



Diocese of Pittsburgh

111 Boulevard of the Allies, Pittsburgh, PA 15222-1618

Phone: 412-456-3010 • Fax: 412-456-3185

E-mail: dzubik@diopitt.org • Website: www.diopitt.org

Office of the Bishop

June 12, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers of Divine Mercy Parish:

On February 23, 2020, I celebrated Mass at Saint Benedict the Moor Church followed by a listening session with parishioners. The visit was in response to parishioners' concerns and the transfer of Father John Odeyemi, Parochial Vicar. At the listening session, parishioners at Saint Benedict the Moor shared the importance of their 130-year history of presence and ministry to Black Catholics in the Hill District and throughout the diocese, while also navigating the same systems of disadvantages and marginalization that Black Americans faced in the Pittsburgh region, the nation and the Church. They expressed that when Black Catholics see little of themselves reflected in the Church, being connected through a genuine relationship with its clergy takes on greater significance and value.

I charged Father Joe Freedy and Dr. Greta Stokes Tucker, as follow-up to the listening session, with forming and co-facilitating a small Task Force of parishioners who worship at Saint Benedict the Moor Church to develop and present to me recommendations to address parish concerns. The Task Force included Ms. Gwendolyn Young, Team Leader for the Diocesan National Black Catholic Congress Leadership Team, Ms. Katharine Dansby-Dean, Ms. Charelise Davis, Mrs. Diana James, Mr. Conrad Johnson, J.D., Mrs. Janice Simmons, Darrell Rubin, M.D., Ph.D., and Ms. Shelley Sims.

I would like to share with you the following direct quote in which the Task Force reported to me:

Those who serve in the Black community must be aware and sensitive to the historical and contemporary trauma of the people and mindful of how their actions, intentional or unintentional, may trigger a negative reaction within the parish community. Social justice as a value and an action is vital. As Black Catholics in this region, we, too, face racial and economic disparity and inequity, racial indifference, disenfranchisement, gentrification in our neighborhoods, and distrust of Black people, especially Black boys and men. Clergy and staff must be able to translate their love for the people into culturally and spiritually appropriate care and action, and be able to relate to local and national situations and concerns that impact those of African descent, especially the dynamics of racism and white privilege. We desire clergy who want to cultivate meaningful and authentic relationships with Black Catholics and are ready to confront systemic racism within the Church and American society as an effort towards racial healing and reconciliation. As noted in *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter from the Black Bishops in the United States*,

*Since African-American members of the American Church are to assume the responsibility to which the Church and our racial heritage call us, Black leaders in the Church—clergy, religious and lay—need encouragement and the authorization to use their competencies and to develop their expertise. Unhappily, we must acknowledge that the major hindrance to the full development of Black leadership within the Church is still the fact of racism." (19)*

We need clergy who are open or willing to self-examine their racial and cultural biases thereby leading them to more richly ministering to Black Catholics.

Given the continued marginalization of Black Catholics, locally and nationally, we must have clergy that seek to empower, inform, encourage, support and create opportunities for lay leaders to undertake leadership positions. This happens when intentional respect and inclusion is a priority

for the Diocese. Clergy assigned to minister to Black Catholics must seek to empower, inform, encourage, support and create opportunities for their parishioners. The role of a pastor is essential to the life of a parish, hence Saint Benedict the Moor Church needs a pastor with a demonstrated sensitivity to and a strong understanding of Black spirituality, inclusiveness, and community so that they may be more effective pastoral leaders. In addition, parishioners want clergy and lay pastoral ministers who are appreciative, knowledgeable, and respectful of the religious experience, history and culture of Black Catholics. This is not a call for separatism but instead for a pledge of commitment to the Church and to share in her witnessing to the love of Christ.

Born out of their love, concern, and hope for the Black Catholic community in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, the Task Force also provided me with specific goals and objectives. I share with you the following four goals and objects:

**Goal 1:**

To have an appropriately sensitive and trained clergy to minister to Black Catholics in order to better serve the faithful to whom they are called to minister.

**Objectives:**

1. Recommend and provide an opportunity for clergy to gain an understanding of Black Catholic spirituality and culture.
2. Consult with the diocesan National Black Catholic Congress Leadership Team and other Black Catholic leadership about formation opportunities for clergy, such as in person or online programs through the Institute for Black Catholic Studies, Xavier University in New Orleans and local experiences.
3. Offer and pay for clergy to attend anti-racism, anti-bias training.

**Goal 2:**

To more fully and meaningfully use the gifts and talents of parishioners of Saint Benedict the Moor in service of our Church as members of the Body of Christ by improving the communication and partnership between the parishioners and the pastor.

