even to the end of time (Matthew 28: 20).” Surrendering to societal or cultural trends is not an option. The Lord Jesus proclaimed “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14: 6)” and, in another

place, “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16: 18).”

Some within the Church have concluded that Catholics should simply accept the “fact” that we are destined to become less, to become a smaller Church. While statistics and other data might suggest such a view, the Church’s duty to undertake a “new evangelization” argues against it. I believe that it is not so much a case of growing smaller or “becoming less” as a Church, a Diocese or a parish; I believe it is a case of “doing more WITH less.” The challenge before us all is to figure out “how.”

FAITH IN OUR FUTURE

As Bishop, I consulted other bishops and considered the experiences of their dioceses, seeking successful models and effective strategies used to address similar challenges we face here. I then interviewed and engaged a Seattle-based Church consulting firm, The Reid Group, with its proven record of success working with various dioceses in the United States for over 20 years, among them the Archdioceses of Indianapolis, New York, Newark, and Seattle as well as the Dioceses of Orange, Orlando, Peoria, Rochester, St. Petersburg, Syracuse and Scranton. Their mission is “to help leaders and organizations transform their challenges into opportunities” for the strengthening of their own institutional mission. Although most of their clients faced similar challenges as the Diocese of Trenton, I directed the firm “not to impose ‘boiler-plate’ strategies” upon us but, rather, to work with our pastors and parishes to develop recommendations specific to our own Diocese.

I launched an initiative called “Faith in Our Future” in the Diocese almost two years ago with consultation of the Diocesan Curia, the Episcopal Council and the Diocesan Presbyterate. Rather than initiating a “top-down” approach, I sought from The Reid Group a “grass roots” team effort involving the laity as well as the clergy throughout the Diocese.



Twenty-five “Cohorts” or small teams of neighboring parishes utilizing lay leaders as well as clergy were established by pastors to surface a “sense of the faithful” regarding the future direction of all our 107 parishes. The Reid Group provided training to the members of these 25 Cohorts, under the guidance of recently retired pastor Msgr. Leonard Troiano and Diocesan Director of Pastoral Life and Mission Mrs. Terry Ginther. The Cohorts then used various means to gather information and data from our parishes including surveys, questionnaires, town hall meetings, small group discussions and other conversations focused on the future direction of the Diocese. The effort was unlike anything the Diocese

has ever seen. To avoid any controlling influence or intervention by the Bishop, I was asked to remain neutral throughout the entire process until the Cohort recommendations were processed by a Diocesan-wide Planning Commission (DPC) created by Msgr. Troiano and Mrs. Ginther.

Following many months of discussions, conversations and even lively debate within and among the Cohorts and the DPC, a series of “final recommendations” were presented to me by the DPC in late November 2016. I shared these recommendations with all the priests of the Diocese in meetings held in each of the four vicariates — Monmouth, Burlington, Ocean and Mercer Counties — and with both the Diocesan Curia and the Episcopal Council in separate meetings throughout December 2016. The task then fell to me, as Bishop, to make decisions regarding the recommendations and input I received. These recommendations became for me the subject of much prayer, reflection and soul searching prior to finalizing them.

I chose the date of Jan. 25, 2017, to make my decisions public because of the important feast the Church celebrates on this day, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul whose entire life was changed by his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ.

An Implementation Commission will be established to guide and encourage parishes in the process of putting my decisions in place and monitoring their progress. Msgr. Troiano and Terry Ginther will coordinate the process and will be the contact persons at the Chancery for any questions. It is important to note that the recommendations and decisions offered through the “Faith in Our Future” initiative are a “first step” in the reorganization of the Diocese, a “work in progress.” Once implemented, these decisions, no doubt, will give rise to other decisions and changes as the future of the Diocese unfolds.

PRINCIPLES AND PRIORITIES FOR DECISIONS

Following the lead and example of Pope Francis in developing “principles” for the reorganization and revitalization of the leadership of the universal Church, I have identified my own set of principles and priorities for the task at hand. These include:

- (1) evangelization, the all-important and all-encompassing effort to bring the Gospel prayerfully and effectively to the parishes and people of the Diocese for our future;
- (2) collaboration, the strategic model chosen by the Cohorts and DPC, to ensure that parishes work together with programs, staffing and resources to meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of the people of the Diocese for the sake of evangelization;
- (3) stewardship, the effort to establish the best possible use of parish resources, assets, facilities and properties — “doing MORE with less” — for the sake of evangelization;
- (4) accountability, the process of providing transparency in the management of the Diocese and all its parishes for the sake of evangelization, and
- (5) service, spiritual and pastoral “in-reach” and outreach to the populations that need to be served by the parishes of the Diocese, especially the sick, the elderly, the poor, the immigrant, youth and young adults, families and Catholics who have become estranged from the Church, again, for the sake of evangelization.

I would like to express my own thanks and that of the entire Diocese to everyone involved in this lengthy process; there are too many to name. Their monumental effort and investment of time give great witness to their “Faith in Our Future.”

Most Reverend David M. O'Connell, C.M.
Bishop of Trenton



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