

A Pastoral Letter to the Faithful of the Diocese of Beaumont

REVITALIZING OUR PARISHES FOR MISSION

January 28, 2005

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Since I became your Bishop over four years ago, I have had the opportunity to visit all of the parishes throughout the diocese many times. I have met with your pastors, your parish councils, and I have listened to many of you on various occasions as you tell me the good things happening in your parish, as well as the difficulties and challenges your parish communities are facing. I am touched by your faith, your families, your hospitality, and your love for your priests. I am also edified by the efforts and creativity of so many parishes in meeting the challenges of ministry (e.g. Renew, stewardship, ACTS retreats, parish vocation committees, dedication of the Cathedral, sharing of personnel & resources, and so many other ways).

Ever since we became a diocese in 1966 with 32 parishes and 16 missions, we have grown to 45 parishes, 8 missions, and 2 stations. Being a part of our modern society, we all feel the effects of unemployment, loss of business and industry in our area, shifting population, an unstable global economy, escalating costs for goods and services (e.g. insurance, health care, gasoline, etc.), and loss of revenue from investments. We also live in a society where individual freedoms, materialism, consumerism, money, drugs, sex, and personal comfort are aggressively promoted as fundamental values. A dwindling interest in one's relationship to God, in religion, and in active participation in the Christian community has resulted in empty pews in many parishes and fewer individuals active in the life and ministry of the parish. The Church scandals that have been highlighted particularly during the past three years have damaged the faith and trust of many people. As all of these factors have affected you and your families, especially in the past decade, so they also have affected our parish communities and made the task of proclaiming the Gospel more difficult.

I have heard from clergy, religious, and laity about the need to examine parish life. With increasing concern I have seen many of our parishes slipping into "maintenance mode" rather than becoming "mission-driven." A few of our parishes are already facing survival challenges, with overwhelming financial problems and a continual preoccupation with their inability to do the critical maintenance and repair of deteriorating buildings. Other parishes will be facing similar challenges in the coming years. *It is a myth that the Catholic Church has unlimited financial resources. Our greatest and only real wealth is the devotion and commitment of faithful Catholics.*

With reduced participation and support of parishioners in the life of so many of our parishes, the responsibility for programs and ministries falls on the shoulders of the same few. Occasionally, an active parishioner will say to me, "Why is it always the same persons who are involved in parish activities?" That is a "tell-tale" question. *The life of the parish cannot rest on the shoulders of a faithful few.* Your pastor cannot lead the parish all by himself. Your priests are diligently spending themselves in ministry to you, oftentimes to the detriment of their wholistic health and well-being. *Attending Mass occasionally and dropping a dollar in the collection basket is not true discipleship.*

Perhaps the Holy Spirit is speaking to us as we struggle with the decreasing number of priests. Are we listening? Perhaps the Holy Spirit is calling upon the rest of the Christian Faithful to shoulder their rightful responsibilities as baptized and confirmed persons, empowered to carry out the mission of Jesus. Are you listening? I call upon every baptized Catholic, every pastoral/finance council, parish committee, parish staff member to re-examine the gift of your baptismal call, and with renewed energy to become more active members of your parish communities, seeking to evangelize in the name of Jesus. I call upon every baptized Catholic to

reach out to those who have distanced themselves from the parish, those who have stopped coming to Mass on the weekends, those who are searching and waiting for an invitation to become part of a faith community. Living our baptismal call is not optional for us as Christians; this is our mandate as disciples of Jesus.

PURPOSE OF MY PASTORAL LETTER

My hope is that this pastoral letter will be a springboard for discussion between and among the Catholic Faithful, in Parish Pastoral and Finance Council meetings, and other meetings of parish committees. I hope that this letter will motivate all of you to renew your baptismal commitment and your responsibility to your parish community. As we examine parish life in this diocese, the key question we seek to answer is: **“What must our parish life be in order to carry out effectively the mission of Jesus Christ?”** While demographics and economics cannot realistically be ignored and must be factored into the answer, they are not the primary criteria. *Each parish* must examine and question its effectiveness in carrying out that mission. And each baptized person must ask herself/himself the question, **“What must my life be like as a disciple of Jesus?”**

To assist you to grapple with these questions and with the challenges that our parishes are facing, I want to reflect with you some of the key indicators of a viable parish. I will then look at the current demographics of our diocese, some pathways and strategies for renewing our parishes, and finally, the consequences of maintaining the *status quo*.

