

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

A Pastoral Letter by Bishop Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V., D.D.,
to the Clergy, Religious and Faithful People of the Diocese of Fall River



Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

A Pastoral Letter by Bishop Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V., D.D., to the Clergy, Religious and Faithful People of the Diocese of Fall River

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Diocese of Fall River,

The holy season of Lent is a grace-filled time in which we strive to enter more fully into Jesus' life, passion, death and Resurrection. We do so by going back to some of the basics of our faith like prayer, which orders our relationship to God; almsgiving, which resets the way we approach our neighbors; and fasting, which helps us to master our desires within. It is a time in which the whole Church goes on retreat with Jesus for 40 days in the desert, away from distractions, to focus on what is most important.

During the Ash Wednesday Liturgy St. Paul tell us, "Now is the acceptable time!," referring to the urgency of embracing Jesus' call to repent and believe. It's the acceptable time to review our life in the light of the Gospel and, where fitting, to make changes to follow Him more fully. It's also the acceptable time for the Church to do a similar review.

That's why I write this pastoral letter to you today, entering into a conversation about some of the joys and hopes, blessings and challenges in our Diocese. These are thoughts that I have been praying about for several months, spurred on by three recent graces.

- First, last September 24, I celebrated my fifth anniversary as Bishop of this Diocese. It was an occasion for me to thank God for all He has helped us to do together in terms of pastoral care, improved administration, greater involvement of the gifts and dedication of the laity, as well as a time to think about the many things still ahead of us and implore God's assistance.

- Second, at the beginning of November, I was privileged to go to the Vatican to meet with Pope Francis and present to him and his chief collaborators, as is required, a lengthy report on the situation of the Diocese, highlighting our areas of strength and those where we need to improve. The Holy Father was so encouraging of our efforts to rebuild the Church.

- Most importantly, throughout the last couple of years, I have had the chance to meet so many of you in different consultations across our Diocese, hearing in person about your desires and dreams, worries and fears, praise, constructive criticism and recommendations for our Catholic life and witness throughout southeastern Massachusetts. This input and counsel have been invaluable.



This letter is a fruit of those experiences. I would like to reflect on where we have come over the last five years and share some thoughts on how I would like to build on those foundations, acting on the many suggestions you have given me as we move ahead. I thank you for reading this letter and continuing on this journey with me in rebuilding the Church in faith and hope.

A rich history to build upon

Our Diocese has an extraordinary 116-year legacy, making us heirs of an enormous Spiritual inheritance. No one coming here can miss the rich traditions of faith that have built so many beautiful churches and enhanced local culture. The Portuguese, Irish, French-Canadian, Polish, Italian, Latino, Cape Verdean and other ethnic expressions of our faith have all contributed to enriching our catholicity and evangelizing the South Coast. I love participating in parish feasts and processions that express this faith and nourish it. While

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

the geography of our Diocese is well-known, the faith of our Diocese is, to me, even more beautiful.

At the same time, changes in demographics as well as the secularization of society have made guarding and investing this great inheritance more challenging. Fewer are practicing the faith as fervently, something we see in lower Mass attendance figures, Catholic school enrollments, vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and Marriage, Church collections, and other indices. This provides us a real challenge. We cannot do things as we have before. The Lord is calling us to be creative, as we seek to share the unchanging love and truth of the Gospel in changing times.

Moreover, the evil of the clerical sexual abuse has not only wounded those who have suffered this evil directly, but has injured and appalled all of us, weakened trust in priests and bishops, tested our faith and disfigured the holiness of the Church. The only adequate response to something so indefensible and foreign to the Gospel is a renewed focus on the holiness that should have been present all along. We can be sure that God, Who is the most outraged by attacks against His beloved children, will give us the help He knows we need to rebuild. That's what gives us hope and also a sense of urgency.

Yet, even though some might want to define the Church exclusively by the scandals, we know that there is much more to the Church. I have seen the grace in the resilience and perseverance of so many in our parishes. I have seen it in the enthusiasm of our youth. I have seen it in the quiet fidelity of our priests, religious, and deacons that seldom makes headlines. I have seen it in the response of so many to become co-responsible for the present and future of our Diocese.

