

13 January 2025

Reverend and dear Father,

“Grace to you, and peace from Him Who is, Who was, and Who is to come” (Rev. 1:4).

Several months ago, I invited you to complete a survey focused on the rights of priests and pastors and giving opportunity to provide your opinion on the “Road to Renewal” initiative in the Diocese of Buffalo. Over the past months, I have received a slow but steady response. The latest response was received in the first week of January. The response rate was average in comparison to other dioceses where I have conducted similar surveys. I pledged to be transparent and objective. This presentation is intended to do that. Before offering the results, it’s important to explain some things about surveys.

The method used in this survey is known as a “census”. That means all the known people in a target population receive the invitation to provide a response. This is a proper methodology when the target group is manageably small enough to survey everyone. It is not expected that everyone will respond. In fact, a 2-4% response rate is often considered valid when using a direct mail census campaign. That is especially true when the survey concerns a controversial matter that directly involves the respondents and in which the respondents are fearful of retaliation if they respond. A lot of very personal factors directly affect whether a particular priest completes the survey. You may consider a 2-4% response rate to be low, but keep in mind most surveys (like political polls) target less than 0.1% (one-tenth of a percent) of the affected population, and not everyone answers the phone when they call. When I conduct a census survey of priests, I hope for 8-12% response rate. I have always received at least an 8% response; on occasion I receive a much higher response rate. In this survey, I received a solid 9% response.

Not all priests answered every question. To reach the response percentage for each question, I used two methods. First, I calculated the number of responses against the total responses to the *survey*. That gives us a percentage of how many respondents answered that question in a particular way. Because not every priest answered every question, it also means the total percentages will not add up to 100% for all questions. For some questions it will, for others it will not. That statistical percentage is shown in RED. This represents my usual practice because in most instances only one or two priests do not answer each question. Statistically, that does not skew the results or alter them significantly.

The exceptions to that are questions 20 and 22-26. These questions are about transfer of pastorship and the spiritual effects of implementing “Road to Renewal.” Because the family of parishes was established before the survey was conducted, and because most priests did not understand their rights as a pastor in regard to accepting or refusing a transfer, a disproportionate number did not answer those questions. I note this below and also note the general comments made by those priests. To demonstrate the statistical variance of these questions, I added the results of my second method in BLUE for those questions. By this method, I calculated the number of responses to each answer against the total number who answered that question. The sum of those two numbers will add up to 100%. Although the percentages are more significantly changed for those questions, I note that the number of priests who answered all questions is still within the parameters of validity. And, the only difference between the two different methods is a greater percentage agreeing with the majority or super-majority. So, by calculating only the responses of those who answered questions 20 and 22-26, the survey results are still valid. I provide the results of both methods so you can come to your own conclusions both about the numbers and why your brother priests did not answer those particular questions.

Please let me offer some general observations from the survey. I will let the specific responses speak for themselves, but I hope you find my observations helpful with your personal evaluation of the survey responses. First, the priests of the Diocese of Buffalo have a stronger understanding of their rights than priests from other dioceses where I conducted the survey (c.f. questions 1-10).

Second, none of the responses reflected a cavalier attitude or dismissive presentation. In every other survey I conducted, I received totally blank responses with a very opinionated and judgmental statement written on the first page; or all the questions are marked “YES” or “NO” with no discrimination of what the questions actually ask; or something similar. I did not receive any such responses. While the comments provided clearly express frustration, none of the surveys demonstrated an attempt to skew the results or discredit the survey with political or personal gain. Third, and closely related to the previous observation, there has been no attempt by diocesan officials to discredit or politically influence this objective presentation. I did mail the survey to the Bishop and he may have responded. I have no way of knowing, but I hope he did. Whether he did or not, I hope he prayerfully considers the results of the survey. It was conducted with transparency and objectivity, and the results speak for themselves.

