

Journeying Together :

With Jesus on the Path of Faith & Hope



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

PART 1 – ENGAGING THE PAST

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In 2017, I issued a pastoral letter calling us to rebuild in faith and hope. In it, I focused on parishes, schools, and leadership formation to address challenges present in our Diocese.

As a result, in February of 2019, nearly 400 people gathered with me and launched an intense six-month planning process focused on these initiatives — Governance (which included Finance and Administration, Human Resources, Communications, Facilities, and Real Estate); Youth and Young Adults; and Catholic Social Services. The Pastoral Strategic plan which emerged with over sixty recommendations was a result of the diligent work of these committees and the input of several listening sessions surrounding these specific priority areas.

A Strategic Planning website—fallriverplanning.org—documents the progress of these recommendations. Some of the work that emerged from the Strategic plan was the creation of ten parish “collaboratives,” the publishing of a comprehensive Diocese transparency report in 2020, reconstituting a diocesan pastoral council, and hiring a Senior Director of Youth, Young Adult, and Family Life Ministries. While our work to rebuild in faith and hope is ongoing, and we have learned various lessons in the process, I believe we have made great strides as a Diocese.

Similar to the rest of society, we as a Church are greatly affected by the pandemic and experienced loss in different ways. Yet, the pandemic reminded us that despite the challenges we may face, God does not abandon us. Rather, He calls us to courageously bring to completion the good work He began in us. Now, more than ever, God is calling us to move forward and not stand still. My hope in this pastoral letter is to offer you a vision for how we can do this and how you can join us in moving forward into the future as a Diocese.



Strategic Planning Mass at the Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption, Fall River

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PART 2 – PRESENTING THE FUTURE

WHAT CHURCH WILL WE LEAVE BEHIND?

As we look to the future, we must ask ourselves: what Church will we leave behind to future generations? Due to many factors, our local Church is seeing declines in Mass attendance, participation in faith formation, and celebration of Sacraments. Specifically, in the Fall River Diocese since 1990 we have 100,000 fewer Catholics, participation in faith formation has dropped 67 %, and Sacraments of Initiation have declined by 65 %. How do we change these declines? First, we must work toward helping individuals experience metanoia - personal conversion and change in one's way of life. This was a key aspect of Jesus' teachings and ministry, and it must also be a key aspect of our work as we move into the future.

As I celebrate Confirmations around the Diocese, I have the opportunity to speak with the Confirmandi and ask them the following questions: Will anything about you change when this Liturgical celebration is over, and you walk out those church doors and return to your life? Will anyone know you are Christian, or that you believe? When you are away from the church, is there anything about you that indicates that you are Catholic to those who meet you? Have you truly committed to living in a way that when people encounter you, they will also encounter Christ? Since we do not carry a sign to announce these beliefs, **WE MUST BE THE SIGN**. What we profess in faith, we must show in our deeds. Our decisions, actions, and words need to reflect what we believe and help others to recognize God in us.

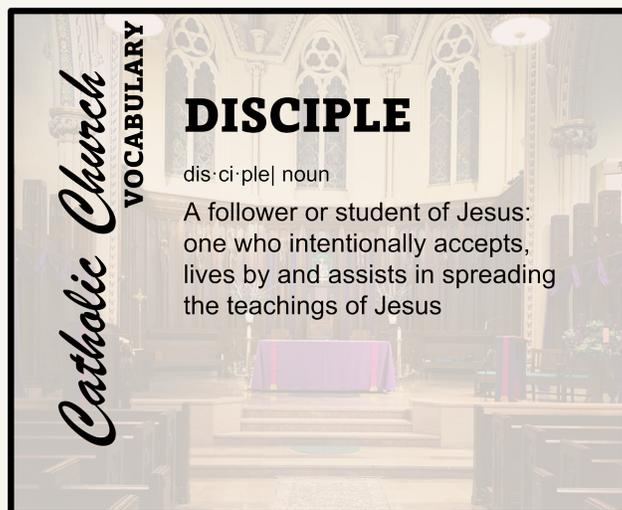
Considering this, I ask you: have you allowed the Holy Spirit to take residence in your heart, home, and life? When the Holy Spirit comes, things change! Think of the disciples after Pentecost and how everything in their lives and their worlds

was never the same again.