VIABILITY INDICATORS

The basic elements of a viable parish can be categorized under the key areas of worship, community, service, and education/formation. As a foundation for this reflection, I ask that you consider some concrete indicators of a viable parish as common reference points that allow analysis, planning, and creative renewal to take place. Each parish must assess its vibrancy, ask the difficult questions, and search for innovative and effective ways to re-energize the life and ministry of the parish so that it can, in its own unique way, carry out Jesus’ mission of evangelization.

Worship

A viable parish will see itself as a Eucharistic community, where they celebrate the Liturgy in a dignified and prayerful way, where they encounter the Risen Christ, and from which they take that presence of the Risen Christ to their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Worship is central to their spiritual life as a Christian people, and every parish is challenged to find ways to invite people and involve them in full, conscious, and active participation. *In a viable parish:*

- well-planned and appropriately participative sacramental celebrations are carried out in an environment respectful of the cultural diversity of the people;
- the liturgy is celebrated with music, competently led and sung, which invites participation of the assembly;
- homilies are instructive, challenging, well-prepared, clearly articulated, and assist parishioners to apply the Scriptures and church teaching to their lives;
- the liturgical ministers are invited to and properly trained for their ministries, and the assembly is also formed for effective celebration of the liturgy;
- there is a liturgy committee which assists the pastor to prepare liturgies;

- a vital sacramental life is evident by regular celebration of the Eucharist and opportunities for the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick (communal and individual);
- sufficient preparation is provided for the Sacrament of Marriage, in cooperation with programs offered through the diocese, and likewise, preparation for other sacraments
- various forms of devotional prayer are offered;
- spiritual life is fostered through retreat/renewal programs, prayer groups and small faith-sharing groups, and participation in spiritual enrichment programs offered through the diocese is encouraged;
- adequate resources are provided for this.

Community

A viable parish is a faith community which fosters in each member a sense of belonging, ownership, responsibility, Christian growth, and conversion. It recognizes that the essential mission of the faith community is evangelization. The atmosphere of the parish is one of inclusion and hospitality where parishioners find a home and welcome an invitation to become leaders, to serve in ministries, and to help other members of the parish family. Parishioners recognize their gifts and, as good stewards, offer their gifts of time, talent, and treasure for the good of the parish. *In a viable parish:*

- all parishioners of all ages and cultures are welcomed and made to feel a part of the parish community; there is a sufficient number of members in their active years who participate productively in the parish ministry;
- there is a stewardship committee which promotes the on-going education of parishioners about sharing their gifts as a faith response and meeting the ministry needs of the parish and the local civic community;
- the pastoral leadership encourages full collaboration among the People of God by assisting them to take an active, responsible role in the life of the parish and its activities and ministries;
- there are sufficient and qualified personnel as staff (who are paid just wages) and parishioner volunteers for program leadership, with training and on-going formation provided for them;
- there is an active Pastoral Council and an active Finance Council which meet regularly and advise the Pastor, and there is training and on-going formation provided for them;
- the parish encourages a theology of stewardship that promotes sacrificial giving;
- it has the financial resources necessary to carry out its mission; it is not preoccupied with financial matters and building maintenance at the expense of pastoral ministry; it has a prepared budget and meets its ordinary expenses in a timely fashion, maintains its plant and facilities in good condition, and is able to pay off any debts (including interest) on time; it meets its target in the Bishop's Faith Appeal.
- members see their baptism as the call to discipleship, with freedom to invite others to join the faith community; they reach out to the un-churched, alienated, non-practicing and marginal Catholics;
- clergy and laity have a deep sense of the importance of unity among the Faithful in the parishes and with their diocesan bishop; all seek to collaborate in ministry with other parishes so that people are served more effectively, unnecessary duplication is eliminated, and resources are utilized more wisely.

Service

A vibrant parish reaches out to the world around it and genuinely cares about the needs of the poor and those who are less fortunate. It knows it must be a sharing community in order to

bear the name Catholic. The members of a viable parish live out the values of their faith in the world, serving their sisters and brothers and working for greater justice and peace in the world. Empowered by their baptism, they serve in Jesus' name, following the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. *In a viable parish:*

- parishioners are instructed about their baptismal responsibility to serve in Jesus' name and are made aware of the Social teachings of the Catholic faith through homilies and various educational opportunities;
- the members keep contact with shut-ins, the elderly, the ill, and bring Communion to those who are unable to attend the parish;
- disadvantaged parishioners and others in the area can obtain assistance with their material needs;
- members are involved in the life of their surrounding neighborhoods and are concerned with and active in ministries which promote equality, freedom, justice, and peace;
- parish groups reach out to local institutions (e.g. hospitals, nursing homes, prisons) and participate in outreach programs in the local community;
- parishioners serve the needy throughout the world by responding generously to appeals for international aid and by supporting the Church's missionary efforts with prayer and financial resources;
- all are encouraged to understand and guard the sacredness of life in all its stages, from the womb to the tomb, and to protect the dignity of each human person.

