



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIocese of YOUNGSTOWN

June 28, 2019

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During the past year, we have gathered to hear about our history and pray in thanksgiving for the people of faith who have gone before us – all with an eye toward the future. Now that we have completed the anniversary year of celebrations, we refocus our attention and efforts toward building a future full of hope in our lives and the lives of those who live in our six counties of Northeastern Ohio. In March, I announced the work that had been accomplished in planning for the future, given the realities of population, Catholic affiliation and participation, and the aging demographic of our priests. Today as I announce the next step in the process, I begin by reminding everyone of the vision for a regional approach to planning.

Each parish has been placed into a pastoral region. Parishes in each region will come together to discuss the challenges and opportunities unique to their area and address them through collaboration in administration and ministry. Parishes will collaborate to strengthen current opportunities for worship, formation, and service. More importantly, parishes will use their collective skills, gifts, and resources to begin new initiatives to reverse the alarming trend of fewer people identifying as Catholics and practicing their faith within our communities. On our own, this task seems overwhelming, but together, with the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can move forward in faith.

An essential aspect of pastoral regions is to reduce the burden on our priests. Even with the retirement of only 5 priests this year, there are still 15 priests in full-time active ministry who are at least 70 years old. In addition, another 14 priests are between 65 and 69 years old. The plan calls for 56 priests in active ministry, which, given the demographics, is a realistic number in the very near future. The regional approach fosters increased fraternity and mutual support among clergy, especially as the numbers of priests decrease and their never ending responsibilities increase. Each region is assigned a specific number of priests, who will each be limited to 3 regularly scheduled weekend Masses, including Saturday Vigil and Sunday Masses. This reduces the number of Masses in our diocese to a level that corresponds with the number of priests available and the number of people attending Mass. Instead of celebrating Masses with churches that are less than half full, these changes in the Mass schedule can create more vibrant liturgies as more people come together to celebrate.

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Based on the feedback from priests, parish leaders, parish pastoral and finance councils, and pastoral ministers over the past few months, the Presbyteral (Priests) Council and Diocesan Pastoral Council (lay men and women) gave recommendations on modifying the originally proposed pastoral regions. As you can see in the related materials (see pages 11 to 13), the approved version of the pastoral regions has some adjustments from the original plan. One area that has not changed is the urgency of the shared sacrifice of clergy and laity, disciples of our Lord working together and using their God-given gifts to build up the Church and the community.

**With regard to timeline, the plan for regionalization will be implemented by each region as soon as possible, and no later than July 1, 2020.**

Full implementation in the region will include:

- Priests will be limited to 3 regularly scheduled weekend Masses, including the Saturday Vigil and Sunday Masses.
- The number of weekend Masses in the region will equal the number in the plan.
- Regions will have a concrete plan for, and actively working toward, collaboration in staff and ministry efforts.
- Regions will have a concrete plan for, and actively working toward, new evangelization initiatives in the region.

The process for implementation within each region will be directed by the deans who are the local representatives of the bishop with support and assistance from the Office of the Vicar for Clergy and the Office of Evangelization and Pastoral Planning. Regions will continue to meet to prayerfully discuss and discern how the plan will best take root in the region, including models of administration, number of weekend worship sites, weekend Mass schedules, Holy Day and Weekday schedules, potential for shared staff and ministry, and evangelization initiatives. One year after implementation, there will be an evaluation of each region.

I know that change is difficult. Nonetheless, there are positive changes – indeed, necessary changes – such as when we leave home to go to college, when we marry, enter religious life or are ordained to the priesthood, or when we retire and begin a new chapter in our lives. We always need to leave some old ways behind in order to improve. Our goal is to “live and move and have our being” in a vibrant Church. I ask you to work with our priests and parish leaders to make this plan a reality to the greater honor and glory of God.

Yours sincerely in our Lord,



Most Reverend George V. Murry, SJ  
Bishop of Youngstown