



July 15, 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we discuss pastoral planning for parishes in Erie County, please keep in mind that the work before us today is building a strong foundation that will carry us through some lean years ahead. But at the same time, it is being accomplished to help create a brighter and sustainable future for the Catholic Church in northwest Pennsylvania.

Before we begin talking about change for the parishes in Erie County, it's important for you to understand the situation some of our sisters and brothers in other counties of the diocese are experiencing.

If the preliminary changes proposed for the Bradford area are approved, for example, parishioners in that area would go from having nine parishes to seven and from having ten priests to eight. They would also go from having one church without Sunday Mass to four without Sunday Mass.

In a similar way, the preliminary plan for the Clearfield area proposes they go from eight parishes to six and from six priests to five. The number of churches that don't have Sunday Mass would grow from zero to three. Parishioners in the Oil City area would go from having 11 parishes to 10, from three churches without Sunday Mass to five and from 10 priests to eight. Please remember these are proposed changes; nothing has been set in stone. But we also are in the position of having to say we cannot promise that we will have even that many priests to serve those areas in the next three to five years.

If these proposed changes go into effect, depending on the feedback we incorporate, people in the affected parishes would face significant travel times. Someone who has been attending Mass at Sacred Heart in Genesee, for example, would be looking at a 30-minute, 24-mile drive to Coudersport each way. For Erie

County Catholics, that would be as though parishioners at Holy Cross in Fairview had to travel to Our Lady of Mercy in Harborcreek for Sunday Mass, encountering no other parishes in between.

By virtue of the distances between their towns, parishioners outside of Erie County already are experiencing hardship in order to attend Sunday Mass. We have no choice but to begin reallocating clergy so that we can meet the needs of everyone in this, the largest diocese, geographically, in Pennsylvania.

Let's think about this information from a spiritual perspective. Preaching on the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, St. John Chrysostom said this: "Not to share our own riches with the poor is a robbery of the poor, and depriving them of their livelihood; and that which we possess is not only our own, but also theirs." From Jesus Christ to Pope Francis in our own day, and with any number of saints between them, our faith has taught us that to live in abundance while others go without and to call that abundance "necessary," is not just.

When we weigh all the information together — the waning number of worshippers, fewer priests in the immediate future, the number of church buildings...their capacities and upkeep costs...and the distance between church buildings — it is not difficult to see that the people of Erie County are going to have to make some adjustments.

I'd like to share one other piece of information that I believe should give us pause. If we draw a circle with a ten-mile radius around St. Peter Cathedral in Erie today, we find there are 26 churches offering 68 anticipated and Sunday Masses. And as you know, a good portion of that circle goes out over the lake.

Pastoral planning is not a business decision. It is a matter of justice and love. We need to trust as we relinquish that which is truly not necessary.

I know most of you understand that to belong to a parish isn't about "me" while my neighbor's parish isn't just about "them." Nor is the diocese separate from any parish. The diocese is "us," and every parish is part of "us." As St. Paul teaches us, discipleship only works when we think of ourselves as a body united, with Christ as our head. Now and in the future, we need to think and act as a body does, cooperating and collaborating together as one. We must be conscious of the diocese as a whole, moving forward with generosity, trust and hope.

Thank you for your attention to this information. You can find more on the pastoral planning microsite available through a link on the diocesan homepage at [www.eriecd.org](http://www.eriecd.org). Please keep the diocese, its clergy, women and men religious and lay faithful in your prayers as we prepare to enter more fully into another round of pastoral planning.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*+Lawrence T. Persico*

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL  
Bishop of Erie