Education/Formation

A viable parish is committed to the religious and spiritual development of its adults, youth, and children. Alone or in collaboration with other parishes, it is able to offer religious education/formation on all levels. Strong faith formation programs make it evident that every baptized person must continually be "conformed to Christ" in order to share fully the life of the Church. The parish considers formation and development of leadership potential as essential so that individuals can become equipped to assume responsibilities in the parish. Parishioners recognize their baptismal call and take advantage of formation opportunities in the parish and on the diocesan level to mature in their faith. *In a viable parish:*

- educational programs assist parents in understanding and carrying out their primary role in the spiritual formation of their children;
- there are complete programs of religious education and sacramental preparation for adults, youth, and children, and there are adequate funds, staff, and space allotted for effective catechesis; collaborating with a neighboring parish(es) by combining programs or sharing competent staff is also pursued for better use of resources and greater effectiveness of ministry;
- there is a qualified Director or Coordinator of Religious Education (or one shared between parishes), and the parish encourages and provides opportunities for training and education for its catechists, especially through the diocesan CEMI courses and workshops;
- the parish supports its staff, lay ministers, and volunteers with regular and on-going training and formation and activities that enhance their faith life;
- opportunities are encouraged and made available for the education and faith-formation of parishioners and lay ministers, especially through the CEMI courses and workshops, or through jointly sponsored programs of adult faith formation between/among neighboring parishes;
- vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, and consecrated life are cultivated and supported.

THE CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS OF OUR DIOCESE

Vibrant parish life is the best way for us to manifest the presence of Jesus Christ and to inspire others to embrace Christ more profoundly. I am concerned that the vibrancy of

many of our parishes, and thus the health of our diocese, is being threatened by the effects of growth in some areas and the decline in others, diminished numbers of priests and religious, reduced participation of our Catholics in their parishes, escalating operating costs, increasing legal and governmental requirements on our institutions, deterioration of parish buildings, the inability to hire competent lay ecclesial ministers in the places where they are needed and wanted, and many of the factors I mentioned at the beginning of this pastoral letter.

I would be remiss if I did not provide you with facts about the **current demographics in our diocese** so that you as an individual member of a parish and all of you as a community of faith can address these serious issues among yourselves and with your pastors. No parish is immune to these challenging realities. Revitalizing your parish is not the sole responsibility of your pastor. YOU are the Church; YOU have been empowered for ministry by your baptism. Each one of you has been given gifts for the good of the faith community; each one of you has the responsibility to become informed about your Church, your diocese, and your parish so that you can become actively involved in shaping its future.

Since March, 2003, a Strategic Planning Committee had been gathering data on our parishes that will be helpful in developing strategies and plans for the future. Some of their findings, which were reported to me in March, 2004, include the following:

Shrinking Participation

Attendance at weekend parish Masses has decreased over the years in many parishes throughout the diocese. During the month of September, 2003, an actual Mass attendance count was taken in every parish for each weekend. With approximately 89,403 Catholics in our diocese, the average number of persons attending 150 Masses throughout the diocese that month was 26,971 persons. While there has been a 25% increase (↑) in the number of registered families from 1983 to 2001, there was a 23% decrease (↓) in the number of baptisms, a 7% decrease (↓) in the number of confirmations, a 40% decrease (↓) in the number of weddings/validations in the Church, and a 22% increase (↑) in the number of funerals.

By way of example: **From 1982 to 2002 in the Southern Vicariate (13 parishes)**, there has been a loss of 2212 *registered families*, all occurring in 7 of the 9 Port Arthur parishes and the 2 Groves parishes. The other 4 parishes (St. Charles-Nederland, Our Lady of Guadalupe, P.A., St. Elizabeth-Port Neches, and Queen of Vietnam-P.A.) reported a total gain of 1590 families. Except for an increase in *baptisms* at our two Hispanic parishes in Port Arthur (St. Joseph's and Our Lady of Guadalupe), all other parishes in the Southern Vicariate had about a 37% decline (↓) in baptisms. During this same 20-year period, the Southern Vicariate has experienced about a 47% decrease (↓) in the number of *weddings/validations*. Only St. Joseph, P.A. and Queen of Vietnam, P.A., had an increase.