Fourth, 88% - 93% of priests agree that Road to Renewal will not have a positive effect on vocations, donations, participation of the Faithful or outreach and evangelization. 85% or more of priests believe the Bishop lacks sufficient understanding of the parish situations to be making the decisions he is making and are opposed to the implementation of Road to Renewal. This is not a surprise. In every diocese where I have conducted similar surveys the priests are overwhelming opposed to a diocesan reconfiguration that extintively merges large numbers of parishes. This is true for both rural and urban dioceses. In my opinion, it foreshadows the devastating harm on vocations and the care of souls that will occur with the implementation of Road to Renewal. In fact, that harm has occurred in those places where the large number of extinctive mergers have taken place. Post-merger surveys I conducted in the past have revealed that up to 60% of *active* Catholics stopped attending Mass when those mergers occurred. The priests—especially the pastors—understand that reality. There is a better way to approach these things without such drastic, harmful effects.

To those who responded, thank you. To each and every one of you, thank you for your vocation and all you do for the People of God. All of us in my office are praying for you.

God bless you; St. Joseph keep you.

Peace,



Philip C. L. Gray, JCL

## RESULTS OF SURVEY FOR DIOCESE OF BUFFALO PRIESTS

**Instructions:** On July 20, 2020, the Congregation for Clergy issued: *Instruction: The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church* (hereafter, the *Instruction*; available at <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>). Listed below are facts of law, statement or questions related to this *Instruction*. The citations after each statement identify whether the statement comes from the *Instruction* (Ins.) or a particular canon (Can.) or another document (O.). Please check the box marked “Yes” or “No” as appropriate after each question or statement. If you have clarifications or comments to make, please make them on a separate piece of paper and attach it to the survey.

**1. In Canon Law, each parish is separately incorporated from the Archdiocese and the pastor is the proper administrator. As such, he has broad pastoral and administrative discretion, specifically over the use of patrimony, administration of accounts, and Mass schedules (Can. 515, 532, et al.).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **92.6%**      No      **3.7%**

**2. At the age of 75, pastors are encouraged but not required to submit a letter of resignation. They cannot be forced to retire legitimately unless sufficient incapacity of mind or body does not allow them to continue (Can. 538; Ins. 72).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **63%**      No      **33.3%**

**3. Because he is the administrator of the parish, the sale of parish patrimony must originate from the pastor after his hearing the parishioners. This includes the decision to sell a piece of church property or school or other real estate belonging to a parish (Can. 532, O-jurisprudence from church closure cases).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **59.3%**      No      **37%**

**4. If the personal condition of a pastor who has reached the age of 75 permits and if it is pastorally feasible, the Archbishop could consider the possibility of leaving the pastor in office, perhaps with some assistance or even entrust him to an assignment which accommodates his condition (Ins. 72-74).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **74%**      No      **22.2%**

**5. Priests are to acknowledge and promote the mission of the laity in the Church and in the world. Priests are to encourage the active participation of the laity in the parish and defend the roles of the laity when such defense is needed (Can. 529§2).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **81.5%**      No      **14.8%**

**6. Diocesan priests have a right to associate with others in keeping with their clerical state. They are to be encouraged to form associations with other secular clergy with the aim to promoting vocations and defending the dignity of the priesthood (Can. 278).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **85.2%**      No      **11.1%**

**7. Since priests dedicate themselves to ecclesiastical ministry as a vocation, provision must be made so that retired priests are given opportunities to minister in accord with their conditions of life. Of particular concern, retired priests should never feel unwanted or pushed out of ministry (Ins. 72-74; O. Multiple documents and jurisprudence on the ministry of priests).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **66.7%**      No      **29.6%**

**8. Each parish is formed and administered as a response to a particular pastoral need of the Faithful in the parish, and is a sign of the permanent presence of Christ with His people (Ins. 7; with footnotes).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **85.2%**      No      **11.1%**

