



## ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE

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OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

October 13, 2011

Dear Friends in Christ,

The purpose for my writing to you today is to call your attention to a number of critical challenges our parishes are facing and to ask for your participation in a process that I hope will not only address these challenges but will also seize bold new opportunities for re-imagining Catholic parish life in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

It has long been reasonable to expect that your Catholic parish—often the church of your youth and the same one where your parents and theirs before them worshipped—would always be open, offer the same schedule of Masses year after year—each one full, and be administered by a stable of priests—with young ones coming in time to replace those retiring after many years of dutiful service.

Unfortunately, those expectations may not be reasonable for much longer.

Seventy-two of our 153 active-duty priests will become eligible for retirement over the next 15 years;

Seventeen of our current 153 active priests are already over the retirement age of 70;

Since 1976, we are ordaining an average of only three new priests/year;

We have 20 percent fewer priests today and the same number of parishes (153) as we did 30 years ago; and

If the current trends hold, the number of active priests will be reduced from 153 to 100 over the next 15 years.

Planning for a future that contains fewer priests to serve the needs of the nearly 500,000 registered Catholics in the Archdiocese is not our only cause for concern, as less than 30 percent of registered Catholics regularly attend Mass. This sobering statistic compels us to look not only at how many parishes we need to meet this diminished need but also why our people are staying away and what changes we can make to engage more Catholics in the regular practice of their faith.

When you add in the sharp demographic shifts in our Archdiocese over the past several decades, most especially in Western Maryland and Baltimore City—and the significant toll these have taken on many of our parishes, it is time for a thorough examination of how and where the parishes of the Archdiocese can best live out our evangelizing mission. This means we must all be open to change—change in Mass schedules, change in numbers of priests, change in the Mass itself and even change in the number of churches. Although uncomfortable, we must accept that we cannot and likely should not be motivated by a plan to keep things as they are if it means forsaking our mission of bringing people closer to Christ.

Over the past year, I have consulted with priests and laity to discuss how best to move forward given the challenges and opportunities before us. I have benefitted greatly from their expertise, their local insights and wisdom. I have also benefitted from witnessing the great collaborative spirit present in the local planning efforts undertaken in areas like Cumberland and Southeast Baltimore where critical needs required more immediate attention.

These various consultations included a month this past summer, during which I, along with the auxiliary bishops, met with lay parish leaders throughout the Archdiocese. Specifically, I wanted to hear their thoughts about what makes a parish vibrant and sustainable, how we can make better use of our priests and encourage new ones, how parishes might better work together to serve the same goals and what should be present in any process we create to address these issues.

Despite news of my recent appointment to a Vatican post, I intend to embark on a parish planning process. The needs and the opportunities are too great to take no action. My successor will likely make the ultimate decisions, but at least we can begin gathering information, bringing parishes together to discuss the relevant issues, provide key information to parishioners and hopefully provide the next Archbishop of Baltimore with recommendations for moving forward.

To achieve these goals, I have taken the input I received from the many consultations over the past year and developed a process for parish planning in the Archdiocese: *Building Up the Body of Christ*. This scripture from Ephesians aptly describes the mission of this process and will hopefully remind each of us involved of our true motivation.

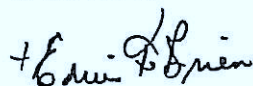
The process involves four phases (Planning, Research & Organization; Work of the Parishes; Work of the Clusters; and Decisions and Implementation) and relies heavily on parish and inter-parish collaboration. It is designed to be a grassroots initiative that allows parishes to work individually and as clusters to examine themselves and one another, to identify areas of improvement and need, and to shape future parish life based on the guidance offered by these assessments and, just as importantly, on available resources.

You can read the full outline of the process at [www.buildingupthebodyofchrist.org](http://www.buildingupthebodyofchrist.org), a new website designed solely to enhance communication and transparency for this planning initiative. There you will find regular updates throughout the process, helpful resources (including a special Prayer for Parish Planning) and contact information so you can have input regardless of your time constraints and availability. As well, quarterly updates will be provided to parishes for inclusion in bulletins and on parish websites. We will also utilize Facebook and Twitter to keep you abreast of developments throughout the process.

It is clear that this process will take time and will involve a great deal of research, collaborative planning and listening. It is critical that we move carefully and that we move together if we are to succeed in building a better Archdiocese. That said, we have many churches whose viability is threatened by dire financial conditions plagued by aging and declining populations and unmanageable physical plants. We also have a pressing need to reenergize our parishes to make them more attractive for our people—both active and inactive—to help them find a deeper and more meaningful relationship with Christ and the Catholic faith. Neither of these can wait and should animate our work as together we build up the body of Christ in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

I hope you and your family will participate in this process. Your ideas, passion and experiences are welcomed and appreciated. Finally, I ask for your prayers for me and for those who will give so much of themselves to build a better Church to serve God and His people, and be assured of my continued prayers for each of you.

In the Lord,



+Edwin F. O'Brien  
Apostolic Administrator