

LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?



A Pastoral Letter from His Eminence

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

As I am confident you have heard, since we have been preparing for this the last five years, the Archdiocese of New York is now formally embarking on our pastoral planning process, *Making All Things New*, and we approach this process in a spirit of *faith, hope, and love*. I have great *faith* in God, and in all God's people throughout the 10 counties and 368 parishes of this archdiocese. I have deep *hope* in what we can accomplish together with God's grace as we confidently plan our future as a Catholic family. And, I *love* Jesus, His Church, and you, the splendid people of this historic archdiocese.

As we begin this process, I am reminded that “without a vision the people will perish” (Proverbs 29:18). When I visit parishes and talk with priests, deacons, religious women and men, and our dedicated lay people, one challenging question keeps emerging—how can we strengthen our parish life, and help more Catholic people grow in their faith? I believe that *Making All Things New* will help us respond to this question in many important ways.

First of all, God's people here in New York have told us their needs. Bishop Dennis Sullivan and his exploratory committee spent a year traveling all over the archdiocese listening to our people. You sure spoke up, and what you said is that you:

- love your parishes, and want them stronger, more stable and alive;
- love our priests, deacons, religious women and men, and lay leaders, hope for more, and are eager to share in leadership and service in the Church;
- want a Church where people are welcomed, and Sunday Mass is celebrated with reverence, joy, a solid homily, and full participation;
- want intense religious education and faith formation, not just for children, but for our teens, young adults, and adults;
- want our schools not just to survive but to flourish;
- want attention to marriage and family;
- want a Church embracing our Latino, African, Caribbean, and Asian newcomers;
- want a Church vigorous in the promotion of the culture of life, social justice, and care for the poor, sick, vulnerable, unborn, immigrants, and our elders;
- want a Church purified, positive, and transparent;
- want a Church much better equipped in communications and technology;
- want a Church, not a museum;
- want, in the words of our Holy Father, a Church not confined to the sacristy, but out on the streets!

What came through in these responses is that people are proud that their archdiocese does all of this, and they want to do it even better. This is a big part of the *why* of pastoral planning, and supports the four significant pastoral themes that have emerged and are integrated into *Making All Things New: Discipleship, Evangelization, Witness, and Ministry*.

Pastoral planning is really the assessment of our communal response to our baptismal call to be followers and friends of Jesus. It is about responding to the invitation of Jesus in our time, given the needs of His Church, and His people right now. It is a call to discipleship, discerning how are we meeting the real needs of our people, and how can we best shepherd our resources to further His Person, message, and invitation to be His disciples.

In a way, the Church has been doing pastoral planning since the first Pentecost, as His first disciples prayed and considered His imperative to “Go, and make disciples of all nations!” Our Holy Father, when speaking to the youth at World Youth Day, reminded the young people—and reminds us, as well—that there are three implications to this important statement: *Go! Do not be afraid! Serve!* Pope Francis notes that Jesus does not say “go” only if you would like to, or “go” if you have time, but rather “Go and make disciples.” At the heart of our planning process is the urgent reply to the call to be disciples, to invite others back to and into the Church, and to equip our parishes and ministries to do this.

Very closely related to *discipleship* is the call to be *evangelizers*—to spread the Gospel that we are a loved, redeemed, and saved people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As Pope Paul VI reminded us “we wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing people constitutes the essential mission of the Church...Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” (EV#18). Pope Paul VI presented a broad view of who needs to hear the Good News: “Evangelization means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.”

(EV 18) This was reiterated by Blessed—soon to be saint—Pope John Paul II when he said, “I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization.” Our archdiocesan planning efforts are aimed at

increasing the effectiveness of our evangelization efforts in living out the commitment to make all things new. We just don't close or merge parishes, but ask why they are not full!