It is time to pray and discern how you will make an impact and a difference through your life in the Church. What roles will you assume to better serve and participate in the faith first given to you at Baptism and which you professed at Confirmation? **If we are to leave a legacy of authentic and lived faith, we must embrace our baptism and courageously bear witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ through the way we live our lives.**

BE OPEN TO GOD'S CALL

Regardless of where you may be in your journey of faith, I ask you to come forward and allow the Lord to use you as his instrument. Say yes to God's call to bear witness to him! If you think that what you have to offer is not enough, remember these words from St Paul, which I chose as my episcopal motto: "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor 12:9). God is calling each one of us to build his Church, to live as his disciples, promising to provide us with the grace we need to overcome every challenge. If we live as Jesus' disciples - as those who intentionally seek to follow him and the way of life he called us to - then we can in turn inspire others to do the same by the witness of our lives.



Pictured: Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption, Fall River

Considering this, in the months ahead I hope to engage in more conversations about how we can provide meaningful opportunities for families and individuals to become involved and strengthen their faith as disciples. For if we are to see revitalization in our Church, we must first revitalize our own faith in God and be transformed ourselves. We need to turn to God every day “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved,” as St. Paul said, and clothe ourselves in “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Col 3:12).

In this Year of St Joseph, I invite you to take St Joseph as a model of how to allow yourself to be transformed and trust in God. Pope Francis, in his letter *Patris Corde*, speaks of how St Joseph had creative courage in confronting the challenges that came with being the foster-father of Jesus. Despite his initial uncertainty, he trusted in God, modeling prudence, patience, faithfulness, obedience, justice, chastity, and hard work. The humble witness of his life has inspired the faith of countless generations. This was made possible because St Joseph was willing to accept God’s call.



St. John the Evangelist in Attleboro

TAKE UP THE WORK OF EVANGELIZATION

In a similar way, we need to confront the challenges of our current times by learning, with excitement and enthusiasm, the good news of Jesus Christ and willingly sharing the Gospel with others. God chose the Apostles to bear witness to the Gospel, to what they had seen and heard. As St. Peter stated in the Acts of the Apostles, after Jesus’ Resurrection, “It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 2:20). Like the Apostles, who did not keep the Good News to themselves, we must accept the responsibility to proclaim the Gospel, bring people to faith, and share the truth.

As a result, we should be considering how we will extend an invitation to welcome people to our parishes, either those away during the pandemic, those who have been away a long time, or those who have never entered our doors. To better aid parishes in this work, I have made changes to several Diocesan offices. As of July 1, 2021, I have restructured the Diocesan Offices of Faith Formation, Campus Ministry, and the Pro-Life Apostolate. All the services provided by these offices are now consolidated into a newly established department: the Secretariat for the New Evangelization.

Under the leadership of the Secretary for the New Evangelization, this department will continue the work previously done in these three areas while exploring continual revival in evangelization, as well as the work needed on the Diocesan level for the Church’s upcoming worldwide Synod and the USCCB Eucharistic Revival Project. We recognize that each parish is unique in so many ways and that it is crucial to come together, working at the local level, figuring out where we’re going to go from here. My hope is that this structural shift will aid in this ongoing process of revitalization.

BEING A SYNODAL CHURCH

A word you may begin to hear a great deal of in the coming years is synodality. In its 2018 document, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, the International Theological Commission explained that “Although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging...The concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church...” (n.6-7) Indeed, the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, speaks to the necessity each member of the Body of Christ has in fulfilling the mission of the Church. Considering this, we need to work together as a Diocese, including priests, deacons, religious, catechists, ministry leaders, educators, laity and anyone eager to embrace and share their faith, so that we may actualize revitalization.

As a result, conversations and efforts regarding revitalization must include all those who comprise the People of God in a particular place. Yet, this also requires that the People of God step forward to be a part of these efforts. How good it would be to see all the faithful take a more active role in the transmission of faith—ready to bring our children up in the practice of faith, beginning with their baptism. May we work together now, so that future generations — our children and our children’s children—will know, understand, and live the beauty of the Catholic faith.

