



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIocese of Youngstown

March 22, 2019

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Diocese of Youngstown, we have been inspired by the stories of the lives of priests, deacons, religious, and laity who have built a strong presence for the Church in our six counties of Northeast Ohio. Looking to the future, we face opportunities and challenges. While the challenges are different from the ones our predecessors faced, the need to confront them as a community of faithful disciples remains the same. Facing those challenges together opens us to unbounded opportunities which are present before us.

On the diocesan level, we are continuing a pastoral planning process begun in 2009 to address our current situation in a proactive manner. The need for a change in the approach of the administration and priestly ministry in our parishes is evident based on three key areas of demographic information. These trends are not unique to the Diocese of Youngstown. In fact, they are especially apparent throughout the Midwest and Northeast.

First, there are fewer people living within our diocese now than in the year 2000. The difficult economic climate continues to cause people to move out of the area. We are also experiencing more deaths than births within the region. Population is projected to continue to decline over the next 10 years, according to estimates from the State of Ohio. While we cannot directly affect this trend, we cannot ignore it in planning for the future.

Second, there is a significant decline in Catholic affiliation and participation. The number of people registered at our parishes has declined 36 percent since 2000. In addition, general participation in parish life has decreased even more. Specifically, regular weekend Mass attendance has decreased by 60 percent; the number of Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations, and Sacramental marriages are approximately one third of what they were in 2000. Consequently, any pastoral plan must renew and strengthen our ministry to those within our care, and also those who do not participate in the life of the Church on a regular basis.

Third, the reality of fewer priests presents a serious challenge. The number of priests in active ministry has decreased by 43 percent since 2000. Currently, we are blessed by the hard work and dedication of over 70 faithful priests in active ministry, as well as many who are retired and continue to serve. The number of priests will continue to decrease in the near future. Over half of our non-retired priests are age 61 or above. By 2025, we estimate that there will be 55 active priests in our diocese. Our priests have been stretched beyond what is healthy trying to maintain current parishes and Mass schedules. Given the fewer number of priests and fewer number of active Catholics, we can no longer continue the *status quo*.

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A plan for going forward has been developed by a committee of the Priests' Council. This plan has been reviewed by the entire Priests' Council and Diocesan Pastoral Council, which is comprised of lay leaders from across the diocese. The plan divides the six counties of the diocese into **pastoral regions** (for information on the pastoral regions, visit www.doy.org). Each region includes multiple parishes and every parish is part of a pastoral region. Working together, parishes in a region will be able to best address the local situation by collaborating in administration and ministry. Given the available priests and lay resources, each region will recommend to me a plan to best provide for the celebration of Masses, as well as collaboration among staff, programs, events, and outreach efforts.

This proposed plan requires the shared sacrifice of everyone: priests, deacons, religious, and laity. **No specific decisions have been made beyond the regional approach and the implementation of Church law that priests should celebrate no more than 3 regularly scheduled weekend Masses (Saturday Vigil and Sunday)**. Obviously this will require some change in Mass schedules, which will be discussed among the regions and deaneries.

Consultation among the clergy and the laity as well as the formulation of specific recommendations will take time. However, there is a sense of urgency with 6 priests retiring this summer and at least 10 more who are in active ministry beyond the retirement age of 70. The diocese will give regular updates on the pastoral planning process through the *Exponent*, the diocesan website (www.doy.org), and through parish bulletin announcements and bulletin inserts.

While there are many challenges, there are also opportunities. The Holy Spirit is present as our helper and guide, empowering the clergy and laity to work together, each using their gifts for building up the Church. May this process of planning and implementation be an occasion for all of us to grow more deeply in our faith, remembering the promise that Jesus will be with us, even to the end of the age.

Yours sincerely in our Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Murry SJ', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Most Reverend George V. Murry, SJ
Bishop of Youngstown