



A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Parish Life in New Hampshire

"I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the Gospel from the first day until now."

St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians 1:3-5

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

St. Paul greeted the Philippians with a genuine spirit of warmth because of their involvement in and devotion to building the local church. It is with a similar spirit of warmth and gratitude that I write to you, my Christian sisters and brothers, as we work together to develop our Church in New Hampshire.

Christ often used images of agriculture to help us understand the Kingdom of God. I will lean upon that image to help us understand the Catholic Church in New Hampshire as we move forward in the third millennium.

The fertile field lying empty does not look like the same field when it has been cultivated and is bearing fruit. Yet, are they not the same field? The Church Paul helped found looks different from our Church today, but it is the same, eternal Church. Our Catholic Church in New Hampshire does not physically resemble the Church when it was formally established here in 1884, but it is the same Church. One hundred years from now, the faithful in New Hampshire will have a Church that has developed beyond what we are today. Yet, it will still be the same Church.

After spending more than five years as your bishop, I am like Paul in my gratitude to God for the gift of your faithfulness and for your partnership in spreading the Gospel. For many of you, your enduring allegiance to the Church is a hallmark of your life in New Hampshire. Even in the most challenging days, we continue to welcome new members, young and old, who join us in following the Lord. We have built over ten new parish churches to accommodate new arrivals. I am grateful to the many people who have sacrificed close ties to their former parish in order to join hands with a nearby community to form a new parish.

I give thanks to God for my colleagues in ministry who generously toil in the heat of the day in order to carry out the Lord's work. We are blessed with faithful, kind and generous priests who, along with deacons, religious and other pastoral ministers, lead our local parishes in faith, hope and love.

Bearing these sentiments in mind and heart, I write to you about the future of Catholic parish life in New Hampshire. It is in the parish that we come to experience God's love for us. Through the example of our parents, parish ministers and one another, we encounter a Lord who loves and serves us so that we might love and serve others in His Name.

Now, as we seek to teach our children and young people today, we have good reason to be hopeful as we plan for the future of our Church. The faithful witness of the generations who preceded us is a source of encouragement and inspiration. Strengthened by their witness, it is now our responsibility to do all that we can to ensure the vibrancy of Catholic parish life in New Hampshire in these first years of the third millennium.

Our goal is simple, yet it will require trust and commitment on our part. Our goal is singular, namely, to nurture and sustain vibrant parishes. In the remainder of this letter, I will share my vision of what a vibrant parish is and how we will ensure their existence. At the core of our vision about parish life in New Hampshire is the Eucharist. As we explore the possibilities and consider the variables, we know that our one constant is the Eucharist. It will remain our center. It will always be the source of our oneness in Christ.

Parish Life

To Teach, To Sanctify, To Serve

The mission of the Church is to teach, to sanctify and to serve. In our parishes, our mission is to **teach** the truth as it has been revealed in the Scriptures and taught to us by the Apostles and the Church through the ages. In our parishes, we celebrate our new life in Christ through the celebration of Sunday Eucharist. It is the foundation of the sacramental and devotional life of our Church. In turn, we are called to **sanctify** the world in which we live through prayer and through the example of the way we live. We understand ourselves to be friends of the Lord and neighbors to one another. We **serve** one another in His Name, with particular attention to the stranger and the poor in our midst.

Parish life never lies fallow. While rooted in Christ, parish life and worship draw us ever closer to the Lord. Today, parish life is moving through a season in which we need to reconfigure and strengthen our resources—personnel, facilities and funding. Our challenge is to develop a clear vision of the whole Church in New Hampshire, not just of one parish at a time. While the number of parishes, the distribution of resources and staffing patterns may change, we remain confident that our task is the same, namely, to strengthen with Christ the Church in New Hampshire and to serve all the faithful.

To Be Vibrant

As we work together to assure we have vibrant parishes, I encourage you to consider the following questions.

1. What can we do to ensure a vibrant pastoral and spiritual life in each parish so that the Gospel is preached, God is worshipped and people are served?