Catholic Church

VOCABULARY

SYNODALITY

syn·od·ality | noun

Comes from two Greek words roughly meaning “common road.” For Pope Francis it is a process of consultations between clerics and lay people that leads to a consensus. It’s focused on joint decision making, dialog, and journeying together to move forward.

Pictured: Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption Fall River

PART 3 – THE WAY FORWARD

With all of this in mind, how may we move forward as a Diocese? In short, the way forward will be multifaceted. It will require us to continue the work of pastoral strategic planning first begun 4 years ago. We will need to unify parishes to be better stewards of God's blessings and our resources. Doing so means that we can better allot time, talent, and treasure within our local Church communities to the essential work of evangelization and forming missionary disciples.

To these latter ends, I urge all of us to move forward in a way that mirrors Jesus' method of evangelization in scripture: inviting individuals to first come and see; next, calling individuals to follow him; and then sending them out to go and make disciples. As you will see in each of these three sections below, I have outlined "Mission Steps", which are action items I ask individuals, parishes, and the Diocese to focus on over the next 4 years.

At this critical time in our Church, I ask you to recognize and embrace your universal call to holiness; to remember you are created by God for sainthood and to seek His wisdom on how to act upon this call.

INVITATIONAL WITNESS - COME & SEE

The Gospels reveal Jesus' powerful yet simple example of being an invitational witness, of how to extend invitations to those people around him seeking truth, hope, and in someone to believe. Gently welcoming, and lovingly inviting people to come and see so they may discover for themselves all the grace, blessings, and promises God has for them.

John's Gospel illustrates Jesus' extending such an invitation, "The next day again John [the Baptist] was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of

God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, 'What do you seek?' And they said to him, 'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour" (John 1:35-39).

Just like Jesus, we need to be aware of those around us, to extend an invitation, and be a welcoming community. This is necessary if we are to move our churches from maintenance to mission. Now is the time for courageous, creative outreach.

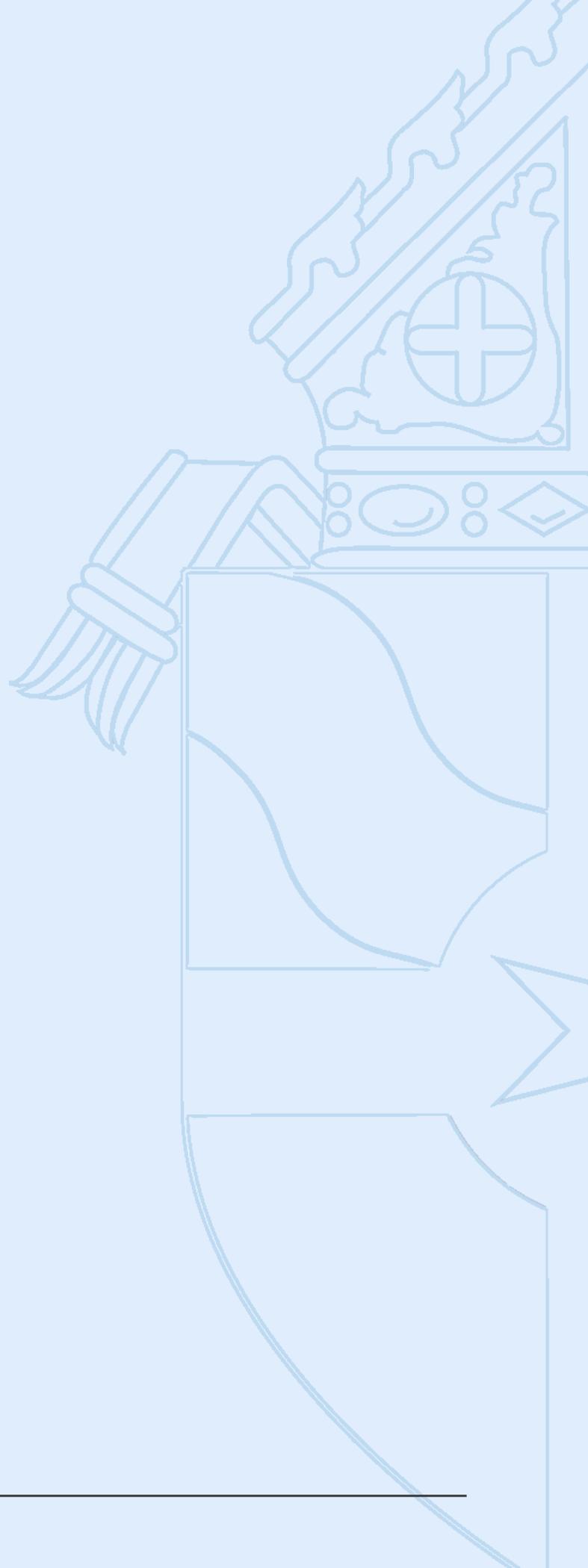
To this end, I've created an ad hoc Revitalization Committee to work with me to define best practices and methods for being "Invitational Witnesses." This committee's primary role will be to assist the diocesan movement post-pandemic and work with the Secretariat for the New Evangelization on the upcoming USCCB and Vatican Synodal initiatives.



