



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Bishop

EMBRACING THE FUTURE WITH HOPE: A PASTORAL LETTER

August 6, 2011
The Transfiguration of the Lord

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

May the Peace of Christ be with you!

On January 7, 2012 we will mark the 125th anniversary of the establishment of our Diocese by His Holiness, Pope Leo XIII. This milestone is the occasion for all of us to give thanks to God for the many blessings He has bestowed upon the Church in southern Illinois during these years. By God's grace our parishes have nurtured the faith of hundreds of thousands during these many years. As we give thanks for the past we must plan for the future, taking into account the realities of the present. A number of factors indicate that we need to consolidate some of our parishes if we hope to have strong and vital Catholic communities in the years to come.

With this letter I am announcing the beginning of a **PASTORAL PLAN FOR PARISH RENEWAL AND RESTRUCTURING** in our Diocese. (See **ATTACHMENT A.**)

I know how much you love the Church and your parish. I am confident that this love will sustain and guide all of us as we undertake this important process. As members of the Catholic Church, we live out our faith and bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our parish communities, which are part of the larger community of our Local Church, the Diocese of Belleville. Our parishes do not stand alone. Ultimately, the strengths and weaknesses of one parish have an impact on the strengths and weaknesses of all of our parishes.

During these past six years, I have reflected and prayed a great deal about the need for a **PASTORAL PLAN FOR PARISH RENEWAL AND RESTRUCTURING** in our Diocese. I have also heard many of our priests, deacons, religious and Christian faithful affirm this need during my Parish Pastoral Visitations. We currently have one hundred and seventeen parishes serving about 70,000 active Catholics. I have been very pleased to encounter many strong, vibrant communities of faith. A number of these parishes are very close together. Others are very small. Still others are struggling to keep their schools open. Some are facing very serious financial challenges. Some of you have told me that our Diocese should have begun the process of parish restructuring a long time ago.

We currently have sixty-nine diocesan priests in parish ministry. Five of these are seventy-five or older and three more are seventy and older. Currently, we have an additional twenty-two priests serving here whom I have brought to the Diocese from dioceses and religious communities outside of the country. We hope to have more in the years ahead. Nevertheless, while it is not possible to predetermine the results of this process, we may need to reduce the number of parishes by fifteen or twenty.

I know well that the question of restructuring is a sensitive topic. Even if you acknowledge that we have more parishes than we need and that some areas now served by two or three parishes could probably be served by one or two, you are aware that our people feel great personal attachments to their particular church community, church building, school, and nearby cemetery. Please keep in mind that this part of the **PLAN** is a consultation. NO DECISIONS HAVE BEEN MADE.

This is why the process we undertake must be done in an environment of prayer to the Holy Spirit for guidance. (See **ATTACHMENT G, PRAYER RESOURCE MANUAL.**) We must be attentive to the desires of individual communities while making hard decisions for the long-term good of the whole Diocese. This requires an unselfish spirit that looks beyond individual parish boundaries. All parishes are required to participate in the PASTORAL PLAN FOR PARISH RENEWAL AND RESTRUCTURING, without exception. Some of our parishes may be able to go forward making internal restructuring that will improve pastoral effectiveness. However, some parishes may be asked to open their arms and welcome a neighboring parish. Still others may gain a new identity through the consolidation and merging of several faith communities.

The PASTORAL PLAN will require parishes to make difficult decisions that may be painful. However, the PLAN will be more fruitful if most of the decisions are made at the parish and cluster levels and then recommended to me for implementation. The challenges of the future are so great that real and difficult decisions must be made. I urge the parishes and clusters to face forthrightly and address these hard decisions. If this does not happen, the Committee for Parish Renewal and Restructuring will try to assist the parishes in their decision making in order to make recommendations to me. It is preferable that our communities of faith make the difficult decisions at the local level. However, if they are not made, these decisions will need to be made at the level of the Vicar General and the Bishop.

I am aware that this process will ultimately involve real sacrifices as devoted Catholics consider the prospect of significant changes in their parish life. However, this process will ultimately strengthen the Church in southern Illinois. It will renew our parish communities and give us hope as we look ahead with confidence to the next 125 years. I am deeply grateful to you for your unselfish participation in this work for the long-term good of the Church in southern Illinois. Please work for vocations to the priesthood in your parish. Please pray the Diocesan Prayer for Vocations (See **ATTACHMENT H**) at all Masses once a month. Please pray the special petition for vocations to the priesthood at all weekend Masses. Please pray as well for the fruitfulness of the **PASTORAL PLAN** we are undertaking for the good of the Diocese. If we do not pray, we have already chosen failure. With prayer at the heart of our endeavor, we can truly embrace the future with hope. Pray that, like the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, we may be transfigured by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayerfully and appreciatively yours in Christ,



The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Bishop of Belleville