All of this inspires me and fills me with hope.

But there's an even greater reason for hope. The Lord

is at work in our Diocese. Jesus reminds us not to be afraid because He is with us. He Who has risen from the dead, Who has conquered sin and draws good out of evil, now journeys with us through time. He invites us to enter more fully into the Kingdom of God and to help others to enter. That is the work of the Church in every age and place.

My First Five Years

A bishop's work, as a disciple and successor to the

Apostles, is to try to continue Jesus' work and help His Kingdom come more fully alive. Given this mission and the needs that are unique to our Diocese, I have prioritized 10 activities. I'm sharing these activities with you now to showcase the good work that has been accomplished and where I hope we can build moving forward.

1) Unleashing the gifts God has given to all of the faithful of the diocese

My biggest priority has been to try to harness the particular gifts God has given to the faithful of our Diocese. There is so much faith and talent in our Diocese and my preeminent focus has been to try to encourage everyone to open those gifts and put them to use in building Christ's Kingdom. We're all called together to be good stewards of the treasure God has given us, to be co-responsible for the mission Christ has given to the Church.

In fulfillment of this priority, I hosted 11 listening sessions across the Diocese. More than 1,800 parishioners attended one or more. Nearly 400 people volunteered to be part of the strategic plan. It was clear to me how so many people love the Church and are concerned about it, how they want to see it remain meaningful and relevant, how they want to deepen their Spirituality and life of faith, how they want to do far more than show up to church but see the Church transform lives and society. So many told me they were



Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

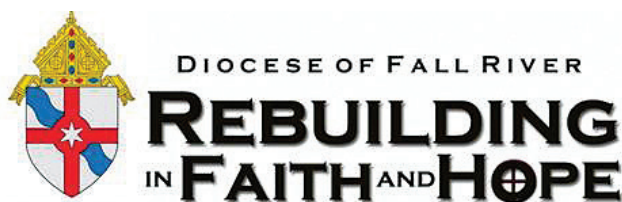
happy and honored to be asked to get involved.

People made huge sacrifices to be part of the Strategic Plan. They took time off of work. They arranged for baby-sitters. They came in from the Islands or the end of the Cape. They paid for hotels to stay overnight. They did this multiple times. I couldn't help but be astounded at their level of loving commitment. They came from so many different backgrounds, with different talents, experiences, expertise, all wanting to share those gifts with the Church.

2) Renewing and revitalizing our parishes

The life of faith in a diocese happens principally through parishes and therefore to strengthen the Church we must strengthen parish life.

A strong parish facilitates people's becoming fully alive in faith. It has beautiful Liturgies, with great hospitality and fraternity, great preaching, great music, that really nourish the people and form them as evangelized evangelizers. A strong parish has ministries to and for all people of the parish, from youngest to oldest, new



and stalwart, thriving or suffering, in which everyone gets engaged, supports one another, and reaches out to those who need the Gospel.

I was a pastor for nine years of St. Nicholas Parish in Palisades Park, New Jersey and for three years at St. Michael's Parish in Newark. I loved those years, which were filled with many blessings, being close to the people God had entrusted to me, opening up for them God's Word, celebrating the Sacraments for them in the happiest and saddest moments of their lives, helping them to say yes to God in things big and small. But they were also challenging years. The biggest challenge was to keep the people engaged and enthusiastic about our faith in the midst of the growing influence of secularization. That remains one of the biggest challenges for each of the pastors in our Diocese, and for me as bishop.

That is one of the reasons why we have had to take a

hard look at the parishes of our Diocese, to make sure that each of them has what is necessary to thrive. Jesus once gave a parable in which He said that before we build a tower, we have to make sure we have the resources to finish it (Lk 14:28). While once our Diocese had so many practicing Catholics that we were able to sustain far more than 100 thriving parishes, demographics have changed, rates of practice have changed, the number of priests we have has changed, and we cannot sustain the situation of previous decades.

This is what has been behind the strategic planning we have been doing throughout the Diocese, to help assess parishes' vitality, monitor their progress, and see whether they're able to fulfill their mission.

