

Greetings, Parishioners of our Lady of Divine Providence family of parishes!

It has been good to meet you over these past 14 months that I've been here. I've met many wonderful, faith-filled people! I thank you for your kindness, hospitality, greeting and welcoming me, and for your patience during this time of transition. A special word of thanks to Father Ron Haft, Father George Jacquemin, Sister Margie Niemer, and Father Bob Thesing for their cooperation. At this time, I also would like to thank all the staff and volunteers of all six parishes for your hard work, keeping our parishes going strong.

The purpose of this announcement is to bring all church-going parishioners up to date on Beacons of Light. I apologize for this recorded message, but not everybody reads the bulletin or the website or emails, and this is the only way I can see to make sure everybody that regularly attends Mass gets the same information at the same time.

Two years ago, like most priests in the Archdiocese, I had only one parish. There were some priests with two, three, or even four parishes, in groupings known as "pastoral regions". A little over one year ago, on July 1st, 2022, I, like most priests of the Archdiocese, began a new pastoral assignment. Most priests with new assignments as pastors were given groups of three to eight parishes. These new groupings of parishes were to be called "**families of parishes**". This widespread regrouping of parishes was difficult for many Catholics. It was also hard on us priests. The family of parishes to which I was assigned is comprised of: **Assumption, St. Bartholomew, St. Bernard, St. Clare, Mother of Christ, and St. Vivian parishes**. This big reshuffling of priests and parishes was done as part of a **major pastoral planning initiative of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati called "Beacons of Light"**. The expression is taken from the writings of Pope Benedict the 16th who said, every Catholic parish should be a beacon of light (of truth and love).

According to this plan, these new groups of parishes, that is, these families of parishes, are to merge into one larger parish within five years of the July, 2022 starting date. This is a big change indeed! Whether you are hearing this for the first time, or whether you have known about this for a couple of years now, there are questions that certainly arise. **1) Is this really necessary? If so, why is it necessary? 2) What will this one Catholic parish look like? And where will we worship? 3) Who decides this and how? What criteria will be used? 4) What has been done so far and what still needs to be done? And 5) How can faithful Catholics help in this process to do what's best for the church?**

With regard to the first question, why is this necessary? I'd say a priest usually considers institutional maintenance his main job. However, with these new pastoral assignments from last year, **our present job is institutional change**, not institutional maintenance. Institutional change. And why do we need this change? Is it because of a priest shortage? There certainly is some concern with regard to the number of priests that can be pastors at this time. And yet, with the number of priests being ordained recently, it should not be a long-term concern. However, the **change in demographics of church-going Catholics** has a huge impact on this decision. There has been a dramatic change in the religious practices of Catholics worldwide, nationally, in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, and in this part of Hamilton County **over the last 50 years or so, even more dramatically over the last 20 years**.

I would now like to share what I think is an interesting anecdote: The Anglican Church in Canada, looking at its decrease in numbers, did a self-study less than five years ago. They wanted to try to predict where they would be as the Anglican Church in Canada in the year 2040. As they did this, they wanted to find out how many church attendees, members and donors there would be in 2040. They found, according to recent trends, they should have zero attendees, zero members of the church and zero donors in 2040! Again, this was their own self-study! And, while these trends probably won't really all come to an absolute zero, it's still quite dramatic and shocking, maybe to you, I'm sure it was shocking to them.

The reality is that our numbers have decreased significantly over recent years. Some 50 years ago, there were well **over 2000 communions at each of our four larger parishes.** There were many Masses every weekend, well attended. Even at the smaller parishes, there were significantly more. Even 20 years ago, there were well **over 1000 communions at each of our four larger parishes** in our family of parishes. This has changed. **Now, a typical Sunday usually has about 300 at most of these parishes.** At the largest one we get close to 400. And sometimes at another parish, we'll get that if there's a special occasion and the circumstances are right. But 300 or 400 is different from over a thousand and very different from well over 2000, like in the boom days of the Seventies...

Why has this change happened? What has happened here? Well, there has been a change in Mass-going habits of many Catholics in the United States and in this area, but that's not the only reason. There have been job opportunities in other places and marriages with people from other states. Many people have moved out of this area. Many of the Catholics who grew up here have moved out of here. This change of demographics is certainly affecting our own parishes. We might be tempted to say, "So what? I like the little parish that I have belonged to for decades that I helped to build and to maintain, and I like our little community of old friends living the Catholic life together in a world that is so big and impersonal." While this way of thinking is quite understandable, it misses out on two key realities. For one, **small often becomes smaller and smaller and then disappears.** This has happened to many Protestant congregations where tiny little Baptist churches or other kinds of churches that we've seen on the corner have disappeared.