We read in the Acts of the Apostles how the first Christians planned the best ways to evangelize, preach the Gospel, celebrate the sacraments, and organize the communities of faith. The mission of the Church, then and now, is precisely the same: the salvation of souls. This mission is accomplished as the Church and her members proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, and, with the help of God's Grace, witness to that coming by the quality and character of their lives. Since the beginning of the Church in New York 205 years ago, we have been committed to this very same mission. The proclamation of the mission, the carrying out of Jesus' mandate to "Go, and make disciples" has been influenced by the signs of the times, and the Church in New York has always adapted to changing situations, while at the same time proclaiming the fullness of the Gospel message and the dignity of each and every human person. There has been a constancy in mission and service that has inspired millions and renewed the Church for the better time after time.

As we move forward now with our new Holy Father, Pope Francis, we must all recognize that the virtue of prudence requires that we once again appropriately plan for our future; Jesus exhorts us to be faithful and focused in our discipleship. The biblical virtue of stewardship requires us to wisely use our time, talent, treasures. I fear that, at present, we are not using our resources as well as we could. For instance:

While unlike most archdioceses and dioceses we have not *yet* reached a crisis in the number of priests—due, mainly, to the generous willingness of some of our priests to stay on in pastoral assignments after 75; to the gift of international priests; and to the blessing of religious order clergy—we still do need to get ready for that day, not too far away, when such a shortage will indeed face us, and not wait until it is too late. Our clergy are getting older, and with retirements and deaths, there are fewer priests each year.

We have too many parishes! The parish setup Cardinal O'Connor, Cardinal Egan, and I inherited is the result of a post-World War II boom, when, thank God, wise shepherds such as Cardinal Spellman and Cardinal Cooke in their days exercised sound pastoral planning in meeting the tremendous growth in the Catholic population, and an abundance of clergy and religious, with a neighborhood-parish or ethnic-parish paradigm still credible. Now that model and those numbers are changing. We no longer need 368 parishes in their current locations! Due to demographic changes, we may need to create new parishes, or expand some, to serve the migration of parishioners outside of the city, while closing or merging others.

Manhattan and the Bronx are particularly saturated with parishes. Of our 368 parishes, 84 are in Manhattan, with an additional 5 mission churches. That's very nearly 25 percent of the total number of parishes in the archdiocese—serving only about 10-12 percent of our Catholic population. There are 29 parishes in the South Manhattan Vicariate alone—all concentrated on 14th Street or below! Having this large number of parishes certainly made sense when they were established, mostly in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. They no longer make sense now in the 21st century and on into the future.

We devote a lopsided amount of money to maintaining parishes and buildings we no longer need. Simply put, we can no longer spend \$40 million a year (a number that will only increase each year unless we act now!) to keep on life support parishes, buildings and schools that are serving only a relative handful of parishioners, especially when there are other parishes very nearby, ready, willing, and eager to welcome new parishioners. While pastoral planning is not about money, and we will always want to devote money to poorer parishes and schools that can't make it on their own, we can't keep doing it to the extent that we have been. Why? First, because we don't have the finances to annually give *\$40 million* to support unneeded parishes; and secondly, best practices and years of pastoral experience tell us that churches which are 10 to 20 percent full do not usually lead to meaningful and uplifting liturgies where we are drawn to give praise and thanks to our loving God. And, apostolates and ministries of education, service, and charity, the main way we witness to the world, cannot flourish where there are not significant membership and resources to support them—so, some critical pastoral needs are not being met.

One of the outcomes of the pastoral planning process is that we will likely have unused properties, that could eventually be sold. As part of our planning, the proceeds of any sale will be used for endowments to support important initiatives of the archdiocese that you have told us we need. For instance, we will establish an endowment for Catholic schools, an endowment for religious education, and an endowment for new projects, like the *Sheen Center*, the *Gianna Center for Women's Health*, and *FOCUS*, a university-based apostolate. Any income from such a sale of property will not be used for operational expenses, but will go to endowments in support of our pastoral ministries, just as our ancestors in the faith intended.

We need to recognize our call to the new evangelization. Today's Church calls for a *mission mode*, not a *maintenance model*. No longer can we presume our people will come; no longer can we wait for the folks to show up; no more can we be comfortable that people baptized and raised Catholic will live and die Catholic; no longer can we do business as usual; no longer can we spend all our energy and resources on maintaining structures that are no longer working; no more can we wring our hands over our problems and fret about just keeping our heads above water. Now we must "cast out to the deep!"