Aging & Shrinking Presbyterate

From 1993 to 2003, 10 priests were ordained for the diocese. In that same decade, we lost 20 diocesan priests (12 of whom died). While we hope to ordain 8 priests in the next 10 years, there are currently 13 active diocesan priests who have reached or will reach retirement age (70) during the next 10 years. According to our actuaries, over the next 10 years 2 to 3 of our 40 currently active diocesan priests will die before retirement. In addition, there are 8 Religious Order priests serving as pastors within our diocese who have reached or will reach age 70 within the next 10 years.

Out of 79 diocesan and religious priests of our diocese, half (or 39) are older than age 55. Of those 39, 16 are already age 70 and above.

Growing Financial Difficulties

Members of the Strategic Planning Committee visited the pastor/parochial administrator of every parish/mission in the diocese. In these interviews, 16 pastors expressed concern that within the next 10 years their parishes could have difficulties in meeting their expenses. These difficulties were ascribed to increased diocesan costs, need for major maintenance of their buildings or need for new construction.

A survey of building maintenance needs, replacement, and new construction in all parishes throughout the diocese amounts to approximately \$16,270,519.

At the end of the fiscal year 2003, 4 parishes were in arrears in paying cathedraticum; 8 parishes' end-of-the-year financial reports reflected deficits before capital expenditures and debt service. From 1983 to 2003, 15 parishes have had under a 100% increase in parish income, with two parishes in Port Arthur having under a 2% increase in income for the 20-year period.

By way of example: **In the Southern Vicariate**, 12 of the parishes/missions will need major maintenance in the next 10 years. Five pastors said that current costs prevent hiring needed employees, and two other pastors indicated that they may have to eliminate positions. Five pastors indicated that they needed to fill positions now, but they were financially unable to do so. Others indicated that they may have to cut the hours of their current staff.

While there has been a concerted effort in the past few years to become a Stewardship Diocese and much progress is being made, the stewardship of treasure (which comes from one's time and talents) has not taken hold in the lives of many of our Catholic families, and this ultimately affects the financial stability of our parishes. One example is the annual Bishop's Faith Appeal (BFA). As you know, every parish has a stipulated goal (that is periodically adjusted), and the amount collected over the goal is returned to the parish. The BFA is a major effort, not only to assist financially the programs of the diocese but also to assist the parishes. We have the data on the 2003 BFA for the *percentage of registered families in the parish who contributed to the appeal*. Out of 53 churches in the diocese (45 parishes, 8 missions):

in 8 churches, under 20% (↓) of their registered families contributed to the appeal;

in 19 churches, only 20-30% of registered families contributed something;

9 churches: 30 - 40% 6 churches: 40 - 50% 2 churches: 50 - 60%

2 churches: 60 - 70% 4 churches: 70 - 80% 1 church: 80 - 90%

2 churches: 90 - 100+%

Additional Statistics from the 2003 Quinquennial Report to Rome:

As you may know, every five years each diocesan Bishop prepares a report on his diocese for the Holy Father, and after it is submitted, the Bishops of the Region make their *ad limina* visit to Rome. My Quinquennial Report covered the years 1998-2003, and I completed my *ad limina* visit the week of May 16-22, 2004. Some additional statistics that will be helpful for you to know about the Diocese of Beaumont are the following:

	<u>1 Jan. 1998</u>	<u>31 Dec. 2003</u>
Total Population in the Diocese	574,240	599,139
Catholic Population (approx.)	86,598	89,403
Number of diocesan priests	49	46
Number of Religious Order priests	22	25
Number of Seminarians	11	9
Number of Permanent Deacons	29	27
Number of Candidates for the Perm. Diaconate	0	19
Number of Religious (Sisters & Brothers)	64	39
Percentage of Mass attendance	40%	30%
Number of Catechists (K-Adult & RCIA)	1,126	1,318

In addition, at the end of 2003 there were 21 lay catechetical leaders working towards Certification on Formational Ministry and 28 lay persons in Certification for Scripture Study Leadership. There were 3,187 individuals who received 5,205 certificates for completing one or more Catholic Education and Ministry Institute (CEMI) workshops and courses in Theology from Fall, 1999 to Fall, 2003. This indicates that more adults are receiving formation and training for various ministries in their parishes.