Bishop da Cunha greets attendees at St. Thomas Chapel Rededication, Falmouth

MISSION STEPS

- Take a deeper look at your personal gifts and talents to engage in our faith communities.
- Continue to learn about the faith by participating in ongoing catechesis and spiritual formation.
- Partake in person-to-person engagement, inviting those in your life to encounter Christ and the Church community
- Focus parish efforts on greater hospitality, invitational awareness, and create opportunities to invite others to come to church. Imperative to this is the role of the laity in inviting others to Mass, as well as offering newcomers opportunities to connect with the parish community.
- Evaluate parish faith formation and sacramental preparation for all ages. To this end, parishes are asked to give special attention to the family, exploring ways to engage in intentional parent and family formation. As a resource, I recommend the new Directory for Catechesis (cf n. 232) The Secretariat for the New Evangelization is also a helpful resource for this evaluation.
- Improve outreach: parishes are asked to ensure they have functioning communications to the parishioners, social media, and a web presence, leveraging these items for evangelization and to help unify members of the parish.
- Consider making use of the votive Masses for the evangelization of peoples or for the Church during this year so that we may better approach the work of evangelization through a spirit of prayer and reliance on Divine providence.



SACRAMENTAL LIVING - FOLLOW ME

As Jesus called his first disciples, he said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). Jesus calls each of us in this same way, to not only follow his teachings but also to help bring others to know him as well. There is no more extraordinary way to encounter Jesus than in the Eucharist, where we believe him to be truly present—Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity.

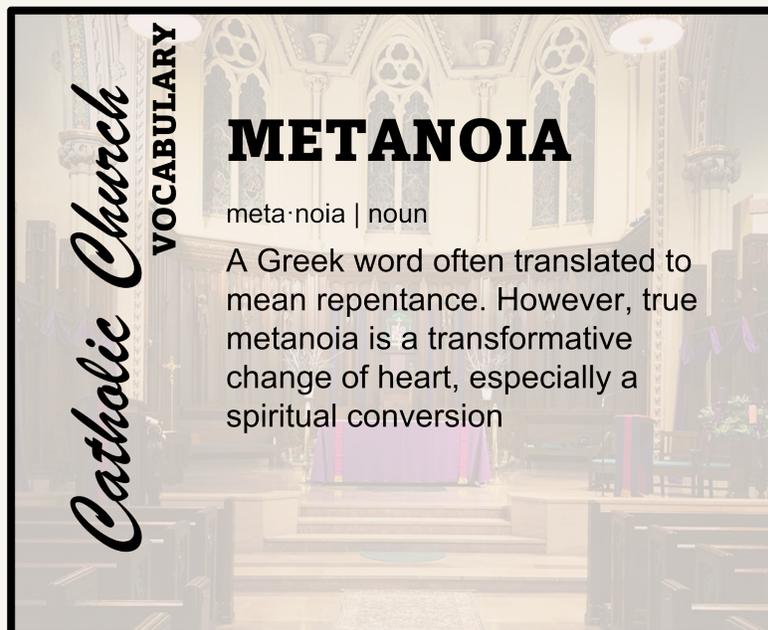
We need look no further than the Bread of Life discourse (John 6) to see the reality of this teaching. There, Jesus makes abundantly clear that unless we “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (John 6:53-56).

