

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It happens every Sunday in every parish. You can see it in every season of every year. You just have to take the time to stop and notice. The next time you go to church, linger for a moment before you enter the building. When I watch people get out of their cars, and make their way toward the building, I realize how blessed I am to see the Church as it assembles to pray:

There's the young couple holding hands, obviously in love. A few children run along the sidewalk, while parents wave to people they know. A woman in a wheelchair negotiates the ramp that leads to the entrance and two men stop to exchange the latest news. Some faces are young with their whole lives ahead of them. Other faces show the wisdom of years as they approach the twilight of their lives.

When you watch these people make their way toward the building, you realize you know some of them. Others you may not know, but their stories are familiar. They are our stories. It's the single mom who is working two jobs; and it is the person who just lost his job. Behind the faces there are stories of financial and academic success. There are stories of the joy of parenting and the struggle of infertility. There are stories of addiction and recovery; stories of illness and care giving. On any given Sunday, the parish parking lot is filled with every human joy and sorrow, triumph and struggle. Making their way to the doors of the church are people of every race and ethnic background. They are the grandchildren of immigrants and they are immigrants themselves who have recently arrived. These stories assemble each week for one purpose: to be the Church. They come to let their story be touched by the presence of Jesus and his story.

Over the years, we have seen remarkable growth and changes take place in the four counties that make up the Diocese of Metuchen. What was once farm country has become the suburbs. Areas that were once heavily populated with those of European origins are now welcoming new immigrants from many parts of Asia, India, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean. Business and industry have brought many people here from other states, leaving behind extended families. As community life has developed, so have the challenges of over scheduled and hectic lives.

In the midst of the challenges and changes these years have brought, the parishes of the Diocese of Metuchen have been a blessing to many generations. Our parishes have opened their doors; and parishioners have opened their hearts. In moments of joy and in the darkest hour, our parishes have provided the presence of Jesus to all who seek him.

There is a song that many of us sing once we enter the doors of our parish church. With joyful voices and sincere hearts we sing that in this house of prayer, all are welcome. That is the experience many of us have had in our parishes, and for that we are grateful. But as we watch those human stories making their way toward

the doors of the church, we must never forget to ask, who is not here? Whose story is not listened to? Who does not believe that their story is of value, or that the community of believers is incomplete without their presence?

I begin this letter with gratitude for all that has been. More importantly, I start with a sincere desire to extend my heart to anyone who has not felt a spirit of welcome from our parishes. There may have been misunderstandings or disagreements that occurred. Perhaps you did not experience the people in your parish living the command of Jesus, *I was a stranger and you welcomed me.* (Matthew 25:35) Maybe life got busy and complicated. Time passes quickly and the distance between us becomes greater than we ever imagined. We wonder if there is ever a way back. My prayer is that this letter will be an invitation, a first step for many to find their way back.

In his first encyclical, ***Deus Caritas Est***, Pope Benedict XVI writes,

We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life: Being a Christian 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)

The parish must be the place of that encounter. No matter what the size, economic or ethnic makeup, the history or number of staff, a parish's first and foremost role is to be that encounter. It must be the place where Jesus is encountered in the hopes, the dreams, the struggles and the joys—the life—of the parish community. Programs and calendars become meaningless unless a parish sees its mission as providing an encounter that leads others to Jesus.

It is my belief that living that mission is what makes a parish vibrant. No parish can or will ever fulfill this mission perfectly or in the same way. But each parish, in its own way, must be ready to open its doors and say to those who seek faith: you belong to us because you belong to Christ.

There are many ways that one can evaluate and reflect on the state of a parish. Books can be read, surveys taken, strategies and programs developed. These can be important steps in assessing the vibrancy of a parish. The first step, I believe, takes place every time the community gathers for liturgy. If we listen closely during the liturgy, the words used, especially in the Eucharistic Prayer, help us reflect on how the mission of Jesus is being lived in our parish at this particular time.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that liturgy has the power to form us.

The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her powers flow. It is

therefore the privileged place for catechizing the People of God. Catechesis is intrinsically linked with the whole of liturgical and sacramental activity, for it is in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, that Christ Jesus works in fullness for the transformation of men. (1074)

Evaluating a parish's vibrancy and effectiveness in ministry begins with the liturgical words that transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. These same words seek to transform the diverse group sitting in those pews into the Body of Christ, the Church. They teach what a parish should be.

FROM AGE TO AGE YOU GATHER A PEOPLE TO YOURSELF

When I was growing up, the parishes in my neighborhood were strongly ethnic. Each had similar societies and organizations, as well as events particular to their ethnicity. Faith was being lived in each of them, but often in an isolated manner. It was very hard for someone of a different ethnic background to belong to those parishes.