Renew 2000 (a 3-year process) was initiated in the diocese in 2002, and at the end of 2003 there were 48 parishes/missions participating, with over 350 faith-sharing groups involving approximately 4,000 people. The formal program ended in December, 2004.

In the Spring of 2000, a new class of 27 aspirants for the Permanent Diaconate was formed. Their theological courses have been provided by the University of St. Thomas, Houston. This past summer, 18 were received as Candidates, and their ordination is tentatively set for the summer of 2006. While most of these Candidates will still have their full-time secular jobs, their ordination as permanent deacons will provide to many parishes a new ministerial resource.

A Changing Model of Pastoral Leadership in Our Diocese

We also have a different model of pastoral leadership that was introduced in early 2004 by the Josephites (SSJ), who, like most dioceses and religious institutes, are also struggling with diminished numbers of priests. This reconfiguration was precipitated by the loss of one Religious Order pastor in a Josephite parish in Beaumont and the sudden death of a Josephite pastor in Port Arthur. The different model is called *Area Ministry*, where two parishes are placed under the leadership of one pastor and at least one parochial vicar. In Beaumont, Our Mother of Mercy parish and Blessed Sacrament parish together now have one Josephite pastor and two parochial vicars. In Port Arthur, St. Mary parish and Sacred Heart parish, both now under the pastoral care of the Missionaries of St. Paul (MSP), together have one MSP pastor and one parochial vicar. Due to the departure of one of our international pastors in the Western Vicariate, St. Joseph parish in Dayton and its mission in Eastgate were placed under the pastoral care of the pastor of Mt. Belvieu, with the assistance of a parochial vicar and a permanent deacon. These reconfigurations are a change from the traditional model of one parish-one pastor, and they are "signs of the times."

PATHWAYS AND STRATEGIES TO RENEWED VITALITY

Following a review of the most significant indicators of a viable parish and some challenging facts about our particular diocese, I want to suggest some alternatives and possibilities for bringing new life into our parishes. Every Catholic has a contribution to make toward this revitalization.

Resurrect our Synod Priorities

For three years (1996-1999) this Diocese participated in its first Diocesan Synod. There were listening sessions in every parish, a diocese-wide survey in every parish, and other parish-based consultation sessions--with thousands of people participating. This extensive consultation resulted in the establishment of pastoral priorities and strategies intended to renew our local church so that the mission of Jesus could be carried out more effectively. The approved documents of the Synod, with goals and strategies, serve as important guides for parishes, with the diocese assisting in many ways. Some goals are addressed to the diocese, some to the parishes, and some to all the baptized.

I call upon all the Catholic Faithful, pastors, and parish councils, to utilize the documents of our Synod as one pathway to renewing the vitality of your parishes. These documents cover the significant areas of Lifelong Education in the Faith, Evangelization, Family Life, Liturgy/Worship, Vocations, Social Justice, and Stewardship. Although the documents were printed in booklet form, published in the E.T.C., and then individually distributed to all parishes over a period of a few years, they can still be found on our diocesan website (www.dioceseofbmt.org). Currently, they are listed under the tab “General,” under “Documentation.”

Participate in CEMI and other Adult Formation Programs

Created in the Fall of 1999, the diocesan Catholic Education and Ministry Institute (CEMI) is a direct response to the needs for further education in the Catholic faith articulated by so many of you during the consultations of Synod. CEMI workshops and courses in Theology are held in various parishes throughout the diocese, making them more available to the people. The schedule is mailed out twice a year to thousands of parishioners, and it is placed on our diocesan website (with on-line registration capability); it is published in the E.T.C., and flyers publicizing new workshops/courses are distributed to all parishes. The CEMI workshops prepare laity for immediate service in parish ministries through basic formation and practical training. CEMI courses in theology prepare leaders for parish ministry, serve as a pre-diaconate program, provide catechist formation, and are a source of general adult education for the people of our diocese. Through CEMI, certification is also available in the following areas: Formational Ministry, Scripture Study Leadership, Liturgical Ministry, and Pastoral Administrative Services.

This is a tremendous resource available to all of you to equip you to know your faith better so that you can live out your baptismal call and participate more fully in the life and ministry of your parish. Your parishes also offer other adult faith formation and education programs, retreats and missions, and other events to nourish your faith and spiritual life. I urge you to take advantage of these resources. If you are more informed, more grounded in your faith, and more spiritually energized, then you will want to share that with others--family members, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers. You will be more alive and willing to share your enthusiasm with your parish. This will, in turn, revitalize your parish.