It cannot be said often enough: *Making All Things New* is not a euphemism for simply closing parishes, changing addresses, or switching canonical names. It is a critical effort to enhance our ministries and sustain vibrant parishes. Our planning will bring people together to see how we can more effectively minister to or serve Jesus, His Church, His people, as we accept the mandate the Lord once gave Peter and Paul, Francis of Assisi, Elizabeth Ann Seton, Frances Xavier Cabrini, John Dubois, John Hughes, Terence Cooke, and now Pope Francis, you and me, "Build"—or "rebuild"—"my Church!" That's pastoral planning. Pope St. Gregory the Great wrote of it 15 centuries ago: "The Church is fittingly styled as daybreak, or dawn. While she is led from the night...she is opened gradually to brightness...This dawn is aptly shown to be an *ongoing process*..." That "ongoing process," from darkness to light, from night to dawn, is at the very heart of *Making All Things New*.

At the same time, we recognize that this process is not going to be without its challenges. I am reminded of *Pathways to Excellence*, the strategic plan that the archdiocese undertook for our schools, which was a painful, yet effective, and now promising plan that has created stable, sustainable Catholic schools, capable of providing an excellent Catholic education to any child who seeks one now, and into the future. In the same way, while we all can understand the necessity of pastoral planning, and the changes that planning will bring, we must also admit that change can be difficult, as our parishes and institutions go through some fundamental restructuring. We know that any true growth in the spiritual life requires sacrifice and change. As Jesus told us, the vine, to grow, must be pruned. This applies not only to priests, deacons, and religious but to all the faithful as well. Anyone who is serious about living the Sacrament of Matrimony knows full well about sacrifice and change! Without it, the marriage is in trouble. In the long history of the Church, eras of great growth and spiritual renewal are preceded by periods of real, and sometimes very painful, sacrifice and change. For the Church to grow, for the Church to fulfill her mission, it is necessary for her and the faithful to see these challenging moments as opportunities for holiness and renewal. Such growth is never accomplished without sacrifice, without giving something up.

In the Archdiocese of New York, we have come to that exciting moment when Jesus, just as He called Peter to step outside of the boat and walk on the water, is inviting us to embrace the challenge of mission as never before. He's calling us to step outside of our own worlds, our fears, our own comfort zones and, with our hearts and minds focused on Him, to traverse those turbulent waters into His warm, loving embrace. Oh, for sure, we're going to sink, as Peter did, from time to time, but Our Lord will be there to pick us up and help us complete our journey. If we are willing to take the chance, step out of the boat of what we're used to, and trust Him, He will show us the way...how the Church's mission will be revitalized and renewed...how we're going to re-invigorate the mission and make it come alive once again for the salvation of souls and the coming of the Kingdom.

Closing Reflection

The Holy Spirit is moving throughout our archdiocese as we continue into this new phase of *Making All Things New*. I am excited to take this journey of faith, hope and love with you and recognize this is hard work, and that there will be painful times of loss and misunderstandings, moments of both grief and joy. If we keep the big picture in mind—the need to be good stewards of God's abundant resources—and support each other we will truly be contributing to building the Reign of God where discipleship, evangelization, witnessing to the Gospel and ministry flourish.

I request that you join me in holding this important parish restructuring and revitalization process in prayer in the months to come. Perhaps the following can be a prayer that we all use whenever we come together as part of *Making All Things New*.

Prayer

God our Father, through the Gospel and the Sacraments, You bring us together as Your Church in the Archdiocese of New York. Send us Your Holy Spirit, to enlighten our minds and guide our actions as we plan for the future of parish life in this Archdiocese. Help us learn new ways to strengthen and revitalize our parish communities, and to be good stewards of the spiritual and material gifts that sustain them. Bless our work, so that our parishes may continue to witness to the truth of the Gospel, and be a sign of Your love for all people. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.