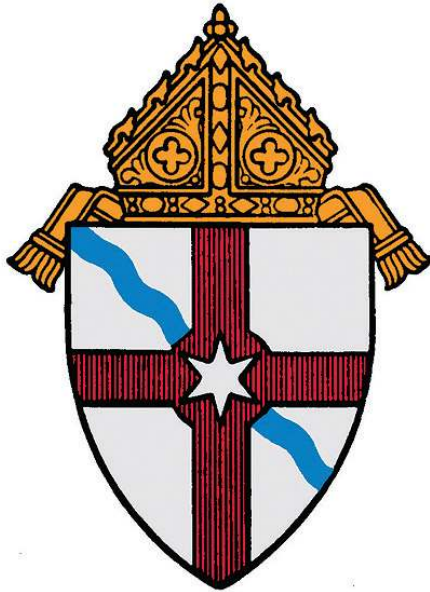


# Rebuilding in Faith and Hope

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



# Rebuilding in Faith and Hope

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I want to share with you a recent experience. Returning to the Sacristy after celebrating Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral, a woman approached me to ask a question. She said, "Bishop, I've been reading in the diocesan newspaper [*The Anchor*] about all the initiatives you are taking and the new people you've hired. Before, I felt worried about some of the challenges facing our Church, but now I'm feeling more hopeful than ever about the future of our Diocese. Is this real or am I dreaming?" I share this experience with you — in all humility — because it expresses exactly what I hope every priest, religious and layperson in our Diocese will feel someday soon: a profound sense of hope for the future!

As Catholic Christians, we know our hope cannot come from a new bishop or from new programs or activities unless these are

based on personal encounters with Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the source of our hope. He alone can prevent us from falling into the darkness of sin and death.

Only Christ can bring us the confidence and the joy that allows us to feel true hope for the future!

When I reflect on the invitation we have all received from Christ to rebuild the Church here in the diverse communities that make up the Diocese of Fall River, the words of St. Paul come to mind:

"What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, Who causes the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters are equal, and each will receive wages in proportion to his labor. For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the Grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the One that is there, namely, Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:5-11).

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St. Paul makes it clear. We are called to do the planting and watering, but God does the growing. We are God's co-workers in rebuilding His Church, but the foundation has already been provided for us. It is Jesus Christ!

The dual purpose of this pastoral letter, *Rebuilding in Faith and Hope*, is to express my gratitude to you — the clergy, religious, employees and faithful people of the Diocese of Fall River



— and to invite you to join me on a journey that will lead to the renewal and rebuilding of our Church, the Body of Christ alive in our midst!

During the past two-and-one-half years, I have witnessed first-hand your hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, dreams and disappointments. I have laughed with you, cried with you, shared in your rejoicing, and felt your anxiety deeply. Through it all, I have become convinced that God has called me to be your shepherd — not because of my personal skills or talents, but because He knows that in my weakness I am totally dependent on His Grace. Like St. Francis of Assisi, who was called by God, “Francis, go repair my Church,” to give up everything, so am I called to partner

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with you in rebuilding our beloved Diocese in faith and hope!

## *Rebuilding in Faith and Hope*

I have found inspiration and encouragement in this passage from the Book of Ezra:

“Take these vessels and deposit them in the Temple of Jerusalem, and let the house of God be rebuilt on its former site. Then this same *Sheshbazzar* came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem. Since that time to the present the building has been going on, and is not yet completed” (Ezra 5:15-16).

This story describes how the precious metals that had been removed from the Temple by the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, were returned and the Temple itself was rebuilt. I especially like the notion that the rebuilding was an ongoing process, “not yet completed.” How true that is for the work of rebuilding we are called to do here in the Diocese of Fall River!