**9. As a “house among houses”, each parish is visibly characterized by the Faithful who comprise the parish, as well as their church where they worship and space where they gather in common (Can. 515; Ins. 7, 27).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **88.9%**      No      **7.4%**

**10. Regarding parish restructuring, it must be remembered that each parish possesses great flexibility. It can assume different contours of reform depending on the openness and creativity of the pastor and the community (Ins. 29). To avoid loss of the faithful, hurt or trauma of the parish community in reform, it is imperative that it be carried out with flexibility and gradualism, preceded by catechesis (Ins. 36). True reform is not the responsibility solely of the bishop or pastor, nor should it be imposed from above in such a way as to exclude the People of God (Ins. 36-37).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **59.3%**      No      **37%**

**11. Some causes are not sufficient to allow parishes to merge. For example, “the scarcity of diocesan clergy, the general financial situation of a Diocese, or other conditions within the community that are presumably reversible and of brief duration (e.g. numerical consistency, lack of financial self-sufficiency, the urban planning of a territory)” (Ins. 48).**

I previously understood this:      Yes      **44.4%**      No      **55.6%**

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**12. I believe “Road to Renewal” reflects the obligations of a proper catechesis of the people, flexibility of parish styles and identity, and gradualism as noted in #10 above.**

Yes      **33.3%**      No      **66.7%**

**13. The Vatican does not want to see parishes merged because of “the scarcity of diocesan clergy, the general financial situation of a Diocese, or other conditions within the community that are presumably reversible and of brief duration (e.g. numerical consistency, lack of financial self-sufficiency, the urban planning of a territory)” (Ins. 48). I believe “Road to Renewal” respects the Vatican on this point.**

Yes      **7.4%**      No      **92.6%**

**14. Do you believe an alternate model of parish restructuring that allows greater participation of the lay Faithful to retain their parish identities while also encouraging a missionary spirit is more acceptable than what is provided by “Road to Renewal”?**

Yes      **85.2%**      No      **14.8%**

**15. I believe “Road to Renewal” will increase vocations.**

Yes      **7.4%**      No      **92.6%**

**16. I believe “Road to Renewal” will increase financial donations to parishes.**

Yes      **7.4%**      No      **92.6%**

**17. I believe “Road to Renewal” will increase the participation of the Faithful in their parishes.**

Yes      **11.1%**      No      **88.9%**

**18. I believe “Road to Renewal” demonstrates a missionary spirit of outreach, including to people in each parish who have limited resources, elderly, or homebound.**

Yes      **11.1%**      No      **88.9%**

The office of Pastor is the most stable office in the Church. Because parishes are where the-rubber-meets-the-road; where people experience the Church in first-hand, practical ways, the office of Pastor is a crucial position that requires trust building with parishioners, developing a sense of family, of which he is the father. As Canon 529 puts it: *In order to fulfill his office diligently, a pastor is to strive to know the faithful entrusted to his care. Therefore he is to visit families, sharing especially in the cares, anxieties, and griefs of the faithful, strengthening them in the Lord, and prudently correcting them if they are failing in certain areas. With generous love he is to help the sick, particularly those close to death, by refreshing them solicitously with the sacraments and commending their souls to God; with particular diligence he is to seek out the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, those exiled from their country, and similarly those weighed down by special difficulties. He is to work so that spouses and parents are supported in fulfilling their proper duties and is to foster growth of Christian life in the family.*

To protect the office of pastor, Canon Law requires that a pastor cannot be transferred unless the good of souls or the advantage of the Church would be positively affected by the transfer (Canon 1748). Because a grave cause is necessary to effect a transfer against the will of the office-holder (Canon 190), it is not enough reason simply to transfer a pastor because he has been in a place for a number of years, or because it seems like a good thing to move priests around. There must be a positive reason—to better affect the care of souls—for the transfer to be legitimate. If that reason does not exist, the stability of the pastor should be respected.