2. What can we do to incorporate the complementary gifts of all the people of God—the laity, consecrated religious, deacons, priests and bishops—in service to the life and ministry of the parish?
3. What can we do in parish life to support and strengthen the faith life of young people and children, with particular concern for praying and working for priestly vocations among young men?
4. What can we do to increase the understanding and appreciation of our faith, not only among children but also among young adults and young parents in order that they might live it confidently within a secular society of conflicting values?
5. What can we do to ensure that the celebration of Sunday Eucharist and the Church's sacramental life are carried out in a manner that draws parishioners to worship the Lord in their parish every Sunday?

In answering these questions, we will be able to develop standards regarding our mission that can measure the effectiveness of our joint labors to maintain vibrant parishes.

Parish Life: Our Experience

Since St. Mary Parish in Claremont began tending to her people in 1870, parishes in the Diocese of Manchester have been striving to provide a setting where the Gospel is preached, learned and lived. My predecessor bishops established parishes to meet specific and current needs of the faithful at the time. It is my responsibility to configure parishes in a way that meets the specific and current needs of the faithful at this time and into the future.

Our families made very real sacrifices for many years to build and maintain beautiful churches, parish halls, schools and other parish buildings. These are the beautiful fruits of their work in the fields of the Lord. These parishes have become **our** parishes. They continue to be places where God is worshipped and enters into our lives as He did into the lives of our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Our parishes are where we and our children are formed in the faith, and pastoral care is provided to the sick, needy and elderly.

The emotional ties to a particular parish run deep. I recall an elderly parishioner pulling me aside during a parish visit one day. She told me about her father coming home in the evening from work in the mill, dropping off his lunch pail, and going down to help in the construction of the new parish church. Our ancestors' love for God and their desire for the Eucharist overcame whatever discomfort or challenges they faced in making God present for their families and fellow parishioners.

On other occasions, also while visiting parishes, people have remarked to me how much they love their pastor, and they thank me for his service. It is clear how much people love their parish and their Church, as well as hold a great and warm regard for their parish priests. We are blessed with good priests in New Hampshire, and we need to pray and work for the promotion of priestly vocations among the young men in our state. Priestly life is worthwhile, rewarding and necessary.

Planning for future Catholic parish life in New Hampshire will require our best efforts and our willingness to do so with a shared sense of responsibility for the basic mission of the Church. We can cherish the past and still embrace a new and evolving future. We recognize that doing nothing about future parish life is not an option. Today we are facing the preferences promoted by our secular culture, calling for a renewed commitment to evangelization so that more families come to know God's love for them and actively participate in the life of our parishes. Without our active involvement in dealing with the challenges facing parish life, our parishes will be too weak to serve the faithful. In view of that, I want to make decisions that best serve the people of New Hampshire today and into the future.

While we must admit our personal biases — our parish, our pastor, our Midnight Mass—we must also engage in this process with a renewed appreciation for the “**call to cast out into the deep**” of which our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, spoke so eloquently at the end of the Jubilee Year in 2000. What we all seek in common is not just **our parish**, but **our Church**. We seek to make Christ known to all who hunger and thirst for peace, justice and love.

We all know that planning together is not always easy; sometimes it can even be trying. Yet, because Christ is with us, we have every reason to be faithful to our mission and hopeful in our efforts to develop vibrant Catholic parishes.

Parish Life: Changing

During these past five years in which I have served you as bishop, parish life has continued to change. In addition to shifts in the population of our state, we are experiencing the age-old challenge of doing the work of the Lord with limited financial resources, combined with the reality of fewer priests available to serve in parishes. There is an urgency to the challenges that we face today. For example, we are blessed with almost two dozen priests who serve as pastors today and are well beyond retirement age. Changes in priest staffing will happen faster than we would prefer, but we are up to the challenge. Despite this urgency, I am hopeful because of the promises of the Lord and the zeal of the people of New Hampshire.

We all want vibrant parishes that are considerate of the diversity in heritage, population and lifestyle of our state. More and more, our Church is being called to be sensitive to the cultural heritage of people and to be mindful of the Gospel imperative to welcome new people in our midst, some of whom come to us from situations of political, economic and social oppression. The success of the French-Canadians, the Polish, the Irish and the Lithuanians must now inform our desire to serve the Africans, the Southeast Asians and the Latinos, and all others whom we are privileged to welcome to our Church in New Hampshire.

Likewise, our population continues to shift to the southeast portion of our state. Statistical estimates indicate that this trend will continue. We cannot, however, be any less mindful of the parishes in other parts of our state, especially in the White Mountains, the Monadnock Region or the Upper Valley. We need to come to an understanding of how best to use our limited resources in a way that is fair and equitable for everyone.

