



ARCHDIOCESE OF MILWAUKEE VISION: 21ST CENTURY - LIVING OUR FAITH

GROWTH IN HOLINESS ✧ STRENGTHEN PARISHES ✧ FOSTER VOCATIONS ✧ STRENGTHEN EDUCATION ✧ JUSTICE & CHARITY ✧ STEWARDSHIP

January 27, 2009
Year of St. Paul

“I am with you all days . . . ”

A Pastoral Letter Asking God's Grace to Help us Plan for the Future of the Church We Cherish.

My brother bishops, priests and deacons, consecrated religious women and men, devoted pastoral leaders, and dear faithful of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee:

It's hardly new: when you think about it, it's been a significant part of the Church's growth and agenda since Jesus ascended to His Father. From those first days of the Church, as recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the Letters of St. Paul, we see God's People and their shepherds *plan*, dream, strategize, and make tough decisions about how most effectively to continue the work of Christ Jesus in His Church. Their mission?

His Person had to be known;
His message had to be taught;
His grace and mercy had to be unleashed;
His sheep had to be fed;
His sacraments had to be celebrated;
His poor had to be cared for and embraced;

And here we are almost two millennia later facing the same sacred responsibilities. *How* best to do this demands prayerful, prudent, patient *planning*.

That's what I write you about today.

Just as in the *New Testament*, we 700,000 Catholics of southeastern Wisconsin in 2009 must continue to be serious about prayerful, prudent, patient *planning*.

Thank God, this archdiocese has been so from the beginning. This is hardly new to us. When he arrived as our first bishop in 1843, John Martin Henni had to assess needs, look at resources, shrewdly assign priests and sisters, and *plan* for a new diocese. My nine predecessors have all had the same mandate and have tended to it well.

Over the last quarter-century or so, *planning* has taken on a special urgency, for a number of reasons:

-- dramatic demographic transitions, which have led to the movement of Catholics from the old urban neighborhoods to the suburbs and exurbs. Some of



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our “old” parishes now have unused buildings and half-empty churches, while our suburban and exurban parishes can’t expand quickly enough;

-- the providential renewal of the Second Vatican Council -- summoned fifty years ago tomorrow by Blessed Pope John XXIII -- has called forth charisms from our lay faithful, and reminded us of the Church’s expanded role in its evangelization of our culture, necessitating new ministries and projects, as we engage and serve our society;

-- concern about having enough priests and religious has challenged the Church not only to be more energetic in her prayers for and encouragement of new vocations, but to be creative in careful use of priests and deacons, with more encouragement of lay service and responsibility in the Church;

-- an increase in the number of cradle Catholics who unfortunately later leave the Church, and a culture that more and more becomes “post-Christian,” seeing little use for “organized religion” or any church at all, compels us to the *new evangelization* eloquently preached by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI;

-- the startling statistic that fewer and fewer of our Catholic young people are marrying, or, that, when they do so, are at a much later age, has given us a whole generation of young adults in transition who do not feel at home in the Church, and thus either grow lax in their faith, or even leave the Church (while we still rejoice in the large number who are firmer in their faith than ever);

-- the wonderful blessing of newly arrived Catholics of Latino, African, or Asian background calling for hospitality, inclusion and an appreciation for diversity;

-- Society’s push for privacy, individuality, liberty and convenience can at times fly in the face of the Church’s traditional emphasis on community, obedience, and selfless sacrifice, as more and more people tell us that their “needs are not being met” in the Church, and reject the Church’s cogent moral message on the dignity of human life;.

-- Yet our sometimes-called “post secular” culture’s noted hunger for the spiritual, interest in the Word of God, fascination with prayer, and search for meaning inspire us more than ever to propose to the world Jesus and His Church.

So, our work is certainly cut out for us today!

For the last fifteen years or so, the archdiocese has been especially keen on *planning*: parishes have opened, merged, or clustered; models of pastoral ministry bringing priests, deacons, religious and lay ecclesial ministers together in collaborative approaches have been developed and refined; the position of parish director has been



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successfully introduced; professional staffs have been expanded with the goal not only of serving parishioners better, but of freeing our priests from burdens of temporal administration so they can devote themselves more to Word and Sacrament; systems of budget and financial accountability have been instituted; our parishes have begun wisely to share resources, especially regarding our schools, religious education, youth ministry, and care for the poor; and our Catholic schools have begun to take very seriously the sharing of resources, with exciting yet challenging adventures in mergers and consolidation.

