My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The celebration of an anniversary provides an opportunity to pause and give thanks for what has been and to look forward to all that is still to come. As we enter into this year of celebration marking the 40th anniversary of the Diocese of Metuchen, I thought this would be a good time to reflect and to give thanks for what has been while looking ahead toward our future in hope, knowing it is towards God’s horizon that we journey together.

Since arriving in this local Church of Metuchen more than five years ago, I have come to love and appreciate the lay faithful, religious and clergy serving in our 90 parishes as well as in our Catholic schools and institutions. As your Shepherd, I know my deepest connection with the faithful is in the spiritual bonds that flow from our baptism and those that are strengthened in the Holy Eucharist, which is part of the reason I love visiting our parishes so often.

In my first year of serving you, I had the joy of visiting with and listening to many of you during my pastoral visits to each of our parishes, a practice I still enjoy. Born out of those first conversations, a series of pastoral priorities emerged which I shared with you in my first Pastoral Letter, “Lighting a fire in the heart of our world,” released near the conclusion of my first year here.

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As diocese celebrates 40 faith-filled years, Bishop asks priests, religious, laity to recommit themselves to the Lord and His mission

Spiritual Renewal

During those early months, as I traveled throughout the four counties of our diocese, I met individually with our priests and with groups of our deacons, religious and many lay leaders. It was a privilege to meet the youth in our Catholic schools and in our catechetical programs. Gratefully, I also came to know our different diocesan and parish apostolates, staff members and volunteers at our Catholic Charities’ sites, veterans and our seniors, as well as many other friendly and welcoming people. I was able to visit many of our nursing homes and all of our prisons, as well as Saint Peter’s University Hospital. Throughout all of my travels, I gained insights from the wealth of goodwill shared by the many good and faithful people here, all striving to be more and do more for Christ and His Church. This led me to discern the need for a period of spiritual renewal that would be advanced under the mantle of Mary, Our Mother.

Together, we began our spiritual renewal with the Year of Awakening, followed by the Consecration of our diocese to Jesus through Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, 2019. It was a high point for our diocese and for me personally as your Shepherd. I was inspired by the many transformative stories of new life that were brought about in so many peoples’ lives from our diocesan Consecration to Jesus through the loving heart of Our Blessed Mother Mary. In turn, it also brought forth hope that even further transformation would take place through the next steps that were planned in our parishes, Catholic schools and institutions.

Challenging Times

However, it was only a short time later when our Church of the present – all the lay faithful, the clergy and religious – would endure the weight of the publication of the devastating transgressions of past Church leaders. Adding to that weight was the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed down much of our normal parish life. As a result, we had to re-deploy our energies to the daily work of understanding how to stay safe and how to prevent the spread of the virus while continuing to build the Kingdom of God throughout our four counties. In spite of our diligent efforts to stay connected, we saw the normal sacramental life of the Church dissipate to a bare minimum. With indoor public Masses and gatherings halted and our Catholic schools closed for a brief time, the online streaming of Masses and creative messages from pastors and their staffs were the only ways left to keep parishioners engaged and connected. I am continually grateful for our pastors, priests, deacons and parish ministers, who developed creative ways to offer sacramental opportunities and moments for prayer. Knowing that it is the Lord who takes our sufferings upon Himself to bring us to the joy of the Resurrection, I insisted that we keep our churches and cemeteries open for prayer and adoration, to keep us grounded in our faith. Beneath the challenges of lockdowns and restrictions was always the deeper truth that we are bound together by a deeper reality: the bonds of faith, hope and love.

Encouragement and Hope

From the moment of our baptism, we are endowed with supernatural gifts that not even a pandemic can suppress. Now, as we journey forward while still managing the continuing effects of the pandemic, we are living in a God-given moment that calls us to arise – the call to celebrate together our 40 years of diocesan life! Desiring to be close to you and to share with you a renewed sense of the pastoral priorities that I set for us in my first Pastoral Letter, I decided to write this, my second Pastoral Letter. Taking into account the current landscape and sensing the reluctance or inability of some to return to the Eucharistic life of the Church in person, it is my desire that this Pastoral Letter offer to us a shared encouragement and hope for our path forward. The Lord has been so good to us. Without us realizing His plan, I believe that the Lord and Our Mother Mary blessed us with our Year of Spiritual Awakening and Consecration to help us through all the turmoil that was unknown to us, just around the corner. Now, He wants us to turn to Him with uplifted hearts, to share the story of salvation that is meant to continue in each of us – in our corner of His vineyard entrusted to us. He desires to do great things, especially now as we celebrate our 40th anniversary, a very special milestone.

