



Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls

Office of the Bishop

523 N. Duluth Ave.
Sioux Falls, SD 57104
(605) 988-3798
(605) 334-2092 fax

To Hold and Teach the Catholic Faith that comes to us from the Apostles

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Paul J. Swain

To the Clergy, Consecrated and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Sioux Falls,

When Benedictine Abbot Martin Marty was appointed the first bishop of the Diocese of Sioux Falls in 1889 the geographical territory included all of the new states of North and South Dakota. Since then separate dioceses have been established; Bismarck and Fargo in North Dakota and Rapid City and Sioux Falls in South Dakota. Our diocese consists of that geographical area east of the Missouri River. I am privileged to be the eighth bishop of the Diocese of Sioux Falls. Each of my predecessors and each generation have encountered and dealt with change. Some was planned and some was in response to the realities of the times. Noting this history is helpful in bringing perspective to our pastoral planning process.

Change is inevitable. While there is no change in the truth of the teachings of Christ, there is change in the secular culture, in approaches to education, and in technology and the manner of communication and transportation. For instance, I am one of those declining numbers who likes to hold a newspaper in my hands and read the news. For more and more people, especially the young, news is received over the internet. Thus there is a need, even a responsibility, for us to, as Vatican Council II stated it, read the “signs of the times.” As did those who went before, we need to prayerfully take into account the signs of our times and look at effective ways to present the teachings of Christ and to live them in an ever changing world.

We can allow change to occur around us or we can, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have the courage to respond to it in ways that authentically continue the mission and ministry of Christ through His Church and do so in solidarity with one another. Our ultimate call is to live the commandments to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.” To do so will require sacrifice and openness to God’s will.

As I have come to know the people of our diocese in my little over two years as your bishop, most, I believe, want to know the facts as they really are and have an opportunity to comment on what we are going to do about them. That is what this letter is intended to do as a follow-up to my discussions with priests and deacons at Clergy Days this past fall.

1. Mission and Purpose

In our pastoral plan we seek continuity with our history which has shaped our diocese, respect for the legacy we have inherited from those who went before, good stewardship of the physical and financial resources in our care, faithful teaching of the faith by word and example, and pastoral sensitivity to the impact of changes on the lives of individuals, families and parish communities.

Our ultimate purpose is the salvation of souls, our own, our loved ones and all the children of God. We seek to hold for ourselves and teach to others, especially the next generation, the Catholic Faith that comes to us from the apostles.

2. Core Goals

Our prayer and intent is that, as a result of a realistic and practical pastoral plan as a diocese, as parishes and as families and individuals, we will grow stronger in faith, be more visible in witness of the faith and be more united as Catholics in eastern South Dakota. To become so, we will need, as best we are able, to assure:

- Regular access to the Sacraments, especially the Most Holy Eucharist, throughout the diocese.
- Solid Catholic faith formation for all ages throughout the diocese.
- The opportunity to gather as people of faith in vibrant and viable parishes.

Essential to achieving these goals are the priests. None of the above can be accomplished without physically and spiritually healthy priests. We are a Eucharistic Church and the priest is the spiritual father of those he shepherds. This plan will seek to support them, and to help them live healthy spiritual and physical lives and serve well as instruments of Christ.

3. The Reality of our Day

When we began the pastoral planning process over a year ago, we identified three phases or tasks. First was to gather objective statistical information on our diocese today and projections about the future. TeamWorks, a consultant company from St. Paul experienced in working with Catholic institutions, was contracted to assure objectivity and professionalism in gathering this statistical data. All statistical information is available on the diocesan website. This is in part what the analysis tells us:

Demographic shifts: There are significant demographic changes occurring throughout our diocese with population growing rapidly in a few areas, mainly Minnehaha and Lincoln Counties and to a lesser degree around several other cities. Most other areas are experiencing declining numbers with fewer young people among them.