If a bishop chooses to transfer a pastor, and the pastor disagrees that authentic good will come of it, Canon Law provides a process by which the pastor can challenge the decision in conscience (Canons 1749-1752; 1747). The bishop must put his reasons in writing or the transfer request is not legitimate. The pastor must respond in writing. While the process is ongoing, the pastor retains his office as pastor of his parish but can be directed to vacate the rectory and not serve as pastor until the appeal process is ended.

Finally, it is noted that a transfer is understood as a lateral move. Transfer excludes a demotion. Moving into an office with less stability in law is a demotion. Therefore, it is illegitimate to transfer a pastor into the office of chaplain, assistant pastor, or even a chancery position against the will of the priest. None of those offices have the same level of canonical stability, and such a move would be a demotion. Rome has consistently upheld appeals against such actions. If a pastor is transferred, he must be transferred to another office as pastor or the move is not a transfer.

***NOTE: The establishment of “Family of Parishes” with pastors being demoted to “senior parochial administrator” had already occurred before this survey was mailed. As a result, there is a disproportionate number of “former” pastors in the Diocese of Buffalo.***

**19. I am a pastor.**

Yes **14.8%**                      No **81.5%**

**20. I believe that transferring pastors to implement “Road to Renewal” is a necessary step that would better provide for the salvation of souls and provide increased advantage to the Church.**

Yes **14.8%**    **18.2%**                      No **66.7%**    **81.8%**

**21. I believe the Bishop has a strong understanding of the unique situation of each parish in the Diocese; strong enough to know whether transferring a particular pastor would be beneficial to the parishes affected.**

Yes **11.1%**                      No **85.2%**

**22. As a pastor, I would use the process of appeal if I believed my transfer would cause harm to my parishioners.**

Yes **48.1%**    **65%**                      No **25.9%**    **35%**

**Please complete the survey on the back of this page.**

23. One parish proposal model was developed and presented as part of the “Road to Renewal” resulting in an immediate extinctive union of about half the parishes in the Diocese of Buffalo. In terms of pastoral care to the Faithful, do you believe the new parish reconfiguration model would improve the pastoral care to the Faithful, especially to those weak in faith?

Yes 7.4% 8% No 85.2% 92%

24. Do you believe the new parish reconfiguration model will allow pastors better opportunity to fulfill their obligations identified in Canon 529 (see above)?

Yes 7.4% 8% No 85.2% 92%

*Diocese officials have not acknowledged that they can expect a 20-60% loss of Catholics once “Road to Renewal” is implemented. It has also been said that this is not a significant loss because those Catholics who leave would leave anyway and do not contribute to the Church. In Is. 42:3 and Mt. 12:20 refer to these people as smoldering wicks and bruised reeds that should not be extinguished or broken.*

25. Do you believe Road to Renewal will extinguish these wicks and break these bruised reeds (drive them from the Faith) in the parishes affected?

Yes 81.5% 88% No 11.1% 12%

26. Do you agree that a loss of 20-60% of Catholics as a result of “Road to Renewal” is insignificant?

Yes 11.1% 12% No 81.5% 88%

Please add any comments below. Thank you.

*(The following comments are presented as provided in the responses. If the comment was associated with a particular question, that is noted with the comment. The exception to this are comments made regarding question 22. About 25% of the responding priests wrote very similar comments on this section. The comments demonstrated anger and frustration over not knowing their rights as pastors and wishing they had known before they accepted the “transfer” to “senior parochial administrator.” Some chose not to answer this question because they marked it as “N/A” since the transfer had already occurred. Others answered “YES” with the comment, “If I had only known!” or something similar.)*

THANK YOU BISHOPS, etc. OUT-OF-TOUCH

- Bishops do not know their priests!
- They believe they are corporate executive rather than pastors
- It is corporate Jesus vs The Jesus of the Gospel
- Get rid of present Day Chancery System.

Thank you for the opportunity Peace (handwritten on returned cover letter)

Letters to Rome and to +Christophe Pierre are fruitless.