Promote Vocations to the Priesthood, Diaconate, and Consecrated Life

One of the outcomes of Synod has been a renewed focus on vocation promotion. Many parishes have formed Vocation Committees. Promotion of vocations is not just the work of your pastor or a committee or the Diocesan Office of Vocations. **Every baptized person is a promoter and recruiter.** Those of you who are parents can encourage and support your sons and daughters to consider a religious vocation, and you can create an environment in the family where such a vocation is fostered. Parishioners can become involved with your parish vocation committee or with the Serra Club or simply invite and encourage a young member of the parish you think has potential to consider a religious vocation. And, most of all, you can pray for an increase of vocations.

The demographics on priests that I presented earlier in this letter forecast a continued decline in the number of priests available for active ministry. This should be of concern to all of you, as well. I want every parish to be able to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday. The Eucharist is at the heart of our tradition, essential to our identity as Roman Catholics. Yet, the place where most people will acutely experience the reality of fewer priests is in fewer celebrations of the Eucharist. Already, our priests are spread so thin that they cannot attend to every pastoral need as in the past, when there were more priests. Parishioners generally have to make an appointment to see their priest since he has numerous responsibilities on both the

parish and diocesan levels. Another example--you are encouraged to go to your parish for the Sacrament of the Sick before entrance into the hospital for a procedure because your pastor may not be able to come to the hospital immediately to anoint you if you suddenly become critical.

Integrate the “Stewardship Way of Life”

In the past few years, our Office of Stewardship and Development has been working diligently with pastors and their parishes to help them become stewardship parishes. The whole concept of stewardship is not, first and foremost, about money, as so many have mistakenly interpreted the word. It is about gifts and showing gratitude to God for those gifts by giving back to God of one’s time, talent, and treasure. Almost all of the parishes have Stewardship Committees which have been supported by the expertise of our diocesan Office.

All of us as fully-initiated Catholics have received many material and spiritual gifts. By virtue of our baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, we have been empowered for mission, and as wise stewards of those gifts, we are called to give back to our faith community through our active participation in our parishes. This means connecting with our parish community for the celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays, assisting in some special way according to our time and talents (e.g. Eucharistic minister, lector, choir, musician, usher, liturgy committee, altar society, etc.), contributing regularly a percentage of our income for the support of our parish and its ministries. It means sharing our teaching ability by serving as a catechist, sharing our people-skills and compassionate heart by serving on the bereavement committee or visiting the elderly or sick, sharing our maintenance and repair skills by offering to help maintain the parish plant, sharing our computer and electronics expertise by volunteering to assist the parish or school with their equipment, sharing our organizational abilities by volunteering to head up a fundraising event for the parish, sharing our love of the Lord by sharing our faith with others with whom we interact and inviting them to “come and see”. The opportunities to share our gifts are unlimited, if only we have eyes to see.

Each person has to undergo a conversion into a new way of thinking about life--the Stewardship Way of Life. As each one integrates this new way of thinking, a world of opportunities opens up, and a new enthusiasm for life emerges as one gives of self for others. This enthusiasm is contagious, and it can turn your parish around and bring renewed vitality for mission. I ask each one of you to open your eyes and see the many gifts you have to offer to others, to your parish, to your diocese.

Collaborate in Ministry with Other Local Parishes

As each parish integrates the Stewardship Way of Life, it becomes aware that it cannot contain its unique giftedness within its own parish. Vibrant parish life can be strengthened by the collaborative efforts of several ministries and communities in an area, and these ministries will often permeate parish boundaries. One parish may have a competent RCIA Team, while the neighboring parish does not. [Three parishes in Beaumont have joined together to form one RCIA Program.] The neighboring parish may have a strong marriage preparation program that can also benefit other nearby parishes. Perhaps two or three parishes can join their resources to fund a competent DRE who can coordinate the catechetical programs of the parishes or a qualified youth minister to develop youth programs for the parishes. Because the competency requirements and responsibilities of the parish bookkeeper have become more complex and technical, two or three local parishes could jointly hire a qualified person to handle this technical position. [Three parishes in the far Western Vicariate together fund a qualified bookkeeper.] These are some examples of collaboration between/among parishes that can increase the vibrancy of

parish life, conserve and maximize resources, eliminate unnecessary duplication, and provide more effective pastoral service to our people. There may be programs or ministries that a single parish might find difficult or impossible to do alone or whose quality is greatly improved when done collaboratively with another parish.

Weekend Mass schedules may have to be reviewed. *Any weekend Mass offered in a church that is less than half filled should be considered for combination with other parish liturgies.* Coordinating Mass schedules in an area can also eliminate duplicate times and liturgies, especially in an area where there is shifting and shrinking population.

