

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

May 17, 2008

My dear friends in Christ,

Last year, I wrote a pastoral letter entitled "A Heritage of Hope: Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Worcester," with the purpose of focusing our entire diocese on the nature and mission of each parish as a vibrant community where faith is engendered, deepened, and passed on to future generations.

For five years, all our diocesan parishes have worked together in clusters, reflecting upon their parish life, their ministries and even projecting as communities what would happen with fewer assigned clergy in their clusters.

For the past year, we have focused attention on the parishes in the City of Worcester. In a city with 21,960 registered Catholic households, of which 32% provide regular offertory support, we have 28 parishes and missions, operating 29 churches. At any one time, we can seat over 14,000 people in our Worcester churches. In the face of such statistics, it has become evident that the time to reevaluate what is really needed to best serve the Catholics in the city has arrived.

To this end, a pastoral planning process to evaluate parish vitality was established. The Pastoral Planning Committee, assisted by members of the Diocesan Pastoral Council and other active lay Catholics, visited every parish in the city and worked with them in addressing various questions in focus groups. That information was then gathered and analyzed in order to ascertain which parish communities were in fact pastorally vibrant, which were struggling with the full breadth of parish life, and those that were facing a serious decline in population and sacramental activity, particularly if they no longer had a distinct ethnic population to serve.

In the end, based on the information from focus groups and interviews, I have accepted the committee's recommendations that four parishes be closed and merged with other parishes. These include Holy Name of Jesus Parish, St. Casimir Parish, Ascension Parish, and St. Margaret Mary Parish. Additionally, Notre Dame des Canadiens Church will be closed. I have become convinced for pastoral reasons such as declining Mass attendance and little or no religious education or sacramental life that the spiritual lives of the parishioners would be better served in parishes with a more vibrant pastoral life. Allow me to address each decision more specifically.

A new parish called Holy Family Parish will be established and located at St. Joseph Church on Hamilton Street. Notre Dame des Canadiens Church and Holy Name of Jesus Church will be closed. All assets and liabilities associated with these parishes will transfer to the new Holy Family Parish.

St. Casimir Parish will be closed and its people will be welcomed into its neighboring parish, St. John, the mother church of our diocese. St. John Parish will also assume the assets and liabilities of the parish. St. John Parish, as many may recall, has welcomed other ethnic groups into its parish. I am confident that they will help the Lithuanian community to continue to preserve their religious and cultural heritage. In order to give ample time to adjust to the process, St. Casimir Church will remain open for another year for a Sunday Mass in Lithuanian and occasional daily use for funerals.

Ascension Parish will close and the parishioners will be welcomed back to their mother church, St. John Parish on Temple Street. St. John will assume the assets and liabilities of Ascension parish.

Due to the severely declining size of its congregation and limited parish life, St. Margaret Mary Parish will close and parishioners will be welcomed into St. Anne Parish in Shrewsbury, which many of the parishioners of St. Margaret Mary Parish have indicated as a natural transition.

Other changes are occurring in the city's parishes. Some of these changes immediately affect St. Joan of Arc Parish, St. Bernard Parish, Our Lady of Fatima Parish, St. Catherine of Sweden Parish and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish.

Effective July 1, 2008, St. Joan of Arc and St. Bernard Parish will no longer be twinned as a multi-parish pastorate.

Our Lady of Fatima Parish and St. Bernard Parish will become a merged parish effective July 1 to serve the needs of the Catholic community on the lower Lincoln Street and Belmont Hill area.

For the last year, St. Catherine of Sweden and Sacred Heart of Jesus Parishes have been twinned sharing one pastor. These two parishes are now being asked to work toward merging as one parish by 2010.

These specific announcements are part of a first phase of parish reconfiguration in the City of Worcester and will be effective July 1, 2008 with extensions as noted. There are more parishes which will be working on a future reconfiguration, and I anticipate that after due consultation, additional announcements will be made this fall.

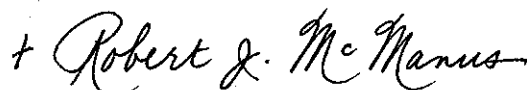
Although many parishes are not specifically being named in this phase of reconfiguration, I speak to all Catholic parishes in making these announcements for a number of reasons. First, I ask that all parishes be prepared to be welcoming parishes as people who are affected by closing churches decide where they will, in fact, choose to worship. Secondly, the Diocese of Worcester is one community of faith. Our prayers and support are needed for all those who are experiencing change in their parish life, especially those for whom the loss of their beloved parish and church is great. These pastoral decisions are never easy, but I am convinced that avoiding them or postponing them any longer is pastorally unsound. I am most grateful to all who participated seriously in this pastoral planning process. Their recommendations sought to respond as closely as possible to the concerns and insights that came from parish focus groups.

Lastly, I want to stress that pastoral reconfiguration will be ongoing for some years in our diocesan church. Other urban areas of the Diocese will be addressed in the coming year, using what we have learned from this process in the City of Worcester. Suburban area parishes must still develop plans for growth. Within five years I would expect us to revisit the City of Worcester to determine if more changes are still needed. Finally, all our parishes must increase their cluster activity as we continue to find ways to be more vibrant communities of faith.

It is fitting to grieve over what we have lost, but hope can be found by looking realistically at what we are today and by eagerly looking forward to what we can become tomorrow. We are members of the Body of Christ, the Church. As such, we are called to bring Christ our hope into a world that needs to be renewed in and through him. May these plans announced to you today fashion a vision for the present and the future that will invigorate the heritage of hope that has been passed on to us.

Invoking the powerful intercession of Mary, the Mother of the Church, for the pastoral vitality of our beloved Diocese, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert J. McManus". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the typed name.

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