We need to recognize there are significant differences in a state where some people live in urban settings, while others live in small towns that have become suburban areas to our cities. Many others live in rural New Hampshire. We also have the privilege of welcoming travelers and vacationers who come to visit and share in the natural beauty and splendor of our state throughout the year, and our parishes need to serve their needs as well.

During the last several years, some parishes have changed in structure. We have also gained some experience in twinning parishes for the purpose of staffing and services. We have worked with some parishes who recommended to me that they be merged with one or more neighboring parishes. Although these consolidations and unions have meant the loss of some parish churches, the people who have taken the leap of faith to do so have come to enjoy a new vibrancy in their life together in the Lord. I know one parishioner who said, “I never thought I would be so pleased in this new parish; I feel so at home and welcome here.”

The fields to be harvested in the Church in New Hampshire may look different, but they will continue to yield a rich harvest if we work and plan together.

How To Develop Vibrant Parishes

Bishop Odore J. Gendron and Bishop Leo E. O’Neil laid out their visions for pastoral planning for Catholic parish life in New Hampshire during their tenure of service. The planning that was begun in the 1980s has brought us to a point at which we need to consider our next steps with a united sense of purpose.

Both Bishop Gendron and Bishop O’Neil made plans about parish life in dialogue with those whom they served as shepherds, and I am continuing this effort. After the planning options have been developed by clusters of priests and people in parishes and deaneries, the Long Range Planning Commission will present the recommendations to me for consideration. I will then consult with those who advise me on the pastoral mission of the entire Diocese, namely, the Council of Priests, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and the diocesan Finance Council. I am particularly grateful to the members of the Long Range Planning Commission who have worked together over the last two years to develop the data and guidelines that will guide this process and that will be utilized at the diocesan and deanery level in developing plans for shaping the future of our local church and parish life.

The Long Range Planning Commission and I have already begun to meet with the deans in the newly reconfigured deaneries. The dean’s role is to help the pastors to animate and guide their parishioners in engaging in a process of evaluation, collaboration and consensus-driven recommendations about the future of parish life together. I envision a renewed process for pastoral planning that will span the next two years and that will be inclusive as well as efficient. This planning process will involve collaboration at all levels in developing recommendations for my study and consultation, so that my decisions reflect the sense of what best serves our local church.

I envision the following efforts taking place:

1. **A continuation** of the involvement of parishioners in every parish in reflection on their parish life and the likely need for collaboration with neighboring parishes that could someday lead to a consolidation of resources.
2. **Between now and September 2004**, the priests of each deanery, in consultation with their parishioners, will continue to evaluate the pastoral plan developed ten years ago, utilizing standards for a vibrant parish. This evaluation will lead to the development of an updated plan for review by the Long Range Planning Commission.
3. **In early 2005**, the deans will meet again with the Long Range Planning Commission to present an action plan and calendar for proposed parish reconfigurations on behalf of the pastors in the deanery. I will review this plan with the Council of Priests, the Diocesan Pastoral Council, and diocesan Finance Council and approve it for implementation.
4. **By spring 2005**, each deanery will receive the implementation plan and timeline for the parishes of the deanery.
5. **Before the end of 2005**, a report will be published by the Long Range Planning Commission regarding the development and progress of pastoral planning initiatives.

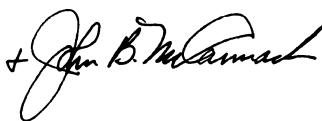
Developing and maintaining vibrant parish life takes much prayer, a lot of work and an understanding and cooperative spirit. Like any labor, the work may be hard and taxing, but the rewards are great. As we collaborate to develop vibrant parishes, we will refresh and renew our parishes. They will continue to be the center of our experience of Church, with the Eucharist as the center of our life. With the assistance of the deans and pastors of the diocese, you will contribute to the future of our Church as our ancestors did when they laid brick upon brick to build our early churches. May God grant us strength, perseverance and wisdom as we till the fields of His Kingdom in New Hampshire.

As I began, I close:

"I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the Gospel from the first day until now."

St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians 1:3-5

Sincerely in our Lord,



Bishop of Manchester



Feast of St. Joseph
March 19, 2004