This is what has been behind the formation of collaboratives and the linking of parishes in the same area. For far too long, we have been living in isolated parochial silos. Instead, we need to build bridges among the parishes of our Diocese and accentuate the communion that is one of the marks of Catholic life.

This is what has also led to the arduous decision to close some parishes, something no bishop ever wants to do and no parishioner ever wants to experience. We rightly love our parishes. Collaboratives are an attempt to maintain many of our parishes by creating an arc of growth and innovation in response to a pattern of decline.

The desire to strengthen our parishes has also led to some new financial practices we've implemented through the collaboratives. Just like families have to do at home, so we as a family of faith have to be very careful, frugal and responsible with our limited resources.

We've looked at many ways to save money and resources, especially by sharing resources. For example, many parishes on their own cannot afford full-time Religious Education leaders, or youth ministers, or musicians, but two or three parishes in a collaborative can. We have worked hard at the Diocesan level to do group purchasing arrangements to help save money, for example, on gas and electric bills, something that can help not only our parishes, but also our schools, nursing homes and other facilities. We have looked at the facilities that are aging so that we can make proper decisions as to whether investments and updating are prudent.

We have implemented greater financial guidelines

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

to ensure that what is contributed to parishes is put to best use and dollars are stretched.

In all of this, strengthening parish life demands changing from a mentality that focuses on maintenance to one focused on mission. Our primary consideration cannot be preserving what we have now at any cost. It must be assessing the needs of our Diocese today as we look to the future. We must keep in mind that our parishes are not fundamentally physical structures, but people, what St. Peter calls “living stones” built on Christ the Cornerstone.

3) Strengthening and supporting our priests now and for the future

We are so fortunate in the Diocese of Fall River to have such a dedicated and gifted clergy who serve God and His people with fervor and distinction.

I’m concerned about them, however. Many are overburdened, at times overwhelmed, and unable to be the priests they desire to be because so much of their day is caught up with administrative responsibilities. Many are responsible for doing today what even a short time ago three or more priests were responsible for. Their excessive workload leads many to neglect their physical and emotional health, and some their Spiritual health.



Priests attend “Good Leaders, Good Shepherds” leadership program.

They have less time for priestly camaraderie, collaboration and mutual support. All of this impacts their priestly morale.

One of the most important things a bishop does is care for his priests. Without these generous priestly collaborators, no bishop can effectively teach, sanctify and shepherd the people of a Diocese entrusted to him.

I have offered many things to support the priests of our Diocese:

- I have met with them individually, in small groups, in different regions or deaneries, and as a presbyterate (group of priests) in convocations, study days and days of recollection.
- We have inaugurated a program of renewal with the Jesuits of Boston College, focusing on their Spiritual, psychological and physical wellbeing.
- Established a cohort of the acclaimed Good Leaders, Good Shepherds program from the Catholic Leadership Institute, which helps priests better manage their administrative tasks.
- We launched a program called Better Brothers so that priests could confidentially share their hopes and fears in a way that could build priestly spirit and morale.
- Our staff at the Diocesan headquarters is always ready to help our priests as much as possible to lighten at least some of their administrative tasks, like care for properties and human resources issues.
- We hired someone who has the specific responsibility to meet with priests to address whatever health issues they have in a more effective way.
- We continue to offer retreats and days of recollection.

On several occasions, I have reached out to the priests of our Diocese for their feedback, as I did in anticipation of writing this pastoral letter, and I’m grateful for their candor and counsel. They love this Diocese and its people. They love Christ and His priesthood. They want the faith to thrive in this Diocese more than anyone.

Perhaps most inspiring to me is that we have prayed together. Several priests told me that, besides celebrating Masses or praying the Liturgy of the Hours, it was not a common practice for us to get together to pray. I have really benefitted from this time together and many priests have told me that they have too.