However, despite Christ’s teaching, a national survey published by the Pew

Research Center in 2019, uncovered the following about Catholics and their understanding of the Eucharist:

"Half of Catholics in the United States (50%) correctly answer a question about official church teachings on transubstantiation – that during Consecration, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ. The other half of Catholics incorrectly say the Church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion are just symbols of the body and blood of Christ (45%) or say they are not sure (4%)" (US Religious Knowledge Survey | Pew Research Center).

Without us helping individuals experience *metanoia* in regards to the Eucharist and the celebration of Mass, we risk future generations not embracing the amazing reality that in the Mass, Christ's saving sacrifice on the Cross is re-presented - made present once again for us - giving us the sanctifying grace we need. For this reason, the Church calls the Eucharist the source and summit of the Christian life.



Pictured: Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption Fall River

In his 2003 Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Pope John Paul II explained the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist:

"The sacramental re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice, crowned by the resurrection, in the Mass involves a most special presence which – in the words of Paul VI – 'is called 'real' not as a way of excluding all other types of presence as if they were 'not real,' but because it is a presence in the fullest sense: a substantial presence whereby Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely present'." (15).

He goes on to teach in the same encyclical that what needs to be at the heart of all seeking to believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is an acceptance of faith that cannot be explained, one that goes beyond our human comprehension: "Truly the Eucharist is a *mysterium fidei*," St. John Paul II states, "a mystery which surpasses our understanding and can only be received in faith, as is often brought out in the catechesis of the Church Fathers regarding this divine sacrament:

"Do not see – Saint Cyril of Jerusalem exhorts – in the bread and wine merely natural elements, because the Lord has expressly said that they are his body and his blood: faith assures you of this, though your senses suggest otherwise."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church which was approved by Pope John Paul II on June 25, 1992 underscores the teaching of this truth within our Catholic faith. In Section 1333 of the Catechism, one finds this about the Eucharist:

"At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood."

We can be assured of the validity of this important teaching, given to us by Jesus and upheld for over 2000 years by word and tradition. Again, turning for verification in the Catechism:

"By the Consecration, the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is brought about. Under the consecrated species of bread and wine Christ himself, living and glorious, is present in a true, real, and substantial manner: his Body and his Blood, with his soul and his divinity (cf. Council of Trent: DS 1640; 1651)"

(Catechism of the Catholic Church – The sacrament of the Eucharist, 1413).



Source: Francois Lochon—Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

By first receiving the Eucharist - the true presence of Christ in real and substantial matter - we are transformed into the Body of Christ, the Church. Without it, we cannot be the individuals, the Catholics, nor the Church God calls us to be. In a phrase, the Eucharist is essential to discipleship, and therefore to evangelization. Therefore, we must make a priority the evangelization of Christ's Eucharistic presence, which we encounter at Mass and then live out as Church in society by being "commissioned" to go out at the end of Mass.

To this end, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released a 3-year Eucharistic Renewal Project for our country beginning in June 2022 and featuring three implementation steps on the diocesan, parish, and national levels. As a Diocese, we'll be participating, and I invite all people to take part in this Eucharistic Renewal for our Church.

MISSION STEPS

- Regularly attend Mass
- Share with the others, especially those away from Mass, the importance the Eucharist holds in your life.
- Set a time for regular Eucharistic Adoration daily or weekly to increase Eucharistic devotion. Each parish should offer expressed devotion to the Eucharist, especially with its great tie to fostering and birthing priestly and religious vocations.
- Intentionally reach out to the faithful to help them recognize the importance of attending Mass. It is not about full pews or collection baskets, but of experiencing the mystical Body of Christ—the Eucharist.
- Help young people in our parishes and Catholic schools encounter the Real Presence by ensuring that they have ready access to the Eucharist and through evangelizing with the examples of saints, such as Bl Carlo Acutis, and through Eucharistic miracles.
- Help individuals refocus on the Real Presence by initiating specific study, preaching and devotional practices, with special attention to inviting those who have been away from the Eucharist. Each parish should look for opportunities that will work best in their community.
- Plan for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Eucharistic Revival Project, which our Diocese will be participating in. The diocesan phase will begin June 2022, with the parish phase set to begin June 2023.