We learn from biblical scholars that the number 40 is significant. We know of our Lord’s 40 days of prayer and fasting in the desert; Moses’ 40 years in the desert and his 40 days on Mount Sinai in prayer, during which he received the Ten Commandments from God; Jonah’s 40 days of preaching repentance in Nineveh; and Jesus’ 40 days with us after His resurrection, before ascending to the Father. Most often, the number 40 signaled a time of testing in preparation for a more profound encounter with the mystery of God and then living more completely for Him – on a mission. This was particularly true for the Israelites of old, being led 40 years through the desert by Moses. Their time in the desert prepared the people to be well-disposed for the Lord’s will. Their time on the journey provided them with opportunities to continue to place their hope and trust in God. This was profoundly true in their dependence on God for “manna.” Remember that “manna” was “the bread that came down from heaven” on a daily basis. There was no other food except for the manna and the quail that appeared in the evening hours.

The Call

The “daily bread” has become for us a prototype, or a foreshadowing of the daily Bread that Jesus would give us when He celebrated His Last Supper and gave us His Body and Blood as a perpetual promise that He would “remain with us until the end of the age.” Recalling the ancient story of their 40-year journey in the desert, in preparation for their inhabitation of the promised land, along with the Eucharistic imagery, we are offered this recurring theme: radical daily trust in God in preparation for the “more” He continually calls us to. This theme is even more remarkable and relatable to us during this milestone of 40 years as a diocesan Church. We must ask ourselves: what has God done for us? And what is He asking of me in response to His goodness and love?

St. Paul wrote, “in all things give thanks” (Thes 5:18). He did not advise us to give thanks for all things – but rather, in all things. This is a fitting context to place our 40 years as a diocesan Church. The emphasis is on our freedom to recognize God’s presence and providence in our lives and in the mystery of the Church. Even in the midst of challenges, obstacles and setbacks, God is ever faithful to His people. We are part of the great story of salvation that began with “Abraham, our father in faith,” which built to a high point with Mary’s fiat, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, and then the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are His living disciples, entrusted with carrying on the work of the Disciples, whom He remained with for 40 days until He ascended back to the Father, commissioning the
Apostles “to go and make disciples of all the nations…” (Matt. 28:19). In the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church has lived as a missionary, evangelical reality of the very presence of Jesus Christ in the world. Our 40 years as a diocesan Church is a continuation of Christ’s missionary mandate. In Middlesex, Somerset, Hunterdon and Warren counties, we now take up the ever ancient and ever new call to come and follow after Him, reproducing in our own lives His life, death and resurrection, and thus becoming His witness and invitation to others to the life He came to bring.

Focused Priorities

In my first Pastoral Letter to you, I set forth priorities that have guided us during the past five years. Now, as we begin the next phase of our diocese’s history, I am asking you to join me in embracing three priorities that will enable us to answer our Lord’s call to us right now, as we celebrate our 40th anniversary and begin our 5th decade as a local Church working to build up God’s Kingdom in our four beautiful counties.

Some basics our prayer life should include are:

1. **Sunday Mass**, of course, is the most important opportunity for prayer we have. If you are able, consider attending daily Mass at some point during the week or when possible.

2. **Spent time in Eucharistic Adoration** where we learn to meditate in the presence of Christ’s Eucharistic Heart. In honor of our anniversary year, I have asked that each of our deaneries – the different regions in our diocese – host a Eucharistic Forty Hours Devotion. All our parishes are also asked to regularly have time set aside for Eucharistic Adoration and benediction.

3. **Daily quiet time with God**, reading Scriptures or just being quiet in His presence will keep you connected to our Lord.

4. **Pray the Rosary**, the Divine Mercy Chaplet, and other daily devotions to Mary and the saints.

5. **Go to Confession frequently** – end your day with the Daily examen, asking for the grace to overcome your defects and sins. This will avail you to more freely love God and others, making you a more attractive witness to God’s loving presence in our midst and less selfish and self-minded.

Our renewal in faith and our life in the Church must be biblically based and sacramentally energized. So, I also want to encourage Scripture studies, which are an important tool in forming us in our faith. I have asked the Office of Evangelization to relaunch parish-based Scripture studies and I also ask all of our parishes do something to promote reengagement in or to increase the frequency of Scripture studies. Besides helping us individually, these studies assist us in our overall task – not only of becoming more authentic people of faith, but people of faith who want to share our faith with others, who begin the important work of evangelization with a transformed heart. Our pastors and parish leaders are always looking for ways to have us reflect more deeply on our ecclesial life, and our 40th anniversary is an opportune time for us to reflect on the most important elements of our identity as Christian Catholics, so I am grateful to our Shepherds for spearheading this effort.