I desire to do everything possible to enable our priests to be the priests they hunger to be. The revitalization of our Diocese requires the reinvigoration of our priests. I ask you to help me in praying for these good men whom Jesus has called to be Spiritual fathers

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

in the family of faith in our Diocese. I ask you to join me in thanking and encouraging them for their sacrifices, most of which are hidden. I also ask you to help me free them from the occasionally crushing weight of administrative tasks, allowing them more time for prayer, preaching and pastoral care. That's one of the reasons behind our strategic planning, to marshal resources so that others may do administrative work and priests may be unleashed to do what they were ordained to do.

4) Promoting priestly vocations

An obvious part of care for our priests is praying to the Harvest Master to send more laborers for His harvest (Mt 9:38). Promoting priestly vocations is also an essential part of the revitalization of a Diocese and an investment for the future.

For me, promoting vocations has always been central to my religious and priestly identity. I am a priest of the Society of Divine Vocations. Our Founder, Blessed Giustino Russolillo (d. 1955) had a special calling to foster and promote vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and holiness among all God's people. He founded our order to help in that crucial work. As your Bishop, I share his mission and am doing all I can to energize a culture of promoting vocations in our Diocese.

We are blessed to have 15 young men in the seminary, at different stages in their discernment and preparation for the priesthood. I ask you to please pray for them. During the summers, they come to work in parishes across the diocese, which is a source of encouragement not only to the faithful but especially as a reminder to young people that God has made us all for a purpose. If seminarians are assigned to your parish please thank them for their generosity and encourage them by your faith.

One of the highlights of my year is the time I spend each summer at the *Quo Vadis* Days camp, where young men open to priestly vocations come for a week

of prayer, discussion, sports and fun with our seminarians and the priests of our Diocesan Vocations Office. I celebrate Mass, reflect about my own vocation, sit and share a meal with them and challenge them on the soccer field. Many of our seminarians have had their vocations awakened and strengthened by this camp. I'd urge you to promote it among your sons and grandsons and especially among those who already serve in the Church, such as altar servers.

Through the Diocesan Vocations Office, we have been trying to help families promote vocations, first and foremost by praying for vocations as they pray as a family. **Parents, do not be afraid to encourage your sons to ask whether God might be calling them to be priests or your daughters to be religious Sisters.** They will be doing something beautiful for God and making a difference in the world.

We have provided parishes with resources to help support vocation discernment including: prayers, bulletin inserts, General Intercessions for Sundays, and encouraged identifying a parish vocations promoter.

Priestly vocations, as we know, are not the only callings God gives! My own experience in religious life has been a real source of gladness. It made me part of a Christian community, praying together, celebrating together, working together as a family, something that was a particular grace for me as I left my family and country to come to the United States. The Lord is calling many in our Diocese to the grace of a more intimate form of baptismal consecration to Him through religious life. We pray together for those He is calling, that they may hear the Lord's voice and respond with generosity.

The Diocese of Fall River has also been blessed with many who have responded to the vocational call to the Permanent Diaconate. I had the joy last year to ordain a new class of permanent deacons who are already making a difference in parishes throughout the Diocese. Permanent deacons are so important to the Mis-



Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

sion of the Church. **With fewer priests, the need for deacons is greater.**

A vibrant diocese is one with a thriving vocational culture in which everyone hears the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send?” and responds, “Here I am. Send me!” (Is 6:8). That’s what we need to help cultivate together at a time when so many look at things from too worldly a perspective.

5) Renewing Diocesan ministries to serve better the needs of the faithful

One of the essential tasks of a bishop is governing the Diocese in such a way as to promote the whole mission of the Church. He has to be a good steward of the resources in a Diocese. Good administration is a responsibility I take seriously.

I grew up in a poor family of 13 children and out of necessity we were always frugal. My siblings and I learned to make our own toys out of sticks and materials we found outside. I learned from my parents how to use gifts responsibly; we never threw anything away that was usable. I have tried to bring that same spirit to leading this family of faith. At the same time, pondering and preaching on the Parable of the Talents (Mt 25:14-31), I recognize that the Lord wants us to invest His gifts. It’s not enough to keep things status quo. With prudent boldness we need to try to make them grow and make money stretch. Good and faithful stewards do their best to make good returns.

I have spent a lot of time and effort over my first five years revitalizing Diocesan administration and finances, properties and buildings, human resources, safe environment, and communications.