Fewer priests: While our vocations to the priesthood have been stronger than many dioceses and continue to be so, these new priests will not be enough to replace those who will be retiring for age or health reasons. In addition, our diocese has been privileged to be served by priests from religious orders, beginning with Bishop Marty himself. That no longer is as possible because religious orders must deal with fewer numbers of their priests. In fact, in June the Sacred Heart priests will no longer serve the three parishes on the Crow Creek Reservation.

Currently, we are asked to serve 153 parishes, Newman Centers and small faith communities, in addition to specialized ministries. The facts are that in 2008 there were in active ministry in our diocese, 74 diocesan priests, 9 priests from religious orders and 9 priests from other countries for a total of 92. Using conservative evaluations, it is anticipated that in 2012 there will be 71, a reduction of 21 priests in four years. While looking farther ahead is difficult, it is estimated that in 2016 there could be as few as 55 priests.

These numbers can change of course, depending on additional vocations. Please pray that more will open their hearts to God's call to the priesthood in our diocese. There also is the possibility of additional priests from religious orders or other countries. As we look to the pastoral plan it will be flexible so that the hard decisions we make will be implemented only when and where necessary.

It should be emphasized that priests are not pegs to be slotted, but men called by God who, through ordination, are his instruments. Priests have different gifts and differing levels of health and stamina, which must affect their assignments. In addition to pastors we need to provide for special ministries such as hospital, prison and military chaplains. Looking to the future, some priests will need to study for advanced degrees. It is also my desire that those newly ordained be allowed to serve as associate pastors as long as practical so they can grow in the understanding of the priesthood and gain valuable pastoral experience before being appointed pastors.

Mass attendance varies: Many liturgies are sparsely attended. In April those attending Holy Mass were counted for three weekends. The average Mass attendance was 47%, a bit higher than the national average. But if 20 parishes are removed the attendance is less than 25%. Every Mass requires the presence of a priest. Many drive long distances to preside at Masses scheduled when there were more priests available and more people present.

Fewer children: Families are smaller than they once were. This choice by parents has significant consequences in many ways. One is that in a number of parishes baptisms and first communions are rarely celebrated. Sixty-four of our 150 parishes had two or fewer baptisms last year, and 53 had two or fewer first communions. This suggests that there are low numbers of young people present in those parishes and likely even fewer in the future.

4. Vision for the Future

Change also is an opportunity. So our second task was to identify what we would hope the future of our diocese and parishes might be focusing on the year 2014, the 125th anniversary of the erection of the diocese. This vision was developed in a collaborative effort. Two series of facilitated regional meetings were held in five locations in the diocese to allow the input of representatives from all the parishes. Also consulted were the Priest Council, Diocesan Planning Committee and diocesan staff.

The vision that came forth from this process is that we will seek to be more:

- Catholic: People of deep prayer and ongoing conversion, fully embracing our Catholic identity and fulfilling appropriately our roles and responsibilities as clergy, religious and laity
- Eucharistic: People with full, active and conscious participation in the Sacred Liturgy, the sacraments and devotions that are celebrated with reverence and according to liturgical norms
- Faith-filled: People grateful for the gift of life who know and witness each day the teachings of Christ and his Church
- Compassionate: People responding through acts of charity and justice to the human and spiritual needs of others, including sharing the faith with love and humility
- United: People who cooperate and collaborate within and among parishes, recognizing the divine connection with the universal church through the bishop and diocese

In the next few months, study groups consisting of clergy, religious, laity and diocesan staff will be formed to review and propose specific and practical ways in which parishes and the diocese can work toward this vision over the next few years. Four areas have been identified for immediate attention:

- Formation: Clear, consistent catechesis true to Catholic teaching available to all ages
- Vocations: Enhanced efforts to encourage response to the call of Christ to the ordained and consecrated life, and greater support for marriage and families and the single life
- Unity: Respectful and caring relationships within and beyond individual parishes
- Accountability: Regular assessment of fidelity to the Pastoral Plan by parishes and the diocese

In addition the diocesan chancery staff will be evaluated and reconfigured to respond to the vision, the recommendations of the study groups and the reality of change before us.

