

ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SYRACUSE

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

October 28, 2014

Dear Frs. Smith, Bove, Lupa, Schoenhofer, Ms. Wentlent & Ms. Houghton,

We stand united; united in our Catholic Faith. Together, we are united as priests and deacons to share the Good News with all of the people of our diocese. As your bishop, I thank you for your priestly ministry. I also thank you for your on-going participation in the diocesan pastoral planning process. Karl Rahner urged us to remember that the God who is the source of creativity is the inspiration for our planning. He said, "Planning is always an expression of hope."

The pastoral care areas of the diocese have made recommendations to me based upon the lived experience of their area of the diocese. The College of Consultors has joined me in reading and discussing every report from each PCA. We have also considered the other materials that you have shared with diocesan offices. A review of the sacramental ministry, finances and programs of each parish has taken place. The College of Consultors raised the questions of community, faith life, mission, out-reach, sacramental life, and sustainability for each parish and each PCA. These deliberations facilitated a diocesan-wide understanding of the faith and the human dynamics at work in our midst. I too have read all of the materials. I have prayerfully weighed and reflected upon the needs of each parish and PCA as we strive to proclaim the Good News.

I have frequently and publically mentioned that I have no desire to close parishes. However, I must be candid, every parish will change in substantive ways. There are many new models of parish life to be experienced. Pope Francis reminds us, "God is not afraid of new things. That is why he is continually surprising us, opening our hearts in new and unexpected ways. He renews us: he constantly makes us 'new.' A Christian who lives the Gospel is 'God's newness' in the Church and in the world. How much God loves this 'newness'." [Homily for the Mass of Beatification of Pope Paul VI, 19 October 2014]

As we move forward, note that the instructions to you that are contained in this letter will evolve in a natural way. I need your commitment to helping our parishioners grow into a new way of being faith communities. Formerly, the diocesan focus was on the development of a parochially based mode. Now our vision must shift to one of mutual support and a PCA vision.

The directions that follow derive from hours of dialogue at all levels. The remaining announcements of 2007, the recommendation of PCA planning groups, the observations of pastors, and the responses to the "Natural Bridges" process frame the direction that I now share with you.

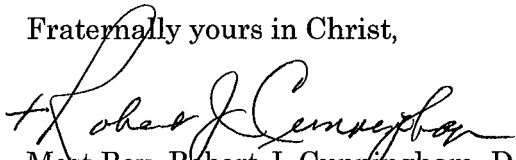
1. Every pastoral care area is to provide me with a Mass schedule that allows the priests of the area to 'cover' for each other as celebrants. Church building capacity and the number of worshipers should be the major element in setting a Mass schedule. Specialized needs may be considered. Each PCA may schedule one Sunday evening Mass, which may be rotated among the priest celebrants of the PCA.
2. Each PCA will develop a Cluster Council that will assist in setting a vision for the work of the parishes as 'collaborators.'
3. Each Cluster council will be attentive to the unique needs of its area. It will investigate, ponder and propose initiatives to serve the people of the area.

Herein follow, my specific directions to your parish and those of your PCA:

1. Afton and Bainbridge retain their pastor. The group notes that it is a 16 mile/20 minute drive to Greene, which provides one possibility for the future.
2. Currently four priests cover this pastoral care area. If we commit to keeping this level of staffing and balancing the Mass schedule three priest serving Sherburne, Norwich, New Berlin, Oxford, should be sufficient for the near future.
3. I affirm the evolution that the planning group recommends a three priests clustering scenario:
 - St. Malachy, Sherburne – Norwich (St. Paul and St. Bart) – St. Theresa, New Berlin and St. Joseph, Oxford;
 - St. Agnes Mission, Afton – St. John, Bainbridge – Immaculate Conception, Greene.
4. This area should thoughtfully consider building on the example of Mary Wentlent in Greene and Pat Houghton in New Berlin. Is it possible, with support from the Parish Coordinators and permanent deacons for two or three priests to cover the 6 parishes? [Recall that Parish Life Directors and Pastoral Associates are, also, a possibility.
5. The area should continue its exploration with Chenango County Catholic Charities in support of meaningful initiatives.

Our journey continues. In deep personal ways, you understand the real change that has transformed Church life in the Northeast. Faith is deeper than these changes. Faith is stronger than change. 'Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.'

Fraternally yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert J. Cunningham". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Most Rev. Robert J. Cunningham, D.D., J.C.L.

Bishop of Syracuse