Our Diocesan administration and finances needed a lot of work to bring them up to the standards of transparency and accountability our priests and people rightfully expect. We hadn’t had a financial audit of the chancery or published online Diocesan financial reports for years. That’s one of the first things I did, because I’m not dealing with my own money, but the faithful’s, and they have a right to know what is happening with their generosity. I reconfigured the Diocesan Finance Council, and expanded our financial leadership team that implemented new audit and investment strategies. Out of necessity we instituted parish assessments to help us better assist the parishes and the other institutions of the Diocese. We

established the Catholic Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts to help us raise long-term resources for Diocesan needs.

With regard to properties and buildings, we wanted to honor the legacy of so many who had sacrificed to build, while being good stewards of the present and future. Our Diocese has many aging buildings that are suffering the consequences of deferred maintenance, with costly repairs needed to keep them fit for purpose. We likewise have many vacant or underutilized buildings. We established a Diocesan office for facilities and real estate and began a thorough inventory and assessment of all the buildings.

With regard to personnel, we had no Human Resources (HR) Department five years ago, just a department to manage employee benefits. An HR Department is so important not just to manage Diocesan staff, but also to assist our parishes and institutions with their recruitment and retention of employees, compliance with complex labor laws, fair compensation, employment benefits, performance appraisal, and more. We hired a new Executive Director of Human Resources with sufficient staff so that we can manage the talented and committed people who help us throughout the Diocese, to develop their skills and competencies, and to motivate them in a mission-oriented way.

We also needed to address our internal and external communications infrastructure so that we could much better coordinate within the family of faith and share the Gospel with those to whom Christ sends us. We have of course the Diocesan website and our storied *Anchor* newspaper, but were not adequately using modern communications technology to be in contact with our priests and people. A team of communications advisors is now in place updating our antiquated means of communicating with priests and parishes so that we can be in touch in a much more timely way. I have started a blog more to be able to communicate more directly and transparently and we have strengthened our presence in social media. We still have a long way to go but we are rapidly moving forward.

I’m grateful for all those who have contributed their gifts to assist in these various transitions and change the at times negative perception of the chancery. Our chancery staff is full of people who are problem-solvers, ready and eager to help. We have made a lot of progress. Much more still needs to be done. But we’re doing that work together, as good stewards of the bless-

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

ings God has given to our Diocese.

6) *Caring with Christ-like love for those in need*

Jesus' fundamental command for us is to love God and to love others as He has loved us. Our love for Him, as He explained in a conversation with St. Peter after the Resurrection, is shown in how we care for those He entrusts to us (Jn 21:15-19). He takes personally the way we love those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, on the move, imprisoned, or otherwise in need (Mt 25:31-46). The real fruit of faith is always charity and we can never love too much.

Among the chief tasks of a bishop, as a follower of Je-



sus and a successor to the Apostles, is to make Christ's love visible and to spur, by words and example, not just the faithful but all people of good will to care for those in need. In every age, the Church must organize so as better to love those in our midst and respond to the basic needs of the most vulnerable in the community with Christ-like compassion.

The Diocese of Fall River has been known for generations for its care for those in difficult circumstances. Over the course of the last 79 years, faithful of the Dio-

cese of Fall River have through the Catholic Charities Appeal donated more than a staggering \$150 million to care for the poor and vulnerable. That generosity continues today, as Catholics here sacrifice more than many dioceses that are considerably bigger. Many parishes similarly have vibrant St. Vincent de Paul Society Chapters. The number of volunteers deeply committed to the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy in our Diocese has impressed me even more than the enormous financial sacrifices people make.

But the needs are growing with so many coming to us who cannot find adequate help elsewhere: the hungry, homeless, aging, addicted, wounded, immigrants, those in troubled Marriages, struggling parents, and so many in the most vulnerable stages of life who do not know where to turn.

Love for God and others compels us to be even more efficient and effective with the resources we have. That's one of the reasons why I have prioritized the renewal of Catholic Social Services (CSS), which spearheads the Diocese's charitable outreach. We have expanded CSS' Board of Directors, hired a new Director and some new staff, worked to expand the recruitment and training of volunteers and are looking at our headquarters and other buildings to ensure that they can meet the demands of today and tomorrow.