5. Practical Implications

The third phase or task is to take what we have learned from the statistical analysis and in the context of the vision described above develop a specific plan for 2012 and beyond. This process will be one that will invite awareness and opportunity to comment from any interested person. In order to accomplish our goals in light of the statistical realities, the following conclusions seem apparent:

- Celebration of Masses and other sacraments as well as the assignment of priests need to be more carefully located while providing access across the diocese within reasonable drive times.
- Quality faith formation in Catholic schools and religious education programs also need to be available providing access across the diocese. New technologies can help.
- Parishes therefore must be in fewer primary locations with greater collaboration and sharing among them.

How we do this is the challenge before us. It will inevitably lead to parish reductions in service, additional linking, some consolidating and sadly closures. New parishes may be needed as well. This is not new to our diocese, 184 parishes in our diocese have been opened and then closed as the times demanded. I will make the tough decisions when necessary, but it is preferable that together we develop plans that are realistic but also are respectful of the local situations.

A detailed description of the consultation process will be presented at regional meetings (see schedule below). It will include a full understanding of every parish including its unique history and story. It will also allow for creative ways to be offered in addressing the reality we face now and in the future.

A scenario will be presented, a suggested way to accomplish what we must. It is based on the following criteria: the number of priests projected available for assignment, priests celebrating no more than three weekend Masses as canon law requires, the number of households and the present sacramental life of the parishes in the area, and drive times, how long it takes to drive from homes to church. The standard used is that most people would not have to drive more than 20 minutes to attend Mass. We of course must also address how those who cannot drive are given the opportunity

to receive Holy Communion. That and a number of other details will be discussed by local committees and parish councils.

This scenario will be offered for discussion. It is a starting point, not a final plan. If there are better ways of accomplishing our objectives they will be welcomed. Ultimately, after listening and learning, I, as bishop, will approve plans specific to given areas, which will be implemented as necessary.

Conclusion

This task is challenging for us all. The change necessary will deeply affect parishes including traditional practices, identity, convenience and patterns of social life. It will inevitably generate a mixture of emotions and responses including hope, hurt, possibilities, pain, energy and anxiety. Change in the face of the realities of our day is not a rejection or discounting of the present or the past. Our heritage of strong and resilient Catholic faith and life is to be honored, celebrated, and serve as a guide as we move to the future with trust and hope. In the midst of this we must seek to listen to one another with open minds, consult with one another with realistic understandings, and respond to one another with charity and compassion, always empowered by prayer. It will require sacrificial acts of faith guided by the Holy Spirit for the good of the greater church, of one another and especially of the young.

This is the time for all of us to be truly Catholic. I accept the responsibility as your bishop to plan for the future with hope. I pray that you will join me on this journey of faith. May Blessed Mary, our Mother, and St. Joseph, our patron, watch over and guide us.

Give Praise to the Lord.

Given at the Bishop's Office of the Diocese of Sioux Falls on this Thursday, the first day of January in the Year of Our Lord, two thousand and nine, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God by

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The Most Rev. Paul J. Swain
Bishop of Sioux Falls

Regional Pastoral Planning Meetings Scheduled

Bishop Paul Swain will hold a series of regional meetings to discuss and explain the pastoral letter and the continuing pastoral planning process. All the meetings will be held in late January and are open to anyone wishing to attend. The schedule is as follows:

St. Ann, Miller - January 26, 1:00 p.m.

Sacred Heart - Aberdeen, January 27, 4:00 p.m.

St. Joseph Cathedral - January 28, 10:00 a.m.

St. Benedict, Yankton - January 28, 2:00 p.m.

Immaculate Conception - Watertown, January 29, 2:00 p.m.