VOCATIONAL PATHWAYS - GO OUT & MAKE DISCIPLES

Before ascending into heaven, Jesus famously commissioned the apostles to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). In many ways, this can be considered the vocation, or call, of the Church in the world.

As faithful Catholics, we can answer this call by embracing our baptismal mission to mirror the priestly, prophetic, and kingly holiness of Christ by how we live our lives. When we live our baptismal mission with purpose, we become a mission-driven church that can inspire others to want to join us on mission. We become a Church of equipped disciples that go out and make more disciples, as Jesus commanded us. This takes, as I previously shared, all of God’s people working together, ordained clergy and the lay faithful, all embracing both their universal and specific vocations.

To this end, Pope Francis has announced the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: “For a synodal Church: communion, participation and mission.” The Holy Father will open this three-year synodal journey of consultations and discernment this October. It will include three phases (diocesan, national and continental) and will culminate in an October 2023 assembly in Rome. “Communion, participation, and mission” is a powerful call to the entire Church —not only the clergy but the faithful to come together and make Jesus known, particularly in the Eucharist.

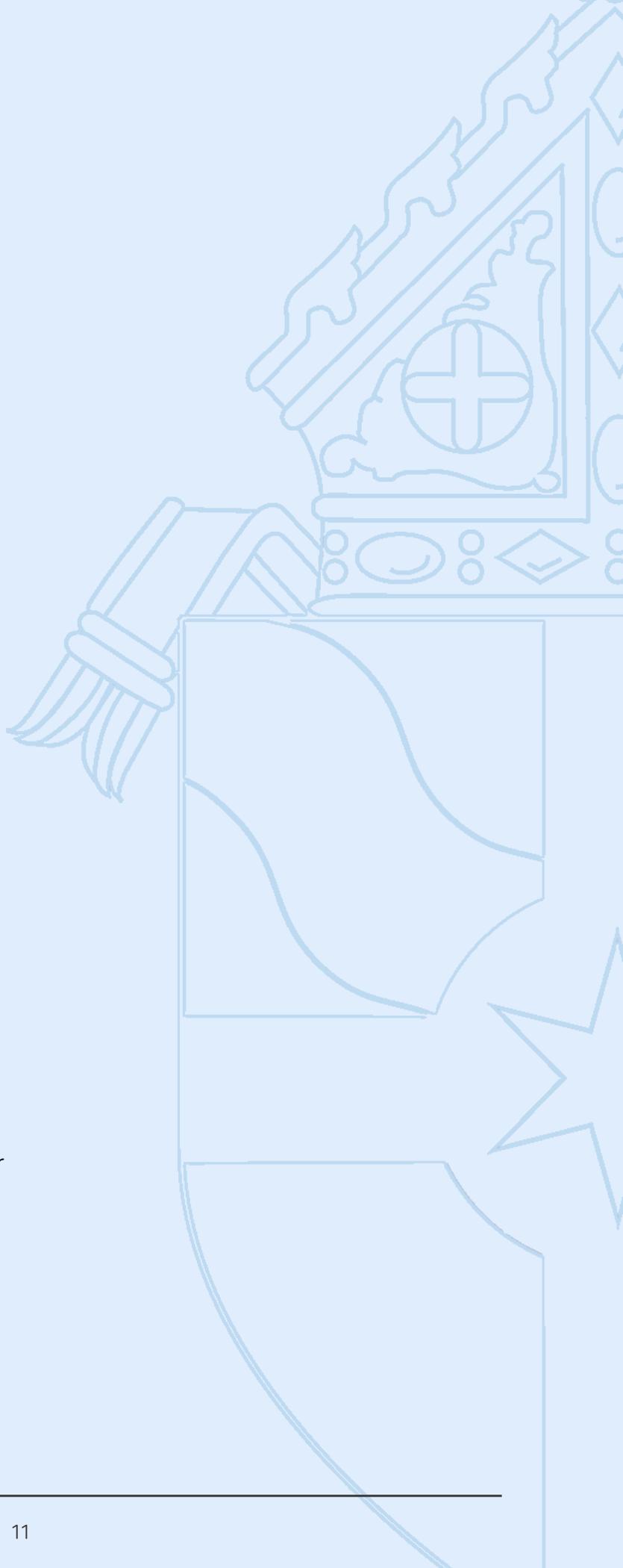
In this synodal process, Pope Francis is bringing to fruition what he has preached throughout his papacy: **the lay faithful have an important role to play in the mission and life of the Church.** “The fullness of the synodal process can only truly exist if the local churches are involved in that process,” the synod document states. This is an invitation to everyone - parishes small and large, all groups, ministries, apostolates, movements, and individuals - to be heard. Considering this, I ask for your participation and support throughout the diocesan phase of this synodal process.