This is the most corrupt diocese in North America.

Pastors are removed by FIAT of Mr. Fisher.

But even if He Leaves—the same STAFF which advised Malone will be in Place. And +Malone still comes to Diocesan and Parish EVENTS!

As a retired priest still actively celebrating Eucharist in various parishes, I am concerned over the lack of “Catholic” presence at hospitals and nursing homes; and the lack of ‘ministries’ in the Diocese for advocating justice and peace (social ministries); and the lack of communication from the Bishop to his priests and people in the parishes (lack of leadership).

Thank you for enlightening me. Peace.

The Road to Renewal does not exhibit compassion for the clergy involved, especially those retired, nor for the faithful who are being left bewildered by the changes. Applying statistics for the decade or more yet to come to the present is a sign of despair and a renunciation of the task of evangelization. Corraling young and mobile faithful in a few larger parishes abandons those who cannot make the needed trip to the new parish.

I was a pastor for 8 years at a nearby parish. I was asked to go to a much larger parish as a “senior parochial vicar” where I feel demoted and without any (or at least very little) power to affect any change for the good. The morale of our presbyterate is very low...as is that of the faithful.

The Apostolic Delegate and Rome need to be made aware of the Canonical Abuses that are taking place in the Diocese of Buffalo in regard to the Road to Renewal (Ruin) Thank you!

Lack of openness to other ways of dealing with priests shortage and dwindling parishioners was never even explored.

*(NOTE: This priest was one who did not answer Q. 22. He added this note to that question)*

If I had known.

*(He made the following comment at the end of the questionnaire)*

Road to Renewal has totally ignored pastors and parishioners, has eliminated the bond between priests and parishioners and destroyed parish “families.” In the Parish I was Pastor of, certain financial data was either hidden when it showed a strong comeback after COVID or misinterpreted. A transfer of funds to a long and short term cemetery account was counted as a loss. A beautiful close knit parish family will be destroyed because it is small, about 650 families. I chose to retire because I could not be a part of the “Road to Rack & Ruin.”

*(NOTE: This priest wrote an extensive comment. He also made side comments in the body of the questionnaire. Most of his comments were written in a way that his identity would be revealed if they were reported here. For the sake of his anonymity, I am omitting the majority of his comments. The comments reported below are his words, and summarize well the full length of his comments.)*

This so called “road to renewal” is a farce—NONE of my Brother priests like it—NONE of them—the People Hate it—Totally hate it....I feel so sad our diocese is falling apart....It is All about Money & our Bishop is very secluded—Never visits parishes & his minions from the chancery do a ton of his dirty work! It is evil & demonic.

I am now Retired. Those “in charge” do not want or seek out any advice of retired priests. I have offered to share my experiences in bringing together parishes where I have been pastor and was successful in evangelical terms. I was politely pushed aside and completely disregarded. What I see happening here is the work of a few (not necessarily the Bishop) who are not competent to handle driving on this “Road”. Those in charge deceive & manipulate to get what they want. There is minimal engagement with the laity.

It's “ROAD TO RUIN!” It's a scandal! EVANGELIZATION? It's driving people away. How many are not able to go to a distant church (ex: SENIORS!) How many are deprived of daily Mass, Eucharist, I'm thinking especially of senior citizens who are regular contributors. Less people? Less collection. Where is the common sense and sensitivity to the spiritual need of people. Will we have catechumens? Young People, the next generation?

If a parish cannot support itself—o.k. close it. Otherwise leave it alone.

Less priests? I think the situation is not as bad as reported. I wonder how many priests were willing to stay on in ministry, but forced to retire. How many retired priests are still willing to help in parishes on weekends but sitting at home on weekend.

Where is the Apostolic Nuncio in all this? Deaf ears? Come Spirit Come! Vocations? Good Luck! How effective is “Family of Parishes?” How can one priest be close to people with five or more parishes?