A year-and-a-half ago, prodded by the archdiocesan pastoral council and the council of priests, I asked Father James Connell to take a hard look at how we were doing regarding all this *planning*. After a year of research, consultation, listening, driving all over, and taking a look at how other dioceses were doing, he presented me with a masterful visionary document entitled *Living Our Faith in the 21st Century*. Perhaps you have read it, as it was widely distributed. (It can be accessed on line at <http://www.archmil.org/resources/userfiles/08%20Final%20General%20Recommendations.pdf>). Maybe you are one of the nearly 500 people who discussed it at three different listening sessions last month. I trust you agree with me that it is well done.

Keep in mind that Father Connell's homework was not to write a strategic plan for the archdiocese, but to gather data and present the pastoral needs of the Church in southeastern Wisconsin, while offering some direction I might wish to consider if and when I formulated such a plan.

Well, I have considered it. The description he gives of the pastoral demands of this archdiocese adequately reflects what I believe.

I accept the recommendations *Living our Faith* proposes.

Let me tell you what I especially appreciate about this document.

-- It is very timely. It comes as we are involved in the successful *Living Our Faith* initiative which has renewed our evangelization efforts in the archdiocese. It also arrives in the middle of the *Year of St. Paul* proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI. And it comes as we enter Wave III of our *Faith in Our Future* Capital Campaign, well on its way to meeting its goal. So, there is a sense of movement and hope in the archdiocese which should provide a warm reception for this vision;

-- It gels with the six priorities I set six-years ago after I arrived as your archbishop. Remember them?

- . . . Growth in holiness
- . . . Strengthening of parishes
- . . . Fostering of vocations
- . . . Sustaining Catholic education and faith formation



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- . . . Expanding our initiatives of charity and justice
- . . . Formation in stewardship.

-- It builds on what we've already been doing in the archdiocese. This is hardly radical or novel, but simply the logical "next step" in our ongoing *plans*;

-- it is not reacting to an emergency, but is a careful, judicious, proactive approach;

-- it does not reduce strategic pastoral planning to cold calculus about closing/merging parishes or clerical assignments;

-- it reports on *pastoral needs*, what our people look for and from their Church;

-- it is hopeful. *Planning* is not a desperate act of survival, but a cooperation with God's grace to further His kingdom here and now, realistic about our problems but confident in His promises.

Although our work in *planning* now concentrates on our parishes, don't forget that Father Connell spent his first months reorganizing the structure of the central offices of the archdiocese. His findings and recommendations led to a consolidation of services, a reduction in staff, and a new constellation of "commissions" to help guide our local Church's attention to matters of pastoral needs throughout the ten counties. Yes, much of this was necessary because of the financial stress of the archdiocese as, you may recall, we had to trim if we were to eliminate the \$3 million deficit -- which we did - - helped by Father Connell's *plan*.

The major reason I found Father Connell's *Living Our Faith in the 21st Century* compelling was because it successfully surfaced *non-negotiable priorities* which must illuminate and direct all of our strategic *planning*. In the document, in the consultations leading to it, and in the reaction to it from consultative bodies and working sessions, certain principles arose that we must ever keep before us. Father Connell's work "stirred the pot" throughout the Church in southeastern Wisconsin, and got a lot of people talking about our future. In these conversations, God's people made it clear that certain principles had to direct us, and were non-negotiable:

- God's people must have the sacraments, especially the Sunday Eucharist, readily available;
- Vocations to Holy Orders, diaconate, and religious life must be promoted by more fervent prayer and energetic encouragement;
- lay leadership in the Church must continue to expand, and the archdiocese has to remain serious about formation of future lay ecclesial leaders by strengthening such welcome initiatives as the St. Clare Center and the John Paul II Center;



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-- priests must be free to use their time to *pastor* -- preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and care for those in spiritual need -- with lay leaders then delegated to and formed to care for the financial, administrative, and spiritual demands of our parishes and ministries;

-- archdiocesan leadership should continue to explore and utilize different forms of pastoral leadership in parishes. While the classical style of one pastor for one parish will remain the ideal, the other models -- *in solidum* teams, two-or-more parishes sharing one pastor, or a cluster of parishes -- not the best word, I admit! -- led by a pastoral team, or a parish led by a non-ordained director, with a priest assigned as moderator and sacramental minister, -- are working and should be expanded;