Baptisms at Our Lady of Grace in Westport

MISSION STEPS

- Regularly pray for the gift of discernment and that individuals may hear and respond to God’s call.
- Champion a renewed sense of lay service by re-engaging Catholics in parish ministries. Grow parish ministry opportunities that allow for various individuals to participate in their faith more actively, through service to their parish and community at large.
- Foster a culture of vocations, with parishes and Catholic schools planning ways to pray, discuss, and help individuals discern the topic of vocations at all ages. To this end, parishes should consider the development of a vocations ministry.
- Nominate “parish ambassadors” in each parish to aid in ongoing evangelization and revitalization efforts at the parish level. These can be parishioners already working on revitalization efforts or individuals interested in getting more involved. Parish ambassadors will be supported by our Diocesan pastoral teams.
- Improve support for our clergy. As a Diocese, we recently hired a Director of Clergy Support to provide more assistance for the health and wellness of our priests. To this same end, as a Diocese, we are introducing Chancery Workshops for the recently ordained.
- Support parish revitalization efforts. As a Diocese, we formed the Secretariat for the New Evangelization to offer expertise, services and evangelizing opportunities to aid parishes.
- Create diocesan resources and trainings for parishes to support and equip parish staff, leadership, and parish ambassadors to accomplish these pursuits.



OUR CALL

As we move forward with a renewed focus on evangelization and partnering as brothers and sisters in Christ, let us not forget that Jesus frees us from sin, death, darkness, and hopelessness through His death and Resurrection. For the first disciples, Easter changed everything around them. We are an “Easter People” and, by our very Baptism, we are called to live in that truth—to live in the light of Christ.

Many thought when Jesus was dying upon the Cross and uttered the words, “It is finished,” maybe it was indeed the end. The world would be descending into chaos, and yet quite the opposite happened. It was a new beginning, a birth of a new creation—from the old order of sin and death—to new life. The attempts to destroy Jesus failed, and instead, He rose again and conquered death itself.

Jesus is not dead, He is alive, and that makes all the difference in the world. How much hope and courage can we draw from this truth? Jesus is the living Messiah, Son of God, and our Savior. The Apostles went forth witnessing what they had heard and seen, sharing all God had done for them, which He also did for us. What a relief—how liberating and reassuring it is to know Jesus conquered sin and death, not only in his life but in ours as well! We know and believe He is alive, and so we, too, become witnesses to that truth.

As I have shared throughout this letter, our faith needs to be shared through our daily lives and manifested in the way we live each day. Let us move forward as an “Easter People”, ever hopeful that God is at work in the world, and ever aware of our responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and build the Church as the People of God.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and discern how you can more actively share your faith and get more involved in our Church. May God bless us all as we continue this journey together.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and reading "Edgar M. da Cunha".

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

Given on September 24, 2021, the 7th Anniversary of my installation as Bishop of Fall River



St. Thomas Chapel Rededication, Falmouth

Websites: fallriverdiocese.org | fallriverplanning.org

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