All of these examples of mutual giving and receiving enable parish life to become more vibrant because resources are shared and coordinated, and the burden on each one is lightened. Traditional parish boundaries can be respected without serving as an obstacle to shared parish life through every area of the diocese. The principles of good stewardship will call the diocese and each parish to review the utilization of resources and facilities.

This “**partnership mentality**” must be promoted. I expect each pastor, staff, pastoral and finance council to consider the gifts that their individual parish can offer to surrounding parishes. The goal of this “partnership mentality” will be the collaborative use of resources and personnel, the combining of gifts and creativity, and the building up of parish life so that all people will benefit from the fullest expression of Church life and ministry.

Become Evangelizers

As individuals, perhaps one of our best-kept secrets is our faith and our love of the Lord. How many of you talked to one other person today about Jesus Christ and His love for us? How many of you were enthusiastic enough about your Catholic faith to invite a relative, neighbor, or co-worker to join you at Sunday Mass this past weekend? Every baptized person has a mission--the mission of sharing Jesus with the world--or in other words, EVANGELIZATION.

By “evangelization” we mean bringing the Good News of Jesus into every human situation and seeking to convert individuals and society by the divine power of the Gospel itself. At its essence are the proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ and the response of a person in faith, which are both works of the Spirit of God (Paraphrase of Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*). Conversion is the change of our lives that comes about through the power of the Holy Spirit. All who accept the Gospel undergo change as we continually put on the mind of Christ by rejecting sin and becoming more faithful disciples in His Church. Unless we undergo conversion, we have not truly accepted the Gospel.

In the document, *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States*, USCCB, 2002, you will find a clear description of evangelization today.

“Evangelization, then, has different implications depending on our relationship to Jesus and His Church. For those of us who practice and live our Catholic faith, it is a call to ongoing growth and renewed conversion. For those who have accepted it only in name, it is a call to re-evangelization. For those who have stopped practicing their faith, it is a call to reconciliation. For children, it is a call to be formed into disciples through the family's faith life and religious education. For other Christians, it is an invitation to know the fullness of our message. For those who have no faith, it is a call to conversion to know Christ Jesus and thus experience a change to new life with Christ and his Church.”

“There are familiar ways by which evangelization happens: by the way we live God's love in our daily life; by the love, example, and support people give each other; by the ways parents pass faith on to their children; in our life as Church, through the proclamation of the Word and the wholehearted celebration of the saving deeds of

Jesus; in renewal efforts of local and national scope; in the care we show to those most in need; and in the ways we go about our work, share with our neighbors, and treat the stranger. In daily life, family members evangelize each other; men and women, their future spouses; and workers, their fellow employees, by the simple lives of faith they lead. Through the ordinary patterns of our Catholic life, the Holy Spirit brings about conversion and a new life in Christ." (The entire document can be found on the USCCB website, www.usccb.org/evangelization/goandmake/eng.htm.)

There are two elements at work: **witness**, which is the simple living of the faith; and **sharing**, which is spreading the Good News of Jesus in an explicit way. *I believe that this is a non-negotiable for each one of us if our faith is to be renewed and our parishes are to be revitalized.* Remember that the first two letters of the word "Gospel" are GO. Go and make disciples!

We have just completed the last formal season of RENEW. As I mentioned earlier, we have over 350 faith-sharing groups throughout the diocese. It is my hope that these will continue, and with their renewed faith they will become "powerhouses for evangelization." It is my hope that the members of these groups will witness to their faith by sharing the Good News beyond their groups into their parishes and local communities.

One Parish's Example

A Catholic News Service story last May caught my eye. I want to share it with you because it shows how one parish that was diminishing turned itself around.

ST. LOUIS (CNS 5-25-04) -- It may have been the billboards or the yard signs. Perhaps the fliers delivered door to door. Since August, Mass attendance at Holy Family Parish in South St. Louis has grown from an average of 225 to about 450 now. At a recent 10:30 a.m. Sunday Mass there weren't enough parish bulletins for the number of people in attendance. "A real treat is that we're all working together," said Alice Nicolas, who co-chairs the parish development committee with Pete Mutter. The committee has been at the forefront of an effort by active parishioners to welcome neighbors to their church. The billboards are a "dynamic endeavor," Mutter told the St. Louis Review, St. Louis archdiocesan newspaper. "Hopefully, it will get the school enrollment up and show the neighborhood what we have to offer." Father Rickey J. Valleroy, pastor, formed a development committee which sponsored a raffle that raised \$17,000. The new pastor asked the committee to devise a way to further develop the parish and help evangelize the neighborhood. "It's amazing to see what this board has done since its incorporation of only a few months," he said. The parish also has used fish fries to attract people to a faith founded by a fisher of men.