**Objectives:**

1. Build trust by creating and implementing a communication plan that takes into consideration all aspects of parish life and background of the laity.
2. Commitment by Bishop Zubik, or his designee, to return to Saint Benedict the Moor Church in 12-14 months to worship and for an updated assessment on the issues and recommendations.
3. Clarify the relationship with Saint Benedict the Moor School, the Extra Mile Foundation and the School Board.
4. Use the Advisory Councils and other leadership roles to involve parishioners in the decision-making and not merely inform once decisions are made and implemented.
5. Clearly outline the parish decision-making process and clear channels for communicating those decisions.
6. Provide periodic review of the parish finances in order to establish transparency and trust.

**Goal 3:**

To achieve racial, cultural diversity among the parish staff, committee chairs and councils in order to reflect and represent the diversity within the parish and improve the trust between parishioners and clergy.

**Objectives:**

1. Job announcements, recruitment and hiring of applicants for any parish positions should be inclusive and diverse.
2. Inform parishioners of job openings by publishing advertisements in the bulletin, bulletin boards in the church, email, and personal communication within a reasonable time period.
3. Plan orientations and training opportunities on the Black Catholic experience (i.e., history, spirituality) for all parish staff.

**Goal 4:**

To develop a plan to minister to Black Catholics and to engage their gifts and talents to serve the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

**Objectives:**

1. Develop a specific vocation plan for the recruitment of Black priests, deacons and religious.
2. Appoint Black Catholics to diocesan boards, commissions, planning and advisory committees so that there is diverse representation.
3. Job announcements, recruitment and hiring of applicants for any diocesan positions should be inclusive and diverse.

As I write this letter, I want each of you to know that I have taken to heart the expectations and dreams held by this Task Force. I feel certain that many of you hold the same desire as well.

The concluding piece of the Task Force's work came in the form of a recommendation. Allow me to share their recommendation as I received it:

**Special Recommendation of the Task Force for Black Catholics:**

Erect a Personal Parish to minister to the unique spiritual and cultural needs of Black Catholics and the Black community in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. A personal parish of this kind will provide for the following:

1. Raising consciousness and building a Black faith community that will enrich and be an integral part of the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Catholic Church Universal.
2. Preserving Black spiritual formation to adults and youth, evangelization, social justice, and leadership.
3. Providing a spiritual and cultural home for African and Caribbean Catholics.

Please note that in most cases a parish is established as a "Territorial Parish." A territorial parish is defined by a specific territory, a geographic region with defined boundaries, a priest(s) and people. The pastor is responsible for all the souls within the parish boundaries.

June 12, 2020

Page 4

A “Personal Parish” is a non-territorial parish which serves the spiritual needs of a particular population of Catholics that is not specifically addressed in other parishes. A Personal Parish must be designated by the Diocesan Bishop. In the case of a Personal Parish, anyone who desires to be a part of that Catholic community is welcome to join. The pastor is responsible for the souls of those belonging to the Personal Parish.

Having clarified the difference between a Personal and Territorial Parish, and reflecting on the above goals, objectives and recommendation, it is important for you to know that I must follow the required next steps in order to make a decision regarding the proposal to create a Personal Parish for the needs of the Black Catholic Community of Pittsburgh.

- a. Father Donley must submit to me a formal petition to create a Personal Parish signed by him and members of the Parish Finance Council.
- b. As required by Canon Law, this petition must be presented to members of Diocesan Priest Council for consultation. This will be presented on June 18, 2020.
- c. Once Priest Council has heard the petition and offered their counsel and I have received the opinion of the Vicars General, I will then make a decision as to the establishment of a Personal Parish.
- d. Following a favorable decision, I would move forward in determining clergy assignments for the new parish.
- e. In light of a favorable decision, the territorial parish of Divine Mercy, established by my decree on January 6, 2020, would remain a territorial parish with two church buildings: Epiphany and Saint Mary of Mercy.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge with much gratitude the work and proposals offered by the Task Force. I am grateful for their efforts and insights. I am grateful to each one of you for your concern and love for the Church. Please be assured of my prayers for you and all the faithful of Divine Mercy Parish.

Finally, I would very much look forward to coming to Saint Benedict Church to celebrate Mass on Sunday, July 12, barring any COVID-19 restrictions. Please pray that it may be so.

Grateful for our efforts together in being *On Mission for The Church Alive!* and for our belief that “Nothing is Impossible with God,” I am

Your brother in Christ,

+ 

Most Reverend David A. Zubik  
Bishop of Pittsburgh

DAZ:lar