As a teenager, I wanted to belong to a youth ministry program. I was welcomed into a youth ministry program at a parish different than my own. Even as a young person, my heart was drawn to a parish that not only had activities for me, but also said to me, "welcome, you belong." It became an important part of my high school life, and helped form my faith during those years.

They say that belonging is one of the major life issues for an adolescent. It seems to me that the desire to belong follows us through adulthood; it just looks different. We want to find a place where our story is heard, valued and appreciated.

Throughout the scriptures, there are powerful images of God gathering people together to form a community of believers. From Ezekiel the prophet we hear these thrilling words,

I will take you away from among the nations, gather you from all the foreign lands, and bring you back to your own land . . . you shall be my people and I will be your God (chapter 36: 24, 28)

Again and again, God forms the community: in the Exodus event, at Mount Sinai, and at the Sea of Galilee. In the desert, on a mountain or on the shore, those who are gathered come to understand that they are God's children.

In his ministry, Jesus gathers a community not based on bloodline or country of origin. He gathers as a people those who desire to live the word of God and keep it. Jesus boldly proclaims *whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me.* (Mark 3:34) And those who live the word of God come to understand that they are brother and sister to each other.

Some families have been part of a parish for several generations. Others are transient, moving to a town because of job with the knowledge they may move again in a few years. A vibrant parish is not focused first on *what we do*, but *who we are*. A parish may have many programs, but it is only vibrant when its parishioners understand who they are: *brother and sister to each other*.

A generation ago, the parish was the center of people's lives. People went to the parish for liturgy and devotion, but they also went there for culture, for celebration of heritage and for community. Today, the parish is often a place to "go to Mass," and the mall or soccer fields have become the place of community. Vibrant parishes recognize this shift, and do not bemoan it. They embrace it as an opportunity to help people see the parish as a community that stands with them, plays and prays with them. The parish understands its mission is to provide what others cannot: the care of the soul. Sometimes we can only do this one person at a time. But over time, the parish becomes a more vibrant community when its people are willing to approach others they see each week at Mass and ask their name.

That is why the role of the laity is essential in the life of a vibrant parish. Key lay leaders understand the challenges of balancing family, work and church life. They are living it each day. They have the unique opportunity to model for other parishioners how participation in the life of the parish can give meaning and direction to their entire lives.

Pastors must be the shepherds who gather the community. Furthermore, they must foster a spirit of collaboration among the staff, organizations and ministries of the parish. With the pastor as their guide, the entire parish must enter into the true meaning of collaboration: naming the needs of the community and calling forth the gifts to address those needs. It means inviting men and women to share their gifts, as well as providing formation for their leadership and their ministry.

A vibrant parish understands that a parish pastoral council is an important forum for the work of collaboration. The makeup of a parish pastoral council may vary depending on various circumstances and factors in a parish. The council members use their gifts to help strengthen the work of the pastor and his role in leading the parish. The lack of such a council diminishes the ability of the people and their pastor to gather around a mission and work collaboratively toward living that mission.

We have dedicated men serving as priests in the Diocese of Metuchen. Many, however, are overworked and stretched in their responsibilities. Many put in long hours, often worried about things for which they were not ordained. I need the parishioners of our parishes to continually come forward to share these burdens and responsibilities with their priests. In doing so, our priests are then free to do the things for which they were ordained. They are able to counsel those who are struggling, sit by the hospital bed of the dying and celebrate the sacraments of the

Church with joy.

The Sunday liturgy is the one event during the week that sees the largest and most diverse gathering of parishioners. Careful planning and use of resources must be put toward celebrating liturgies that are filled with joy. The community gathered must experience the peace, the hope, the wonder and the welcome that they cannot find outside the doors of the church. The Word of God will always challenge us. But the community that gathers for liturgy must leave with renewed hearts. The liturgy must help them sense that their encounter with Jesus in this place will carry them through the challenges of the coming week.

When the community is gathered, Jesus is truly present, for he tells us *where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst*. (Matthew 18:20) Many people worry that our casual society has lessened our reverence and appreciation for the presence of Jesus, specifically in the Eucharist. I share that concern. I wonder how much of that lack of appreciation is tied to our lack of presence to each other. We walk by each other and do not notice the hurt in someone's eyes. We are often busy about many things, and are distracted from the things that really matter. A vibrant community fosters among its members a sense of presence to each other. It is Jesus, truly present, who gathers the community. The community lives the encounter with Jesus by being present to each other.

MAKE THEM HOLY BY THE POWER OF YOUR SPIRIT

Years ago, the word conversion was used primarily to describe the experience of a person becoming a Catholic as an adult. A convert was identified as a person who left one religious tradition to join the Church. As time has passed, we have a deeper understanding of that word and that process. By virtue of our baptism, we are all converts. The challenge and mission of our lives is that daily moving from the things that are not of Christ to the things that are. Conversion is a life long process of making our lives more like the life of Jesus.

We hear those words of the Eucharistic prayer: *make them holy*. It is that moment of calling down the Holy Spirit, and asking that the Spirit would change these ordinary things—bread and wine—into the extraordinary real presence of Jesus. Many times, when I pray those words, my eyes are drawn toward the congregation. Make *them* holy I pray as well.

Sometimes when we hear the word *holy*, we think of someone else. It is a saint whose image is on a holy card. Or it is the great aunt who went to church every day and never said a bad thing about anyone. We don't believe that we are also called to be holy. Holiness is not being perfect, never making a mistake, or never in need of God's forgiveness. Holiness is about the call we receive in baptism to let Christ be seen in our lives. It doesn't happen overnight; for most of us it takes a lifetime. This is the meaning of conversion. Centuries ago, the great Saint Augustine said it in a beautiful way when he wrote about the Eucharist: *be what*

you see; receive what you are.

Parishes that are vibrant and alive are always inviting people to come into a deeper life with Jesus. They do it through spiritual programs, scripture study, days of prayer and retreats. They do it through the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a spirit that speaks the truth of Jesus: there is nothing you could ever do that would make God love you less.

There is a danger, however, to think that this is only a matter of providing good programs to help people grow spiritually. More importantly, a vibrant parish models ongoing conversion by encouraging groups to spend time in prayer and reflection. How many of us have been at a parish meeting that was opened with a quick prayer and then moved on to the business at hand? Parishes need to model something different. No matter what the meeting or gathering, attention should be paid to the time the group prays with one another and also shares faith. This can be risky and challenging, as some people are uncomfortable with talking about their faith. But if the primary task of every parish is to bring people closer to God, then we must use every opportunity to do just that. No meeting agenda will be lost or meeting time wasted when it is done in the context of prayer and sharing of faith. Spending time in prayer and reflection can help us work through differences, find our way through tough decisions, and help us appreciate a point of view different than our own.

There is a new generation of families, raising their children and doing the best that they can each day. Many want to grow in a spiritual way, but have neither the time nor understanding to do so. Vibrant parishes look carefully at meetings they hold for parents at school or in the religious formation programs. Offering a guided meditation or a time of reflecting on a question in small groups might disarm those attending. But more than a few might leave a little more renewed, than if they only sat and listened to information they could have read themselves.

Once a year, parish staffs, pastoral councils and lay leadership should gather to reflect on the spiritual health of the parish. They should creatively explore new ways to help parishioners with their spiritual lives. There are so many hard working individuals who live overscheduled lives. There are many people who experience loneliness, a sense of isolation even in the midst of friends and co-workers. There are many who feel the stress of job and family life. Vibrant parishes are not afraid to ask whether devotions and opportunities for prayer that they offer speak to the current spiritual needs of people. This is the way vibrant parishes call upon the Spirit, asking to make them holy.

DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME

I sometimes wonder: if Jesus walked the earth today, in what contemporary setting would we find him? There's a good chance he would be found in a mall—perhaps in the food court talking to people. He would be sitting in an unemployment office, and also with workers in a field harvesting vegetables.

Jesus would probably be out on the sidelines of a sports field talking to soccer moms about their children. He would be at a soup kitchen, a hospital emergency room, and perhaps even on the boardwalk down the shore. Jesus went wherever people lived and laughed. He was where they worked and played. After an encounter with Jesus, people returned to their lives knowing something more about God and about themselves.

It is said that everything we do teaches. That is the way Jesus lived. There is something very touching about the depiction of the Last Supper in John's Gospel. There is no mention of bread or wine. Rather, Jesus gets up from the table and washes the feet of his disciples. *What I just did was give you an example: as I have done, so you must do.* (John 13: 15)

Everything we do teaches.

A vibrant parish understands that formation and education are essential parts of its mission. While classes and programs are important, a vibrant parish understands that it begins at a much more basic place. It begins realizing that everything we do has the power to teach. How the parish phone is answered and the ways new parishioners are welcomed have the power to teach others about Jesus. They are opportunities to show others what it means to be his follower. When we evaluate our programs of education and formation we must question whether they speak to the hearts and the minds of those we are forming in faith. But in doing so, we must never forget to have a wider vision: what are the other teachable moments that need our evaluation as well?

If every moment of our life is an opportunity to know more about Jesus and his Gospel, then we are never done learning or being formed in faith. A vibrant parish plans and designs its programs around the understanding that learning is a lifelong process. Celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation or graduating from a Catholic school are important milestones. But they are never the end. When a parish sees learning as a life long process, then its way of life and its programs take on a new vision. We are not simply passing on information, important as it may be. We are passing along a Catholic way of life: a certain way of looking at the world and our lives. We are passing along a belief that says God has a plan for my life, and I will be given a power greater than myself—the Holy Spirit—to help me find my way.

For several generations, parish education and formation programs took place mostly in a classroom model. Many of us learned what it means to be Catholic and the truths of our faith in that model. While it continues to be a way of forming children in faith, many have found that it has become a less effective model of formation.

When Jesus told the stories we call parables, or when he sat on the side of a mountain and taught the Beatitudes, he spoke to all people. They were not divided according to age or experience. Everyone was welcomed to hear the word

that was spoken, and challenged to live it in daily life.

Parishes that seek to be vibrant in this century—who desire to share the message of faith in a meaningful way—are called to see the importance of intergenerational faith formation. In memory of Jesus, we gather the entire community -- every age and every life experience – and learn together. This model of education and formation reminds us that we learn about faith not always based on class grade or age. We learn as one family making the journey together.

It is important to offer age appropriate opportunities for learning and formation, such a youth ministry, and preparation for the sacraments. A vibrant parish, however, looks to find ways to gather families—and the entire parish family—into a process of learning and growing in faith.

There is probably no greater textbook for learning about and growing in our faith than the liturgical seasons. There is a natural beauty and rhythm to each of these seasons. The stories, the rituals and the spiritual truths of the liturgical seasons bring us closer to the memory of Jesus, and teach us what it means to be his followers. The themes of those seasons also speak to our stories: the waiting of Advent; the call to change our hearts in Lent; and the nearness of God in the daily life of Ordinary Time.

Vibrant parishes use the liturgical seasons as a guide for planning. How often have we heard the challenge: do we plan parish life around the liturgical seasons or do we try to “fit in” the seasons to our already full calendar? When the liturgical seasons are the guide for parish planning, then we teach the community a new way of looking at their own life. They live their life’s story by knowing and embracing the story of Jesus. *This* is what we are called to do in his memory.

IN MERCY AND IN LOVE UNITE ALL YOUR CHILDREN WHEREVER THEY MAY BE

It was in the early years of my priesthood that many of the changes in the liturgy took place. English replaced Latin. The laity were welcomed into the sanctuary as extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist and lectors. Gregorian chant gave way to music with a contemporary sound. One dramatic change was the movement of the altar. No longer was it far away from the congregation. It was brought closer so that the priest could preside at the Mass facing the people.

I remember the enthusiasm of that time, and also the resistance that many people had to these changes. The pastor with whom I was assigned was unwilling to move the furniture in the sanctuary, using as his reason that the marble pieces were impossible to move. I approached him and asked, “If I can get the furniture moved, will you allow me to do it?” He agreed, believing that it couldn’t be done.

Energized by the challenge—and by the new vision our Church was calling us to—

I went to work. With the right amount of people and a fair amount of sweat, the furniture in the sanctuary was moved. Now the liturgy could be celebrated in a way accessible to everyone.

Breaking barriers. The willingness to work hard and get dirty in the process. Not allowing the resistance to change to dampen the Spirit. Since the time of Jesus, this has been the example the Church has set when it comes to its social mission. As a community of believers, we are called to serve those in need, to feed the hungry, and to work for an end to structures that oppress the human spirit.

So many of us have faced barriers that can wound our spirit and challenge our faith. We've worked long hours at tough jobs, for inadequate pay and no access to health care. We've worried about paying the rent and feeding our families. Some live with chronic health problems; others face bigotry and intolerance.

In their document, **Called to Global Solidarity**, the Bishops of the United States write,

Cain's question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9), has global implications and is a special challenge for our time, touching not one brother, but all our sisters and brothers. Are we responsible for the world's poor? Do we have duties to suffering people in far off places? Must we respond to the needs of suffering refugees in distant nations? Are we keepers of creation for future generations? For the followers of Jesus, the answer is yes.

Vibrant parishes always seek to live that *yes*. They are willing to look within the walls of the church and see the challenges lived each day by members of the parish family. They are willing to look beyond the walls of the church and out into the world. When they look, they do not see strangers or people they do not understand. They see themselves. They see brothers and sisters who share the same human story. They see the face of Jesus.

The great social teaching of the Church is reinforced each week at Mass. The link between the supper of the Lord and service to others is at the heart of our Catholic identity. Those who are fed at the table by his word and by the Eucharist, return to their lives with a mission. They must bring to the table of the human family all who hunger and all who thirst.

Every human person deserves adequate housing and food, a just wage, and the right to life, happiness, peace and justice. Vibrant parishes unite the members of its community to the larger human family through works of charity. They encourage an understanding of the root causes of poverty, homelessness and war. Those works of charity will look different, depending on a parish's abilities. It may involve making lunches for a soup kitchen, advocating for legislative action, or working for the greater care of our environment. No matter what the work or project, a parish must develop a sense of solidarity with the human family. Every

human suffering is *my* suffering. Every human hope is *my* hope. Every human story is *my* story.

It is hard, especially in these challenging times, to have that wider vision. But we must never allow our own struggles, as great as they may be, to blind us from seeing our responsibility to the cause of justice and peace. Working to feed the hungry, to help those who are not in this country legally, to protect the unborn, to end bigotry and racism are just a few of the many challenges that face us. These and other issues are opportunities for several parishes to come together, uniting their resources of time, talent and treasure for a common purpose.

Young people, especially, must be encouraged to open their hearts to the work of justice. They must be led to understand that acts of charity, such as service hours in preparation for Confirmation, are not things to get done. For the follower of Jesus, they are a way of life. Youth Ministry programs must provide important and meaningful experiences for young people to understand the social teaching of the Church. If children are our future, then we must not only give them this vision, but the opportunities to live that vision now.

There will always be resistance to change; perhaps even the insistence that some problems are too big for us. A vibrant parish is always realistic about what it can do. But it is always willing to challenge itself: what barriers must we remove in our own lives, so that we may be more closely united with all our brothers and sisters.

WE HOPE TO ENJOY FOR EVER THE VISION OF YOUR GLORY

It is a challenging task to write a pastoral letter on vibrant parish life. There is so much that can be said, and so many areas of parish life that are a challenge and a blessing. The writing of this letter is a direct result of the Diocesan Synod and the implementation of the synod norms. My hope in writing this letter is that it begins many conversations in our parish communities. I hope that it offers each parish the opportunity to name the areas of parish life that are alive and vibrant; and that it gives each parish the courage to name the areas of parish life that need work or even radical change.

Most importantly, I want our parishes to have a new vision of themselves: the parish is the place where a person can encounter Jesus. He is encountered through a community that is open and welcoming. He is encountered in a community that honors every human story and desires to form people in faith. He is encountered in a community that continually needs the help of the Spirit to guide them.

I also hope that parish families will continue to explore ways of welcoming back those who do not join us regularly on Sundays. It is my prayer that some wounds might be healed, and that parishes will be renewed to live our faith with enthusiasm and joy.

In this year of St. Paul, I think of his many letters to the various churches. Most of them begin with his profound sense of gratitude for the people of those communities. As I conclude this letter, I too am grateful to the parishes of our diocese that challenge and inspire my own story of faith.

I am grateful to our priests, who are true fathers to our parishes and give of themselves unselfishly.

I am grateful to deacons, religious, lay pastoral assistants, and key parish leaders who love and nurture our parishes, often without adequate recognition.

I am grateful to the people of each parish, who use their gifts so that others might know and love the story of Jesus.

It is hard to believe that almost 50 years have passed since the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. There is now a generation of adults for whom the term, “Vatican II” has only a vague meaning. For some, it is a way of saying that the Church of our grandparents was different than the Church today. The Second Vatican Council was more than a few changes in language or rituals. Like many other times in the history of the Church, it was a moment when the Church opened its doors, and told the story of Jesus—and what it means to be a follower of Jesus—to a new and changing world.

On the eve of the opening session of the Second Vatican Council, a candlelight vigil took place in the square in front of St. Peter’s Basilica. Blessed John XXIII, the pope who convened the Council, surprised the crowd by appearing at his balcony. Giving a spontaneous talk under a moonlit sky, he said,

Feeling your voices, mine is just one voice that sums up the voice of the whole world . . . as you head home and find your children, embrace your children. . . and when you find them with tears to dry, give them a good word . . .

It is my prayer that our voices would be united in praise of God and in spreading the Gospel of Jesus. May our parishes be those homes with open doors and open hearts, where all God’s children find a good word of welcome spoken to them.

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31 May 2009
Solemnity of Pentecost