I have presented a few pathways and strategies for you to consider. The Spirit is present and active and may lead you to other creative ways to renew the life of your parish. *I challenge every parish and mission in this Diocese to assess the viability and vibrancy of your faith community.* You know all too well the many needs of your parish or mission. You know that your pastor and the same faithful few cannot carry the full responsibility to meet the needs of your parish. It will take all of you, together, to make the difference. Utilize your creativity, as the parishioners in the St. Louis parish did, to bring new life to your parish. Find ways for you to become more involved, so that the mission of Jesus will be the primary focus of your parish.

WHAT IF WE SIMPLY MAINTAIN THE *STATUS QUO*?

I have written this pastoral letter because I want all of you to be informed about the current challenges all of our parishes are facing. I want you to become informed about the needs of your particular parish and the neighboring parishes, so you can mobilize the gifts and talents of all your parishioners to meet those needs. For all parishes and missions, and especially for those few that are currently struggling with survival issues, if the mission of Jesus is overshadowed by the material and financial issues and diminished participation of members, then I hope you will take this letter to heart, assess your situation, inform all your parishioners, and together consider your options for the future. If you simply maintain the *status quo*, you will continue to see the decline of your parishes, and your ministries will become further weakened by fewer staff and diminished resources. This would be a great loss for our people. I do not want to see the health of our priests, deacons, religious, and lay ecclesial ministers threatened by asking them to do more than they can. I do not want our priests to be so overburdened with administrative responsibilities that they have too little time for the sacramental and pastoral ministry which they see as central to their priestly vocation and which you expect from them. These are real possibilities in the not-too-distant future if we fail to act now, while we have options. Failing to act now may impose more difficult situations on us later on, and *circumstances may take the choice out of our hands.*

No parish exists for the sake of buildings; every parish exists for the good of the people--the care of souls. If people are not being served, if faith is not being nourished, if the community is not being evangelized, then the parish is built on sand, not on solid rock.

You have, perhaps, heard that many dioceses in the United States have reached the point where a number of parishes had to be merged and others had to be closed. For them this has been a very painful experience. Many dioceses are currently struggling with various options in their strategic planning processes. Several of the dioceses in the State of Texas already have parishes with no resident pastor, and the possibility of mergers and closings looms on the horizon for all of us. For many years the pastor in Jasper, in the northeast part of our diocese, has carried out the pastoral responsibility not only for his parish but also for two missions and a Mass station.

I make these statements, not to alarm you, but to be open and honest with you about the realities we are facing. The Diocese of Beaumont has been discussing strategic planning possibilities for a couple of years. In the past year I placed two parishes in Beaumont and two parishes in Port Arthur under the leadership of one pastor. This past August, one of our international priests had to return to his home country, and his parish (Dayton) and mission (Eastgate) in the Western Vicariate were placed under the pastoral care of a neighboring pastor (Mt. Belvieu). At least two other parishes are currently in a critical situation with few options remaining, and some type of reconfiguration may become necessary in the near future. Others of our parishes and missions are headed toward decline and may approach critical status in the next several years *UNLESS all of the parishioners assume responsibility for revitalizing their parish.*

I know that it is very difficult for the people of any parish to see their community in decline and in need of support, facing deficit budgeting and deteriorating buildings, unable to serve the needs of parishioners with ministries and pastoral care, and facing an uncertain future. It may be advisable for such a parish to unite with a neighboring parish to improve the quality of ministry that can be provided to its people. It takes great courage for a parish to acknowledge that it is no longer viable, and that, for the good of the future parishioners, a merger with another parish or closing is needed. Ideally, this acknowledgment and proposed alternatives should come from the parish itself, rather than be legislated or imposed by higher authority.

The choice to revitalize your particular parish NOW is yours to make. Building a vibrant parish involves initiative at the local community level and must be embraced willingly with the heart by those most affected. This requires local leadership, along with the members of each parish, to formulate a plan for the future and willingly to open your hearts to new life and to a renewed parish. I hope that you will CHOOSE LIFE, AND LIFE TO THE FULL!

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Rev. Curtis J. Guillory, S.V.D., D.D.
Bishop of Beaumont