One of the high points of my first five years has been going out to volunteer in the various charitable works of our Diocese. Last Lent, a particular highlight was cooking a meal for the homeless at the Sister Rose House.

Jesus told us during the Last Supper that everyone will know we are His disciples by the love we have for each other (Jn 13:35). The Church at her best is a communion of Good Samaritans and love for our neighbors in southeastern Massachusetts will always be among our top priorities. I am so grateful for all of those who use their time, talents and financial resources to help those less fortunate.

7) *Bolstering Catholic schools*

During the decades of rapid growth in the Diocese's history, nearly every parish had a thriving parochial school, staffed by dedicated religious, which formed the next generations to succeed in faith and life. There were also several top-notch Catholic high schools that not only provided a superb academic education but

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

taught the faith and moral values that people could not get anywhere else. Catholic schools contributed mightily to the vitality of the Church in our country and became the envy of the entire Catholic world.

For many reasons — such as fewer practicing Catholics, smaller families, a decrease in religious vocations, the shift of Catholic families from cities to suburbs, different economic factors and others — some Catholic schools have had to close and a number of others are struggling.

- Established a Central School Board.
- Expanded tuition assistance funds and scholarships through the Diocese's Foundation to Advance Catholic Education (FACE).
- Formed alliances with higher educational institutions and public school districts to provide greater resources for our students.
- Beefed up Religious Education formation and instituted programs for teachers to grow Spiritually and in the knowledge of their faith.
- Offered schools greater assistance with budget and financial reporting.



One extraordinary resource is our Catholic teachers and administrators, now mostly lay, who are so dedicated to the mission of Catholic education. Many receive far less than what their counterparts do in other schools, even though their students regularly obtain far higher results on standardized tests. I thank them for their faith and commitment. We need to come together as a Diocese to support their work for the benefit of upcoming generations.

8) *Forming life-long disciples*

Catholic schools are one part of the mission Christ entrusted to the Church to “go, teach all nations” (Mt 28:19). The word “disciple” in Greek means “student” and we never cease to be pupils of Jesus the Master.

But Catholic schools are too critical for the mission of the Church not to do everything we can, together, to save and strengthen the schools of our Diocese. We need to help them continue in developing as centers of re-evangelization, academic excellence, optimal character formation and vibrant Christian service.

Keeping our Catholic schools thriving is not easy. Parishes often cannot cover all of the costs of their schools, and we know that parents often struggle to cover tuition. We must work together as a Catholic family to save this precious gift. If we don't, many will not survive.

We have therefore:

- Created a Taskforce on Catholic Education, comprised of Church, business, educational and philanthropic leaders to assess the schools of our Diocese on academics, enrollment, effective governance, financial sustainability and marketing and make a strategic plan for the Diocese.

That begins with the catechesis we provide for children. With the cultural changes in our society, our young people need to be formed in their faith more deeply than before. Faith Formation is not just passing on knowledge, but helping people to meet Christ, know Him, accept Him, love Him, and follow Him. A Commission studied Faith Formation in our Diocese and noted inconsistent quality of Religious Education across different parishes. The Commission suggested engaging the younger generation in a new and improved way, by:

- Strengthening the participation of the family and the faith knowledge of parents.
- Increasing the number and preparation of our volunteer catechists.
- Counteracting the powerful influence of secular culture.

We also need to bolster the Faith Formation of our youth and young adults in our Diocesan high schools,

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

colleges and universities. The goal in this critical stage of life is to get to know Jesus more deeply in prayer, the Christian community, charitable service and learning so that they might make the mature choice to follow Jesus as missionary disciples. Recognizing the power and presence of social media, the goal is to invest in resources to meet them where they are and bring them to where Christ wants them to be. We must together help them to see that the Church is their family, their home, where they encounter God, find nourishment and get answers to the most important questions of life.

That's why our parishes need to have the resources to offer organized outreaches for youth and young adults beyond their Confirmation. That's why we must continue and expand opportunities at the Diocesan level through programs like the Christian Leadership Institute (CLI), Encountering Christ in Others (ECHO), and Diocesan and World Youth Days.

