



June 24, 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As you know, we have begun another round of pastoral planning, this time focused solely on parish restructuring, in the Diocese of Erie. I am sharing a series of three letters with you this summer as we prepare to develop a plan for parishes in Erie County.

We are, always have been and always will be a missionary church. We are called not only to care for those who attend Mass, but also to invite others into the community Christ established on earth. As we introduce another, more formal round of parish restructuring, our goal is to create parish communities that are vibrant, life-giving places of worship, places where people find encouragement and hope as they grow in their relationship with Christ, his church and each other. I am grateful we are taking these next steps in the midst of our three-year Eucharistic Revival.

The idea of restructuring brings up many emotions, and quite frankly, we haven't had to face them as fully in Erie County as in other parts of the diocese. We all belong to the Diocese of Erie, and we all have the responsibility to ensure that the needs of our sisters and brothers across the 10,000 square miles of our diocese are met. The time has come to look at our realities as a whole diocese and to move forward with all of our sisters and brothers in mind.

The fact is, we have fewer practicing Catholics and fewer clergy to lead them. If our mission as disciples is to proclaim the Gospel, grow in our relationship with Christ and his church and help others to do the same, we must be open to change. One way to describe where we stand at this moment, is that we need to right-size our diocese to ensure that we can be ever-better stewards of our resources, including our clergy. Our priests must be assigned in ways that allow the people they serve to thrive and that put them in a position to thrive as well.

I encourage you to visit the new planning microsite we have launched, accessible through a link on the diocesan homepage. There you will find this letter as well as the full pastoral letter I have written to the people of the diocese, detailing where we have been with planning and what needs to be accomplished in the immediate future.

We are handling this next round of diocesan-wide pastoral planning region by region. Thanks to a grant from the Catholic Foundation of Northwest Pennsylvania, we are once again benefiting from the services of Meitler Consultants. We presented their findings to parish leaders from parishes in west Erie County last fall. Parishes in east Erie County also have been meeting and working to come up with recommendations for a preliminary plan for more than a year.

We have received feedback from both groups and are now formulating a preliminary plan for Erie County. In addition, we must take demographic information into account including the following:

From October 2010 to October 2022, the parishes in Erie County have seen a combined 45 percent decrease in weekend Mass attendance. That's nearly 10,000 fewer people worshipping at Mass each weekend compared to just 13 years ago. This is considerably larger than the 4.4 percent loss of population in Erie County between 2010 and 2020. In addition, since 2012, the number of active priests serving throughout the diocese has dropped from 130 to 92. Our best estimate is that number will be only 60 by 2031.

We've been experiencing a consistent downward trend since well before COVID. While in much of the world, and even some regions of our country, the church is growing and showing signs of vibrancy, we have to respond to our situation here in northwestern Pennsylvania.

This letter, and the other two I will share with you in the coming months, will all be posted on the diocesan website at www.eriercd.org. Please take the time to read them as they become available.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Lawrence T. Persico

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie