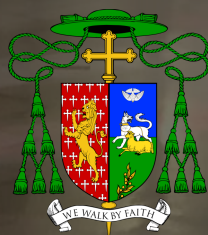



UNITED IN CHRIST

A Pastoral Letter Introducing Our Pastoral Planning

*Most Reverend William E. Koenig, M.S.W., D.D.
Bishop of Wilmington*





To the laity, members of institutes of consecrated life,
and the clergy of the Diocese of Wilmington:

Greetings in the name of the Risen Lord.

INTRODUCTION

I continue to be grateful for how warmly I was welcomed when I became your Bishop in July of 2021. Since that time, I have grown ever more deeply in my awareness of the rich history of the Diocese and most importantly, of the faith and vibrancy of the people whom I have met in my travels throughout Delaware and the Maryland Eastern Shore. In addition to informal gatherings that have taken place when I visited parishes for Confirmations, Sunday and weekday Masses, or other social events, there have been two initiatives that have been particularly helpful in providing me with the opportunity to not only personally meet and get to know the faithful of our Diocese but also the opportunity to listen and strengthen my understanding of your present and future cares and concerns.

The first of these initiatives took place in the Fall of 2021 when I met with groups of our priests at regional gatherings throughout the Diocese. At every gathering, our priests expressed their love for and commitment to the ministry and the faithful whom they serve. They also unanimously articulated a desire to strengthen the capacities of all parishes, schools, and ministries so as to be more vibrant and more welcoming beacons of hope for all people. You will see the word vibrant often in this letter, as it is fundamental to the realization of this pastoral vision.

The second initiative came in the form of the diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality. It was fortuitous that this coincided with my first year in the Diocese of Wilmington.

This timing enabled me to meet representatives of all 56 parishes through a prayerful and structured process wherein participants had the opportunity to voice what they saw as the strengths, challenges and opportunities within their parishes, schools and the Diocesan ministries. The feedback that we heard during these listening sessions was documented and synthesized into a 16-page report that reflects not only the struggles we face as Church but also the hopes and dreams that so many of you have for your parishes and ministries.*

It is clear to me that our parishes, schools, and Diocesan ministries are beautifully fulfilling Jesus' missionary mandate to "go make disciples of all nations." Through our efforts, Christ is made present to those who hunger and thirst for God's love, mercy,

and forgiveness. The success of our ministerial efforts, as we look back, is certainly reason to give thanks. It is also, however, an impetus for us to look forward and be strengthened in our desire to live out Jesus' mandate to be missionary disciples as we experience situations and circumstances that change and evolve. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read of the first disciples encountering a situation that had not been experienced previously: non-Jewish Gentiles

who were desirous of baptism.

Acts, chapter 15 relates the ensuing discussion that took place in Jerusalem. The members of the early Church needed to determine whether or not these converts should also be required to follow Jewish law. It was ultimately decided that this was not necessary. A

decision that today we take for granted. That early Council of Jerusalem is an example of the Church, in the midst of a changing situation, living the Faith and striving to bring the Good News of the Gospel to the World. It is in the same spirit of the early Church that we continue to live our faith.

So, after considering all that I have heard and witnessed throughout the Diocese, I have discerned a vision for the future of our local Church. It is a future filled with hope, mercy, and hospitality. It is a future where we truly fulfill St. Paul's image of the Body of Christ, where we are united beyond our parish boundaries with our unique gifts and talents and expressions of worship. Therefore, our work will commence under the banner, *United in Christ*. For it is only when we are united that we as a diocese can bring forth the Kingdom of God.



Ss. Peter & Paul Parish Family Life Center, Easton, MD

* This report is available at cdow.org/synod/

Earlier in this letter I referenced our participation in Pope Francis' Synod of Synodality. In his homily at the opening Mass for the Synod on October 10, 2021, the Holy Father said *"Celebrating a Synod means walking on the same road, walking together."* I believe these words along with St. Paul's emphasis on unity are an indispensable element of our evangelization and ministry.

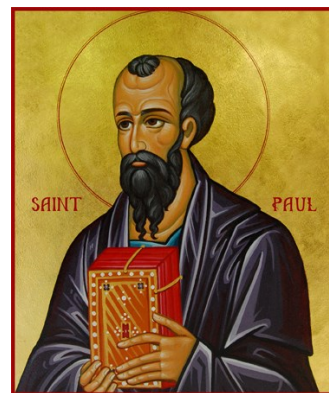
A VISION FOR OUR CHURCH: ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT IN CHRIST

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12, St. Paul has a great deal to say about unity and variety. He was deeply concerned about the many divisions that had formed within the Church of Corinth. Paul knew that if left unattended, these rifts had the potential to completely destroy any sense of community among the Christians in Corinth. Without community, the local Church would have ceased to exist. St. Paul's concerns provide us with critical insights even today.

*Our skills and talents only
have meaning when they are
united in Christ for a greater good.*

Paul first addresses the variety of talents and gifts which the Corinthians possessed. The difficulty was that each person or fractured group was convinced that their particular talent or skill was the most significant. This divisive attitude was the genesis of the destructive divisions within the community. Paul reminds them that *"There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord; there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them*

in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit". (1Cor 12:4-7) Diversity of gifts is an asset to the community but they are empty unless they are seen as coming from God for a particular purpose. Our skills and talents only have meaning when they are United in Christ for a greater good.



To further encourage the Corinthians to strive for greater unity, Paul uses the image of the human body to illustrate the profound connection and mutuality that is required in order to be Church. *"But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy"*. (1Cor 12: 24-26) Having a variety of skills and gifts, we all have a special part to play in the life of the Church and just like the body, each role is essential for overall health. No part is greater than the other; no part is insignificant.



When we are united, we bring together our various gifts and talents in order to prayerfully discern creative solutions that will help us to persistently improve our capacity for vibrancy in our parishes, schools, and all of our ministries. It is essential for us as a Diocese to be ever alert for ways in which we can work together as the Body of Christ.

UNITED IN CHRIST: ACHIEVING THE VISION

Intentional planning presents us with the opportunity to reflect on where we are now, where we have been, and where we want to be in the future. The process of Pastoral Planning will help us to identify how we will collaborate to achieve this desired future ministry. Unlike other forms of organizational planning, Pastoral Planning is rooted in faith and the message of the Gospel. It is a planning model



that can help us to align people and resources to fulfill our mission and guide parishes to build the Kingdom of God in our communities. This model also enables parishes to work together for greater effectiveness in serving parishioners.

As I envisioned a plan for our Diocese, it was important to me that it not be a top-down process. If we are truly United in Christ, then we all must have the opportunity to actively participate in shaping the future of our Diocese.

“All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; Indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love”. (Pope Francis - *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 120)

INITIATING PASTORAL PLANNING

Last year, I engaged the Leadership Roundtable as a partner in ministry to assist us with creating a process for this three-year planning endeavor. This organization has an outstanding history of assisting parishes and dioceses with achieving excellence in church management. We began by establishing a Diocesan Core Leadership Team composed mostly of lay men and women from across the Diocese who are seasoned professionals with great love for the church. They will assist in designing the planning process and communication strategy and they will be available for coordination and consultation. They will not, however, be developing the Pastoral Plan. The plan will, instead, be developed on a regional level throughout the

Diocese using guidelines that I have put into place. This is a key component as it will foster participation from all parishes and allow our planning to be informed by the realities of the various areas of the Diocese. For example, the needs of our parishes in the City of Wilmington are very different from those on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and our beach/resort areas. Given the diversity of geography and pastoral concerns present in our Diocese, a one size fits all approach would not be helpful. In this way, each area of the Diocese will be able to develop creative solutions that are tailored for their particular concerns and circumstances.



St. Paul's Church, Wilmington, DE

Each parish will have the opportunity to prayerfully articulate their hopes and dreams about the future of their parishes and identify the resources they require to achieve their vision.

PASTORAL PLANNING IN OUR DEANERIES

Like all dioceses, the Diocese of Wilmington is organized into small regions called deaneries. A deanery is



made up of contiguous parishes and is lead by a pastor within the deanery who serves as the dean. A dean is appointed by the bishop and his responsibilities include overseeing the spiritual needs of priests, being attentive to pastoral issues in his deanery and coordinating regional pastoral initiatives. It is as groups of parishes within a deanery, that our Pastoral Planning will take place. Each of our deans has already assembled a team of parishioners and priests to facilitate this endeavor. These local Deanery

Leadership Teams will begin the bulk of their work this coming fall in consultation with the Diocesan Core Leadership Team.

- Their first task will be to develop a process for a Needs Assessment for each parish.
- Each parish will have the opportunity to prayerfully articulate their hopes and dreams about the future of their parishes and identify the resources they require to achieve their vision.
- My hope is that each parish and Deanery will have developed a plan by early 2024 and implementation will begin later in the spring.

CREATING VIBRANT PARISHES AND SCHOOLS

Where will this pastoral planning lead us and what is the desired outcome? Throughout this letter I have used the word vibrant several times. I believe this word precisely describes what we are looking for in our parishes, schools, and Diocesan ministries. To say that our ministries will be vibrant means that they are spirit filled, alive, and adaptive to the ever-changing needs of those they serve. In so many ways we have a head start on our Pastoral Planning and Needs Assessment through the work of our diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality last year. Now we have a starting point with a list of best practices to be considered by each Deanery and parish. Ensuring hospitality, meaningful liturgy, emphasis on youth and young adults, and greater access to faith formation opportunities are just some of the recommendations that were shared during the Synod.

WE NEED YOUR PARTICIPATION

As we continue to move forward with our Pastoral Planning, essential information will be shared with you in many ways - through our diocesan newspaper, the Dialog; our website (cdow.org/united), and other social media outlets. Most importantly, you'll be hearing directly through your pastors. You will be asked to participate in a Needs Assessment process in your parish this fall. United in Christ as the Church of Wilmington, may we, in the coming months, reflect upon how we are called to be bearers of Good News and how we live out the "Great Commission". May we reflect upon how the Gospel has been proclaimed to us and how being Christian, in the words of Pope Benedict, *"is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person,*

which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1). May we reflect upon how we encounter Jesus Christ through the Sacraments and devotions, through our ministries and apostolates, through our schools and religious formation programs, through our service and through, as the Body of Christ, one another. May we reflect upon how we are called to "walk by faith" and, led by the Spirit, proclaim, in Worship, Word and Work the Good News of Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Given in Wilmington, Delaware, at the Chancery Office, on the 15th day of May in the Year of Our Lord, two-thousand and twenty-three.

+ *William E. Koenig*

Most Reverend William E. Koenig
Bishop of Wilmington



Most Reverend William E. Koenig, M.S.W., D.D.
1925 Delaware Avenue
Wilmington, DE 19085
302-573-3100

cdow.org | thedialog.org