The Mission of the Church springs forth from her identity, so we are called at this time to revitalize and renew some important areas of our ecclesial life to be more attuned to living in relationship with God. Of course, the more that we participate in the Eucharistic life of the Church – receiving His Body and Blood with an open heart – the more we are prepared and fit for the Mission entrusted to us: to make Christ known

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I am convinced that the root of all renewal is prayer and we must be evermore attentive to this call in our lives. We
Each day, we are provided with opportunities to perform a work of mercy – 40 times every person in our diocese is being called upon to act in His name, to reproduce the love of God the Father through His acts of mercy, and to merge into traffic. It might be saying a prayer with someone who is discouraged or grieving, even as we ourselves need prayers or might need a consoling ear to listen to us. There are numerous ways that we can put into practice the merciful presence of Jesus, and the 40th anniversary of our diocese provides us with a perfect opportunity to practice such spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Catholic Charities, along with our local parishes, will provide many possible suggestions for how to “put mercy into action” this coming Lent and Easter. You will be hearing more about this “40 Works of Mercy” initiative in our diocese in the coming days. I urge you to pray and to consider how God’s gracious love and mercy has impacted your own life, and then go out and do the same for others. How many lives are changed by our individual acts of mercy each day? The world needs the touch of Jesus – He touches the lives of those around us, through each of us, each day.

Vocations

Throughout these 40 years of our diocesan life, we have been blessed with generous priestly and permanent diaconate vocations as well as vocations to the consecrated life. Gratefully, in recent years we have seen an increased number of priestly vocations. Yet, together, you and I are still called to ask the Lord of the Harvest to send an abundance of workers to serve in His vineyard. The 40th anniversary of our diocese provides us an opportunity to consider how we might do this better. So, I ask you to consider: how do we actively build up a culture where vocations will flourish? Our world certainly challenges us in this, as for a young man or woman to hear the quiet whisper of the Lord can be a challenge amidst all the noise we constantly encounter. How do we create a culture where your children, grandchildren or fellow parishioners might hear the Lord’s call?

One initiative we started a few years ago, which has born fruit, is our Quo Vadis (Where are you going?) retreat in the summer for high school boys. It is a time of prayerful discernment, but also a time of joyful collegiality among faithful young men. What a blessing it would be if we could have at least one young man from each parish attend the retreat, hopefully leading to one seminarian from each parish. Can you imagine if we had 90 seminarians? That is potentially 90 future priests, who could one day serve as pastors in each of our parishes, or possibly even as your next bishop!

Vocations come from families, schools and parishes. Those considering a vocation are involved in our parish youth groups and likely volunteer to serve in our parishes. Many of our seminarians and young men discerning a vocation say that they were called by the Lord during Eucharistic Adoration. They attend our Catholic schools and religious education programs. Gratefully, we have been able to place two diocesan priests at two of the Catholic high schools in our diocese, to teach and minister to the students there, as well as to help foster vocations. Two of our diocesan priests and our diocesan vocations recruiter serve at St. Peter the Apostle University & Community Parish in New Brunswick, where they help to minister to the young adults at Rutgers University, alongside our dedicated religious and lay staff. Many dioceses have found their college campuses to be a rich source of vocations, so we are developing a stronger outreach there too, so that this may become more fertile ground for priestly and religious vocations.

If we want to have enough Shepherds to serve our parishes in the future, then we must look around our own families, in our parishes and in our schools. Who among those you know would be a good Shepherd and priest? Who might have the gifts and virtues we look for in a priest and be willing to take on this beautiful way of being with our Lord and serving His people? I have asked our diocesan vocations recruitment...
er to work with our pastors on establishing a parish vocation committee in each parish. These committed groups of people, especially families, would focus their prayer intentions on this good cause and also look inward within their own parishes, seeking good candidates, encouraging them and praying for them. This would be a concrete response to our Lord’s command to ask the Lord of the Harvest to provide for our needs.

Stepping Forward in Faith and Hope

Yes, the 40th anniversary of our diocese provides us with the perfect opportunity to recommit ourselves to the Lord and His Mission. After 40 years, I would say that the Church of Metuchen has passed the test and is prepared for more! The Lord needs us now to step forward and offer ourselves more fully to Him through prayer, works of mercy and our support of vocations for the good of our Church and our world. Despite the challenges we have had and any we may face in the future, we have the wind at our backs and the Blessed Mother pushing us on and holding us up. We also have one another to encourage us and to strengthen us along the way. This is certainly a time for us to pause and to give thanks for what has been, and while we place our trust in God, we cannot let Him work alone. Rather, we must continue to put into the deep as our Lord commands us in Scripture. He desires to provide us with more, both individually and as a diocesan family, we just have to trust and give all of ourselves to Him and then let Him work through us. His vision is so much broader, so much more fulfilling and higher than our own.

I pray that these past 40 years of building the Kingdom may be just the preparation we needed to take these next steps forward, growing closer to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, under the care and guidance of His Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Guadalupe. “Let nothing frighten and afflict you or trouble your heart... Am I not here, I, who am your mother?” Mary says to us. She is always with us, to guide and protect us. She will lead us in our essential task of evangelizing this corner of His vineyard entrusted to us - as we entrust ourselves more completely to her Son, as we commit to engaging in works of mercy, and as we create an even more abundant culture of vocations for the future service of our beloved Church. Thanks be to God, we are on this road together. Know of my love and prayers for you, and my great gratitude for you too! And please, remember to pray for me, too.