-- it thus becomes clear that at times a pastor or associate pastor's assignment will become more and more to an area or region of the archdiocese, rather than exclusively to one single parish;

-- the faithful have to be open to asking hard questions about future cooperation with neighboring parishes, more effective use of shared clergy and lay ecclesial leaders, and sound use of buildings and facilities;

-- what is primary is that *the Church* remains vibrant and effective in a given area; the name, address, and buildings associated with the Church's presence are secondary;

-- The Church's mission of *teaching* is more urgent than ever. Our programs of lifelong religious formation, and our excellent Catholic elementary and secondary schools, deserve our fullest support, and are getting it, as we see from the success of the *Faith in Our Future* Capital Campaign;

-- different styles of governance for our Catholic grade schools have to be explored. While the classical model of *a parish grade school* remains the ideal, other models -- regional schools, consolidated schools, or even schools administered by independent lay boards, with religious instruction and sacramental life shepherded by priests and religious, and funding shared by parishes -- need to be encouraged, because Catholic schools have to remain available, affordable, and accessible to our children;

-- the *living our faith* initiative, stressing a warm, welcoming parish atmosphere, with a joyful, reverent Sunday Eucharist at the center of parish life, must be continued so our people remain "at home" in their parish, and others sense an attractive welcome;

-- the blessings of the diverse ethnic community of our historic diocese, especially the growing Latino, Asian, and African presence, should be celebrated



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and cared for. Our priests, deacons, and lay ministers should thus have knowledge of Spanish;

-- some challenges to the Church extend beyond the scope of parishes, but cannot ever be forgotten. Among these are:

- . . . those who have left the Church or drifted away;
- . . . those angry at the Church because of the clergy sexual abuse horror;
- . . . our poor in our cities who cry out for help;
- . . . our historic farming community and the struggling families in our rural areas who often feel aloof from the wider Church;
- . . . our prisoners and their families, who have specific spiritual, temporal, and emotional needs.
- . . . our immigrants and refugees;
- . . . those among us who are divorced and remarried, and those struggling to keep their marriages strong;
- . . . the attacks on human life, marriage, and family;
- . . . those in hospitals and nursing homes
- . . . our young people in college, or beginning professional lives and careers, and our devoted single people, who sense a distance from the Church.

You see what's happening here? Our conversations about *planning* have not been reduced to nervous chatter about closing parishes or trimming numbers of priests, but about the challenges and needs of God's people right now, and how the Church must *plan* to meet them. Truly, all of these *non-negotiable priorities* provide the seedbed for *planning* our future, and must direct all our decisions.

We are also realistic in recognizing that we cannot ignore pressing questions about the future of parishes and the sound assignment of our priests.

The document lists *district* and *cluster recommendations* that have been discussed, debated, and refined. I accept all of them. (Once again, these are listed in the document, accessible online at <http://www.archmil.org/resources/userfiles/08%20Final%20General%20Recommendations.pdf>. They will also be sent to all deans and pastors).

A timetable is also presented, one that presumed I would probably act on the recommendations last Fall upon receipt of the report.

Since I chewed on it and consulted further, taking more time, the calendar must now be adjusted. Thus, each of the dates given for reports and recommendations for movement toward adherence to the proposals of the *plan* need to be extended by *six-months*.

There will have to be *accountability* on all levels:



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Pastors, parish directors, pastoral staffs, and councils at the *parish* level will have to take a hard look at what the plan means for them and be ready for change within a precise time period;

clusters, already working together well in many cases, will have to continue coming together to implement the recommendations, with the individual pastors (or parish directors) and their lay leadership engaged at the cluster level. Almost every parish in our archdiocese already has a partnership with a neighboring parish in a cluster relationship. Every parish must have at least one such partner;

districts, led by the dean, would see that the *plan* is a constant item on the agenda, calling for reports and progress from individual parishes and clusters;

the district representative for the *archdiocesan pastoral council* would be engaged in the process, reporting back to the council itself on progress or lack of it;

the *clergy placement board* would be attentive to a priest's enthusiasm, or lack of it, for this pastoral plan as they consider assignments, requests for extensions, and transfers;

the *archdiocesan building commission* would make sure that all requests for approval for building expansion, or renovation projects at the parish level, are consonant with the *plan*;

the *archdiocesan council of priests* would regularly review progress, as deans would include briefings on this matter in their usual reports;

Mark Kemmeter, the archdiocesan coordinator of parish-mission, will jockey the enterprise, with his office receiving the plans and strategies from parishes, clusters, and districts, and reminding them of when such reports are due;

and, ultimately, I myself would continue to call for compliance to the proposals of the *plan* I have just approved.

