

January 31/February 1, 2009

My dear people,

In July of 2004, I issued a pastoral letter that talked about the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the Diocese of Scranton. I discussed the need to look at every one of our structures: our parishes, schools, institutions, buildings and programs. I posed these questions: Are these entities the right ones for the 21st century? Are these entities currently prepared to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ as Jesus intends them to do?

You might have reacted with questions of your own: Why do we need to do this? Our churches and schools have operated for so many years; can't we just leave well enough alone?

Unfortunately, many of our institutions are not "well enough." Our society and our diocese are experiencing changes. Populations are shifting. Financial resources are diminishing. Many Catholics are not actively practicing their faith or supporting the Church. Our priests are serving too many parishes at one time.

We began to respond to these changes in the fall of 2005 when we initiated a comprehensive strategic planning review of our Catholic schools. This long and thorough process resulted in a restructuring of the school system that took effect in the fall of 2007.

Then it was time to look at our parishes. So last January we began a process titled *Called to Holiness and Mission: Pastoral Planning in the Diocese of Scranton*. After months of self-study in the parishes, and then in groups of parishes organized into clusters, suggestions were made to the Diocesan Planning Commission, established for the *Called to Holiness and Mission* project. The Planning Commission made preliminary recommendations that were sent back to the clusters for more discussion and a response. The Planning Commission gathered again to study and reflect on those responses before making its final recommendations to me in October.

I then entered into a period of study, reflection and prayer, and I have consulted with the appropriate bodies in accordance with Canon Law. Now I am prepared to announce the final decisions for the restructuring of our parishes.

Before I tell you what the decisions are for your cluster, I want to repeat what I said in my message to you several months ago: I do realize that you will experience sorrow, perhaps even anger, if the church you are used to attending should close. I know that you love your churches. But I also know that you love God and your faith even more. You want to see the faith preserved and handed down to future generations. And so, I believe you will recognize that changes must be made to deal with the realities of the present day.

It's only natural for us to want things to be the way we prefer. But as I said in my pastoral letter four years ago, we must be prepared to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ not as we would have it, but as Jesus intends it. We must be responsible and grateful stewards of the gifts and talents God has given us. We must use them wisely and productively to bring about the spiritual and pastoral renewal of the Diocese. That is the essence of *Called to Holiness and Mission*.

From the beginning of this process, I have asked that every step we take be anchored in prayer. We can accomplish nothing on our own. We need the wisdom, grace and guidance of Our Lord. So I ask you again, as we prepare to implement these parish restructurings in July, please pray often for the light and strength we need in order to walk the path that God has prepared for us.

Please know that I have no other way of making this announcement if I want to be respectful of you for whom this information is so important. I have chosen to address the entire Diocese at this weekend's Masses so that you will not be hearing about the future of your parish after others have heard of it. I ask you to understand my only intention in addressing you through this audio disc is to respect you and show my care for you.

Before I announce the plans I approved for your cluster, please let me review three parish models which we have used throughout our planning process.

The first model is partnership which calls upon parishes that retain their own pastors to enter into a formal relationship of cooperation with one another. This cooperation will involve the sharing of programs and resources such as RCIA, youth group and adult religious formation. Partnerships conserve resources by avoiding unnecessary duplication of services. Partnerships are one way of practicing good stewardship.

The second model is linked parishes. This model involves two or more parishes sharing the same pastor. Although linked parishes remain distinct, they cooperate even more completely than parishes in partnership. Linked parishes are already very familiar to us in the Diocese of Scranton for they exist wherever one pastor is caring for more than one parish.

The third model is a consolidated parish which happens when two or more parishes come together in such a way that only one parish continues to exist. That one or new parish then serves the parishioners of those parishes which have closed. In some instances of consolidation, however, a church building of a closed parish may remain open for a limited time. When this arrangement is provided, it will usually be to accommodate a Sunday Mass, funeral or wedding.

Now, this is the plan I have approved for your cluster:

For **Cluster # 4 of the Southern Pastoral Region** which includes the parishes of **St. Nicholas, Wilkes-Barre; St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Wilkes-Barre; St. Joseph (Slovak), Wilkes-Barre; St. Aloysius, Wilkes-Barre; St. Casimir, Wilkes-Barre (Lyndwood); St. Therese, Wilkes-Barre; and Exaltation Holy Cross, Hanover Twp. (Buttonwood)**, I have decided the following:

- The creation of a Partnership between St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Wilkes-Barre and St. Nicholas, Wilkes-Barre effective July 2009. Hispanic Ministry is to be located at St. Nicholas no later than July 2009.
- St. Joseph, Wilkes-Barre, St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Wilkes-Barre, and St. Therese, Wilkes-Barre will consolidate no later than July 2011 at the St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception site. Both the St. Joseph Church building and the St. Therese Church building will close no later than July 2011.
- St. Aloysius, Wilkes-Barre and St. Casimir, Wilkes-Barre (Lyndwood) will consolidate no later than July 2011 at the St. Aloysius Site, pending a meeting with the Diocesan Director of Finance, the Diocesan Facilities Manager and the Vicar General-Director of Called to Holiness and Mission to determine the financial cost for renovation of St. Aloysius. If the renovation cost of St. Aloysius is acceptable, St. Casimir Church building will close no later than July 2011.
- The creation of a Partnership among all the parishes no later than July 2009.
- St. Aloysius, Wilkes-Barre and Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Hanover Township will link no later than July 2009.