With the present trends **in the Catholic Church, there will be some great crises that will come in the near future, meaning within probably the next decade or so.** If we look around at church, we see many people that are under 90. In fact, **almost everybody is under 90, and we see lots of people under 80, and we see pretty many people under 70. If we go under 60, in most of our congregations, we'll find that the numbers drop dramatically. Under 50, even fewer. Under 40, even fewer, and under 30, even fewer.** There is **a very small number of children** that are brought to Mass on Sundays at this time. Well, the **crisis that could come in the future, even if we don't change anything,** is that with fewer people still able to come to church and to donate the money that keeps the church operations going, there will be **major repairs needed at some point,** perhaps a major parking lot overhaul or a roof repair, or some kind of H V A C issue or some major structural problem. Then **there won't be the money to do it;** then what happens? Well, often **staffs are cut,** and then when the staffing goes down, then **the church's ability to perform and function well also goes down.** The number of people decreasing also makes **a smaller pool of volunteers** to help out with the worship of the church, and, of course, just as important, to be involved in the catechetical enterprise of the church. So small does become smaller; that can be bad.

The other reality is mission. The **Catholic Church has a mission,** and the mission isn't simply to be a small Catholic community center for each place. No, the Catholic Church has a mission given it to it by the Lord himself to go and make disciples of all nations. This was given specifically to the apostles, but it remains the God-given mission of the church: To preach the gospel, to spread and teach the gospel message, and **to help make other people intentional disciples of the Lord.** That term, "intentional disciple", is used often now. It refers to **people who have made a clear decision to follow Jesus.** In fact, it looks like these will be the only disciples in the future because of cultural trends; if we simply go along with the culture, then we don't necessarily follow Jesus. We want people to make that intentional decision to follow the Lord Jesus. If we do and if we love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves, we'll want that message to spread. **A large parish has the resources to have adequate staffing and enough people coming together to make the Christian movement strong, to make our worship beautiful and strong, and to pass on the faith to other people through catechesis and evangelization. This is why this institutional change is necessary.**

With regard to the second question, **what will this one parish look like and where will we worship?** There will be **one main worship campus**. By main worship campus, I mean there will be one worship campus where one of the churches that we presently have will have **at least three Masses on the weekend** for a more varied time structure for people to make choices, the way we used to do it when we had more Masses at each parish. Right now, many of our parish Masses for Sunday are at the same time, and that's fine for now, but it will change in the future. Other than the main worship campus, **there will probably be some satellite worship campuses for some years**, I believe, barring the unforeseen. There may be one, two, or three other churches within our family of parishes where there is one Sunday Mass. At these churches, of course, someone could still have a funeral for several years. Then the properties will be used for other things, as long as there's money in the pooled resources to maintain these properties. The crisis I mentioned, major repairs, could end up being a change point. **This one parish will have shared finances** with a main worship campus and **one main office area**. For some time, there **may be satellite offices open a day or two a week**. We'll see how that works out and how the resources pan out.

Who will decide this and by what criteria? We have a **Beacons of Light Planning Council** that I have formed, taking two delegates from each church's parish council or parish pastoral council. We met around seven times this past year. We have the two delegates from each parish, that's 12 people right there. Father Haft, Father George, Sister Margie and I are also on the Council as key leaders. We also have Anne Ketzer, a parishioner of Assumption whom I've asked to be our Beacon's lead, that is the person mainly responsible for the administrative carrying out of Beacons of Light. We discuss things at this Beacon's council. Over the future years, I intend to have outside committees evaluate our properties and our worship spaces and other factors to recommend which church property might be the best place for our common worship in the future, perhaps, our common office center, and other questions like that. That is what has been done so far. We've come up with a name, Our Lady of Divine Providence family of parishes. **Our Lady of Divine Providence should be the name of the parish in the future**. By the way, **the church buildings retain their own names** throughout this, even as far into the future as this goes. We will be Our Lady of Divine Providence Parish five years from now, and when I say five years from now, that is, it may be a little bit less because having been here 14 months, we're down to three years and 10 months. How quickly it goes. Now again, the deadline is a deadline in quotations, but we do need to do this in about five years. Okay? So much more still needs to be done. Eventually, each of the parishes will be canonically, that is according to Canon Law, closed. That in itself does not change the way things will look. No locking of doors necessarily, but making it so that **we become one institution fiscally, that is, the finances will all be shared together**.

How can faithful Catholics help in this process? For one thing, try your best to remain informed, cooperative and positive. Also, please pray. Pray for me and the other people that are on the Beacons of Light Planning Council. Pray that we'll be wise and take all factors into account. Of course, there will be strong differences of opinion in the future with regard to the decisions made. This is simply a reality. It will probably be painful in some ways, maybe scary in some ways, but again, our eye should be on the prize, **the prize of having a large dynamic parish with the resources to promote the gospel**. I ask that you all pray regularly for the Beacons of Light process, that it will be a good process, that it will end up coming up with good decisions to make a strong parish. Maybe you could offer a decade of the rosary. I'd like to acknowledge and thank a group of parishioners that have been meeting regularly for over a year now, praying for the Beacons of Light Initiative. Maybe you will want to join that group. This could be another way for some to pray. So please do pray. Please remain informed. Thank you for your patience in general and with this message today. God bless you all.