What we have learned in the "school of hard knocks" is that cooperation, mergers, consolidations, or closings are not successful when *imposed from above*. Dioceses where the bishops' office simply announces widespread reorganization without exhaustive dialogue, face bitterness, resentment, and loss of people.

While it is never easy or without sacrifice, *planning* works best when it brews-up from below, from the pews, with each parish, cluster, and district taking ownership and realistically facing the future. The good news is that this style has already been the praxis of this archdiocese for two decades; the better news is that it works, and that the priests and people are ready for it. Yes, it's slower, more tedious, and exhausting, as



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we meet, pray, listen, plan, propose, give-and-take, and try again; but, in the long run, it works. Indeed, this is how we can stay focused on the *non-negotiable priorities*.

I predict that two groups of people will be disappointed by the content of this letter.

On the one side will be those who hoped I would announce a bold, radical plan to reorganize the archdiocese, merge, consolidate, and close parishes, reassign clergy and pastoral staff, and present the finished product. They will find my approach too weak, business-as-usual, too inconclusive, way-too-much future work. They would prefer I tell everybody what to do (unless they do not then agree with what I tell them to do).

The other disappointed group will be those who wish planning would just go away, that parishes would evolve and change over the years, that an "ecclesiastical Darwinism" would be in effect where strong parishes make it and the weak ones slowly die out.

I regret disappointing both sides. Hopefully, my decision, accepting the *Living Our Faith in the 21st Century* directives and recommendations, is a prudent middle course: yes, clean, clear direction has been given; but the way we implement these guidelines has to include the very people most affected: our pastors, parish directors, and faithful parishioners.

Two closing comments . . .

One, our implementation of Vision 21 has to be flexible. The *plan* is but a means to an end, not an end in itself. The end is the good of the Church, the sanctification of God's People, the effective proclamation of the Gospel, evangelization. Please God, for instance, vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, and religious life will continue to rise, which would alter some aspects of the *plan*; or demographics will continue to shift creating different needs in various areas. Already, the recession of the last six-months has altered some projections formerly presumed in the *plan*.

Simply put, the *plan* is a work in process. It serves us, not vice versa.

And it is far from the last word, as the perennial cycle of *planning* will not stop.

Two, in the end, we're not in charge of the Church anyway. Christ our Lord is. It's His Church, not mine, not yours. Thus, *prayer* must be a big part of our *planning*, an openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I propose this moving *Prayer with St. Paul*, in this year devoted to him, as an appropriate one for our holy enterprise:



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Blessed are you, God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens. (Eph 1:3)

Make us always ready to proclaim to all the boundless riches of Christ and to throw light on the inner workings of the mystery kept hidden through the ages in God, in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:8-9)

Glory to you, Father, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine; glory to you from generation to generation in the Church through the Holy Spirit, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. (Eph 3:2). Amen.

At the beginning I referred to the fact that *planning* has been going on in the Church since Jesus returned to heaven at the Ascension. Keep in mind, though, the first move of the early Church: the Apostles and our blessed Mother went on retreat to *pray*, only to have their prayer answered on Pentecost Sunday, nine days later. Good move. . . We never underestimate the Holy Spirit! As the old maxim has it, "If you want to make God chuckle, tell Him your *plans*."

Thank you for your patience in reading this far.

Thanks for your interest in this *planning* so helpful to the future of the Church we love.

Thanks in advance for all the hard work this *plan* is going to take.

Thanks for inspiring me by your trust in Jesus, believing He meant it when He said, "I will be with you all days . . ."

Faithfully in Christ,

Most Reverend Timothy M. Dolan
Archbishop of Milwaukee
January 24, 2009
Feast of St. Francis de Sales
Secondary Patron of this Archdiocese
Year of St. Paul