

Walking with Moms in Need
Presentation: USCCB General Assembly
November 17, 2021

Greeting and Witness

- Dear brothers, I recently had the privilege of watching a powerful video. It began with a touching testimonial from a single mother.
- Through tears, she shared that she had been afraid to come to the Church to ask for help. Because she was unmarried, she feared that she would be judged. And when she ultimately found the courage to ask for assistance, she never revealed that she needed help *because* she was a single mother due to this same fear of judgment.
- This prompts us all to consider that, if a pregnant or parenting woman during her time of need does not trust that she can turn to the Church, *where will she go?*
- This testimony was included as part of a video the Archdiocese of Atlanta produced to promote *Walking with Moms in Need* in their diocese.

Reintroduction to WWMIN

- Brothers, it is hard to believe that it has been two years since I first came before you to introduce a new pastoral initiative of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, which we now know as *Walking with Moms in Need*.
- When we planned this nationwide initiative to launch on March 25, 2020—on the 25th anniversary of *The Gospel of Life*—none of us foresaw the unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that would take our nation by storm that same month.
- While the pandemic certainly presented many challenges to getting this effort off the ground, I'm pleased to share with you that, with some adjustments, our efforts to increase support to pregnant and parenting mothers in need has in fact continued.
- I want to thank my brother bishops who have wholeheartedly supported this initiative in their dioceses, despite the immense trials of the last two years. You and your diocesan staff and parish volunteers have refused to allow such obstacles to prevent you from making progress in serving mothers and their children. (I'll share some of their great work with you during this presentation.)
- And to my brother bishops who have not yet brought WWMIN to your diocese, *you still have the opportunity*, and I'll provide more details on that as we move forward.

What is *Walking with Moms in Need*?

- First off, I'd like to briefly remind you of the scope and vision of this important effort.
- *Walking with Moms in Need* is a parish-based, yet nationwide, initiative to better serve pregnant and parenting mothers facing difficulties. It provides parishes with a detailed process to help them walk with moms in their community.

- Along the way, the WWMIN process helps to identify new parish leaders, empowering clergy and laity to make a positive impact together through a whole-church response.
- And while WWMIN is *not* about turning parishes into pregnancy centers, it *is* about enhancing referrals and building relationships with helping agencies.
- *Walking with Moms* is NOT meant to replace, duplicate, or compete with existing pregnancy help programs or pastoral services. Rather, it is a **process designed to help parishes integrate, improve, and—when needed—expand** existing local resources.
- It is our national effort to ensure that all the resources of local Catholic ministries are known and communicated, so that those in our parishes know how *to help or be helped*.
- We also hope that WWMIN will help to change the national pro-life conversation and witness to the Church’s commitment to women and their children.
- It likewise has the capacity to take what is often seen as a partisan divide and transform it into pastoral unity, bridging the divide between Catholics who describe themselves using the labels of “pro-life” or “social justice.”

Inspiration for WWMIN

- As you may recall, WWMIN was inspired by the desire to honor the 25th anniversary of *The Gospel of Life* and to answer this direct challenge from St. John Paul II that we find in the encyclical:

“With great openness and courage, we need to question how widespread is the culture of life today among individual Christians, families, groups and communities in our Dioceses. With equal clarity and determination we must identify the steps we are called to take in order to serve life in all its truth.” (EV 95)

- WWMIN was similarly inspired by repeated calls from our Holy Father Pope Francis for we as the Church to *go to* and *accompany* those at the peripheries:

“Dear brothers and sisters, how greatly I desire that all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become **islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!”** (Lenten Message, October 4, 2014)

The Need for WWMIN

- We know that pregnant and parenting moms in need are in our parishes and our neighborhoods. Based on 2014 data, 24% of women choosing abortion self-identified as Catholic.
- Across the board, women who chose abortion were poor, young, and unmarried: 75% were low income, 60% were in their 20’s, and 86% were unmarried.
- We have over 17,000 parishes in the U.S. which are uniquely situated to reach out to mothers in need. Any woman who is facing a challenging or unexpected pregnancy—or who is parenting young children in difficult circumstances—needs to know the Church is a place where she can find help.

Vision and Goals

- The goal of WWMIN is really threefold. Through this initiative we are working, first and foremost, to improve and better communicate help to pregnant and parenting women in need; second, to engage our parish communities in a whole-church, life-affirming initiative; and third, to inspire parishioners to get involved with a new vision of what it means to live the Gospel of Life.
- The vision of WWMIN is that a pregnant or parenting mother in need can turn to *any* local Catholic parish and be connected with the life-affirming assistance and accompaniment that she needs. WWMIN is truly turning parishes into “islands of mercy.”

Background Information

- Before launching *Walking with Moms in Need*, our Committee completed an in-depth, preliminary survey of resources and assistance available to pregnant and parenting mothers through our dioceses, as well as that provided by national Catholic organizations.
- These surveys provided an inspiring snapshot of the incredible breadth of help that the Catholic Church provides to mothers and their children, both during pregnancy and far beyond.
- However, the data we gathered also revealed that there are sometimes gaps between what we, as bishops, believe is available in our diocese and the actual experience of a mother in need reaching out to her local parish, as evidenced in my opening anecdote. Too often those staffing our parishes and dioceses don’t actually know how to help a mother who may be contacting them for assistance.
- While in some cases, there may be a real need to expand the services that our dioceses provide, mothers and children can often be more effectively served simply through better outreach, improved communication, and increased efforts at the parish level.

WWMIN in Action

- An inspiring example of this in action comes from Holy Family parish in the Diocese of Orange. Throughout the year as the parish completed the various steps of WWMIN, they prayed and discerned about how they could bridge the gap between their parish and mothers in need in their community.
- The parish was able to build a strong relationship with a pregnancy center located just minutes away. Parishioners began to regularly volunteer at the center, and as a result, the pregnancy center updated their intake form to specifically ask mothers if they would like to be matched with a mentor from the parish who would journey with them and spiritually support them.
- From a pregnant teenager to a 30-year-old mother of eight, the parish says, and I quote, “*The response for mentorship has been overwhelming, and the opportunities for evangelization are amazing.*”

- Not only are mothers from the parish being served practically and materially through this partnership, women entering the pregnancy center are being led back to the Church, and the sacraments, including a mother who is now having her seven children baptized!
- Similarly, in the Archdiocese of Miami, the parish leader at St. Martin De Porres Parish worked to identify gaps in services in the local area of Homestead, Florida, and began advocating for mothers in her community.
- She quickly discovered that many of the mothers in the local community work long hours in agriculture. And due to a lack of transportation, it was especially difficult for them to travel to the nearest Pregnancy Help Center.
- Over the past year, the parish worked to coordinate two mission trips in which the local Pregnancy Help Center staff travelled to the parish and were able to provide services and assistance to those families in need.
- This is what WWMIN is all about—empowering missionary disciples in our parishes to be the hands and feet of Christ to mothers in need.
- Both of these stories highlight the essential role that our parishes play in extending support and assistance to those on the peripheries. Our parish leaders are able to identify obstacles and challenges that we would otherwise be unaware of.

Why is it important to get started now?

- As we know, the pandemic and its economic impact have only increased the struggles for mothers and their children. While *Walking with Moms* is not an emergency response, its goal is to lay the foundation for a long-term and sustainable response from the Church.
- We all witnessed the very negative reaction to the Texas Heartbeat law from abortion advocates and political leaders. While we rejoice at the lives being saved daily through any restrictions on abortion—and we are grateful that more women will be spared from the pain and trauma of abortion due to such legislation—we also need to expect increased calls for help and assistance. *And the Church needs to be prepared to respond.*
- *Walking with Moms in Need* directly confronts the false, yet popular, narrative that the Catholic Church merely condemns abortion, without providing the resources or support women need in raising their children.
- Highlighting what the Church is doing—and will be doing—for moms in need is an important message to share with the public.
- Consider, brother bishops, if such a law went into effect in your state, would your diocese be ready and equipped to respond?
- *Walking with Moms in Need* is designed to help your diocese be prepared for the day, God-willing, when abortion is no longer the law of our land. While we cannot be sure how courts or legislatures may treat abortion in the future, our pastoral response will always remain the same.