To excel in life-long learning, we must also give greater attention to opportunities for adults to grow in their faith. The experience of Mass on Sunday ought to

spur people to hunger for more. Parishes must provide resources and opportunities for adults to get to know their faith better. At the Diocesan level, we have started the annual Men's and Women's Conference to rekindle the fire of faith in the lives of Catholic adults. I really love this event, where I give a brief talk, celebrate Mass, hear Confessions, and grow in faith together with the people of the Diocese.

I also want to say a word about seniors, who are the pillars of many of our parishes. The example so many of them set of a hunger to continue to learn the faith inspires us all. One of my favorite pictures from my pilgrimage to the island of St. Michael in the Azores for the *Santo Cristo* Feast is of a grandfather teaching his three-year-old granddaughter how to pray in front of the *Santo Cristo* image. I have a copy of it in my office and it never ceases to remind me of how many grandparents are superb teachers of the youngest generation in the ways of faith. Teaching is a great way to learn and seniors grow in faith by seeking to pass on to others the wisdom Christ and life have taught them.

9) Supporting parents and families

The Church is a family of families and, therefore, strengthening a Diocese must involve strengthening the families within that Diocese. The family is not just the building block of society but also of the Church.

I am the fourth in a family of 13 kids, eight boys and five girls. I still remember vividly, as if it were yesterday, praying together as a family. My mother had a little shrine of images of saints and we would pray the Rosary there and other prayers. I learned at that little shrine in our home how important God is in our daily life. When things were difficult for us, my parents used to say, "It is in God's hands. God will take care of it." We learned to trust in God Who never let us down. We learned to speak to Him and to say, "Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening." We learned to love Him and to make time for him. My parents didn't have doctoral degrees, but they were great teachers of their children in the most important subject of all. My vocation as a Christian, as a future priest and now as a bishop was certainly nourished there.

As a young religious Brother in Newark, New Jersey, soon after arriving in the United States, I used to teach catechism. I could readily tell the children who came from stable situations at home versus those who didn't. It showed me how important families are not only for



Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

people to grow in faith, but to have solid foundations for almost everything in life. So much of the Church's educational mission is to buttress the work of parents as the first and best of teachers of their families in the ways of faith. We have to do everything we can to support them.

Families have always had to face common challenges, like finances, health issues, disagreements and finding time together. But today there are new issues that undermine the unity of the family, and every mom and dad has had to contend with the fact that they are competing with media and social media as their children's formative influences.

During the last five years, we have tried to do several things to strengthen families. We have focused on quality Marriage preparation to help young couples prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage. The Church has a responsibility to defend and promote Marriage and the family; as one of the most effective and prophetic ways we do that is through vibrant Marriages that show the shining witness of human love in the Divine plan. One of the things I've tried to build on has been the celebration of major wedding anniversaries with a special Mass in the Cathedral. These couples demonstrate for the younger generations that a covenant "until death do us part" is not just possible but beautiful and life-giving.

No amount of Marriage preparation, however, can address all the issues couples will face including the reality that some Marriages may end in separation or divorce. The Church needs and wants to help with the healing process in those cases with all of the means Christ has placed at our disposal.

St. John Paul II used to emphasize that the future of humanity passes by way of the family. So does the future of our Diocese. That's why strengthening families in every way is a great priority.

10) Carrying out our mission to spread the faith

One of the things that Pope Francis has repeatedly stressed — and before him, Pope Benedict, Saints John Paul II and Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council — is that the Church doesn't have a mission but is a

mission. Each one of us is meant to recognize, as Pope Francis wrote, "I am a mission on this earth. That is the reason why I am here."

Jesus used the image of a harvest to speak about spreading the faith and called us to lift up our heads and see that the fields are white, ripe and ready for the harvest (Jn 4:35). Those words are valid in every time and place, but they are very fit to describe the situation of our part of the Lord's vineyard in 2020. We are now in mission territory. So many, including those who have been baptized, are structuring their life without Jesus at the center. We love them too much, and love Christ too much, to leave them like this.