WWMIN Resources and Materials

- As the Holy Father consistently reminds us, we *must* be willing to go to the peripheries and bring the light and love of Christ to those in need. Our staff has worked to create well-thought-out resources and materials to allow *every* parish to answer this call, and make WWMIN an easy lift for pastors.
- *Walking with Moms in Need* invites parishes to complete three basic tasks:
 1. Take an inventory of the resources and services available in their local community.
 2. Assess the results of that inventory and identify gaps.
 3. Plan and implement a *parish* response based on their findings and assessment.
- To help parishes complete these steps, all of our resources are easily accessible online. The materials are available at their fingertips and can be downloaded for *free* in both English and Spanish.
- Our website, WalkingWithMoms.com, is simple and easy to navigate. It offers a full listing of materials available to parishes with short descriptions of how each can be used.
- A detailed, 78-page Action Guide takes parishes step-by-step through the process, equipping them with all the tools they need, from email templates, to sample announcements, to tips on how to run a meeting and build a network of support in the parish.
- Our Action Guide also highlights wonderful models for parish accompaniment that already exist, such as the Gabriel Network, PREPARES, and Elizabeth Ministries.
- We've also provided sample timelines, email templates, supplementary webinars, prayer guides, and educational resources to support parishes throughout the process.
- These prayer and educational materials help pastors and parish leaders provide both the spiritual and catechetical formation that serve as the foundation of this pastoral effort.

It's Not Too Late to Start

- While the pandemic posed many challenges to this initiative, the good news is that all of the WWMIN resources, including timelines and schedules, are fully adaptable to meet the specific needs and circumstances of your diocese and parishes.
- *This means it's not too late to bring WWMIN to your diocese.* Dioceses across the country are at all different stages in the process, as many had to delay or relaunch their efforts due to the pandemic. As parish life returns, our pro-life staff is available and eager to help you and your staff in any way that they can.

Reports from the Field

- In preparation for this presentation, we asked leaders from our dioceses to provide updates on their local WWMIN efforts.
- We were encouraged to hear that WWMIN is already inspiring collaboration between ministries and service agencies. Many diocesan directors reported that they were excited

to realize just how many resources were available in their area. Leaders also emphasized that the provided materials were an immense help to parishes.

- In hearing from the field, it came as no surprise that the pandemic has made it especially difficult to build momentum within our dioceses. Many parishes are just now returning to normal parish life and pastors and volunteers are working hard to rebuild ministries that were put on hold and to address the financial impact of the pandemic.
- In the face of these challenges, many pastors are understandably hesitant to start something new or add something else to their plate, but WWMIN can be part of the *solution* to rebuilding parish life.

How Bishops Can Help

- The mission of WWMIN is one that excites, motivates, and inspires our people in the pews and unites our ministry leaders. It is a way to breathe new life into a parish that may be struggling.
- The Diocese of Oakland reported that, and I quote, there is an “unprecedented level of interest, in particular in the Latino/Hispanic community. One participant even said ‘We have been waiting for something like this for years!’”
- WWMIN relies on lay, volunteer leadership, and requires minimal effort and time from our pastors. And the good news for both pastors and bishops, WWMIN doesn’t cost anything to implement.
- Just as our example from the Diocese of Orange demonstrates, WWMIN can have a huge impact simply by utilizing existing resources more effectively and building relationships with helping agencies that already exist. Accompaniment is a gift we are all able to offer, no matter our financial resources.
- Reports from our people in the field tell us that what can make the biggest difference in overcoming these challenges is *our* support, Brothers.
- It is up to us to encourage our pastors to make WWMIN a priority and to let them know that they have our support.

In Summary

- In summary, *Walking with Moms in Need* is a parish-based, yet nationwide, initiative to better serve pregnant and parenting mothers facing difficulties. It provides parishes with a detailed process to help them walk with and accompany moms in their community.
- Along the way, WWMIN helps to identify new parish leaders, empowering clergy and laity to make a positive impact together through a whole-church response.
- And while WWMIN is *not* about turning parishes into pregnancy centers, it *is* about enhancing referrals and building relationships with helping agencies.
- We also hope that WWMIN will help to change the national pro-life conversation and witness to the Church’s commitment to women and their children.
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Conclusion

- In the two years since we began to roll out WWMIN, we've had the chance to share this unprecedented effort with people and organizations from all across the country. In response, many find WWMIN an unexpected initiative coming from the Church, and the Bishops' Conference more specifically. Others are rather surprised to learn of the Church's desire to serve women and their children.
- These reactions are rather telling. They demonstrate how important it is for us to prove through word and example our commitment to serve pregnant and parenting women in need. The Church needs to be seen as a refuge of compassion and care for mothers.
- Through WWMIN we can address the disconnect that exists between pregnant mothers in need and the Church who desires to walk with and support them.
- I'll leave you with the same question from the beginning of this presentation: if a pregnant or parenting woman during her time of need does not trust that she can turn to the Church, *where will she go?*