We have in Jesus a treasure that we cannot keep to ourselves. Like St. Paul, fervent Christians will burst unless we share the Gospel (1 Cor 9:16). This isn't easy today.



But the same Holy Spirit Who helped the Apostles, the first followers of Jesus, and then successive generations seeks to enliven us in the Diocese of Fall River to bring about a New Evangelization. While we're aware of our personal inadequacies and all of the cultural challenges, we know what the Holy Spirit has done and wants to do again.

Everything we do has to be geared toward helping the faithful of the Diocese become evangelized evangelizers, missionary disciples in communion. Our parishes, schools, Religious Education programs, hospitals and nursing homes, charities, communications, even our fund-raising efforts must all be part of sharing the Gospel with those for whom Jesus cared enough about

Reflections on Five Years — Continuing the Mission

to enter our world and die on Calvary.

I mentioned before that the transformation our Diocese needs most is from “maintenance to mission,” from focusing on preserving what we have — our buildings, structures, and mentalities — to sharing the gift of our faith, bringing Christ to others and others to Christ. When the other bishops from New England and I met with Pope Francis in November, he spoke about this urgent missionary metamorphosis so that everything in the Church can be channeled for the evangelization of today’s world.

That is not a short-term goal or something that will be able to be achieved by a strategic plan. That will happen only from all of us unleashing the power of the Holy Spirit and cooperating with His desire to help us help others come to experience God’s saving love in the Church.

The challenge is vast, but let’s make it practical. Let’s each of us, bishop, faithful, priests, religious, deacons, young, old, men, women, girls and boys, make the effort with persistent prayer, cheerful example and invitation, to bring at least one person to Christ this holy season. How pleased Christ would be to welcome them, and it’s all possible because the Holy Spirit would be working with and through us!

CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking the time to read these reflections about the priorities that have guided my prayer and work as Bishop of Fall River over the last five years. I am grateful to God for the progress we have made and I am confident in His help for the years ahead.

I’ve given a general overview but I have on my desk detailed recommendations from the Planning Commissions we’ve established, recommendations from our priests, and many other things that I intend, with everyone’s help, to implement moving ahead to advance these priorities. We obviously face some continued pruning, but I want to focus far more on planting. With gratitude for the past, I want to concentrate with hope on the present and the future.

I would like to finish with a prayer to the Patroness of our Diocese, Our Lady of the Assumption. I am so grateful for her maternal prayers for me and for all those whom I am entrusted to serve in this Diocese. We turn to her and ask:

*O Mary, Mother of Mercy,
You who have been full of grace from the first instant
of your life:
Intercede for us that to correspond fully to the grace of
your Son.
You who said Fiat to God’s plans for you announced
by the Angel:
Help us similarly to say a similar yes to God’s plans for
us and our Diocese.
You brought the embryonic Jesus with haste to Saints
Elizabeth and John the Baptist:
Help us have the yearning to bring Christ with joy to
our family members and friends.
You whose soul magnified the Lord and spirit rejoiced
in God your Savior:
Teach us to give thanks to God in every circumstance.
You prayed for the couple in Cana before they even
knew they had a crisis on their hands:
Assist the families of our Diocese to center their homes
on your Son and do whatever He tells us.
You who stood faithfully by the Cross of your Son until
the end:
Obtain for us the graces to remain faithful in picking
up our Cross and following Him all the way.
You who received from Jesus on Calvary the Beloved
Disciple as a Spiritual son:
Raise us, as your sons and daughters, to be, like Him,
fervent disciples and ardent Apostles.
You who led the Church in prayer for the outpouring
of the Holy Spirit:
Show us how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in a
new Pentecost throughout our Diocese.
You who have been assumed body and soul into Heavenly
glory:
Pray for us that, after this exile, we might come to be
with you forever at your Son’s eternal right side.
You who were chosen by God the Father from all
eternity to be the Mother of His Son and whom that Son
chose to be our Mother:
Pray for us now and always and help us fulfill the Mis-
sion for which your Son has created and called us, to the
praise and glory of God the Father. Amen.*

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend
Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V.
Bishop of Fall River