“Rebuilding in Faith and Hope” is not just a slogan. It is one way to describe our mission as a people called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to give witness to His Kingdom, the mystery of God’s love. The rebuilding we are called to do in this Diocese is Spiritual — through prayer, reception of the Sacraments, lifelong Faith Formation and service to others, especially those who are most vulnerable. And it is material — through the building up of parishes, schools, diocesan ministries and institutions through stewardship of all God’s gifts as well as accountability and transparency of our finances and decision-making.

During the past two-and-one-half years, significant progress has been made in our efforts to “rebuild in faith and hope” but our rebuilding is ongoing and not yet completed. As a result, we thank God for the gift of His Grace which has brought us to this moment in our history as a Local Church. We also beg God’s continued help as we work to complete the good work that He has begun in our midst.

## *Opportunities and Challenges*

Rebuilding in Faith and Hope begins by celebrating all the gifts we have been given in a spirit of gratitude that

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acknowledges the strengths we want to build upon. We thank God for the opportunities and challenges we face as co-workers who have received the Grace to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. There is no need for us to be anxious or fearful about the future no matter how difficult things may seem. If we are true to our mission as disciples called to proclaim and live the Good News, renewal will happen, by the Grace of God, in an atmosphere of confidence and hope in the Lord.

There are countless things I could list as opportunities and challenges for our work together as a people called to rebuild Christ's Church in faith and hope, but I will limit these reflections to three major areas: Parishes, Schools and Leadership



Formation. I believe that if we can make good progress in each of these areas, we will be well-positioned to address all our Spiritual and material needs.

## *Parishes*

**T**he priests of our Diocese recently shared with me their insights regarding the opportunities and challenges they face in parish life. I listened carefully to their hopes and concerns which come from the dedicated pastoral service they have provided to our people throughout their lives as priests. I also noted what our priests said about our needs closely matches what I have

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heard during the past two-and-one-half years from laypeople in every region of our Diocese. It's a great blessing to know there is a good connection between our priests and the people they were ordained to serve. Both are deeply concerned with the health and vitality of our parish communities! Here are some of their major concerns:

First of all, we must be a welcoming Church. We must be



parishes that welcome our brothers and sisters into our communities. We must welcome those who are looking for Jesus and for meaning and purpose in their lives. We must welcome those who feel alienated from the Church. We must welcome those who are hurting and are looking for healing. We need to be a Church where people feel welcomed — regardless of their nationality, language, culture, or the color of their skin. As Pope Francis told us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (EG No. 114). Throughout its history, the Diocese of Fall River has always been a welcoming Diocese. Many ethnic groups have come to Southeastern Massachusetts, found a home, felt welcomed and settled here to build their lives, raise their families and practice

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their faith.

- Our priests and our people share a desire to make Holy the Lord's Day by ensuring vibrant Liturgies with homilies and music that inspire reverence and encourage the full, conscious and active participation of all. Some call this "The Sunday Experience." They believe it is essential to the Spiritual rebuilding of each parish community and of the Diocese as a whole. Without vibrant Liturgies, our efforts to stem declining Mass attendance and engage our people in celebrating through Word and Sacrament become very difficult. Great preaching and beautiful music should not be considered optional or "extras." They are at the heart of what it means to praise God and proclaim His Good News!

- All recent popes from St. John XXIII through Pope Francis have stressed the importance of evangelization. This means we are called to be "missionary disciples" and "messengers of Good News." According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, evangelization is the Grace and vocation proper to the Church, Her deepest identity.

- Parishes are called to be dynamic centers of preaching and teaching. Through Faith Formation and education for people of all ages, but especially for youth and young adults, the parish is the place where the beliefs that are first taught at home are broadened and deepened into a mature faith. We must do everything in our power to make sure the people of our Diocese (especially our young people) have access to Sacred Scripture and the richness of Church teaching through our parish communities. I have great hope for the future of our parishes. The Church will be here — strong and vibrant — for the next generation and beyond!

There is a lot of work to be done. To be successful, we must embrace these opportunities and challenges together.

## *Responding to the Changes in Demographics*

One of our greatest challenges is that Sunday Mass attendance and participation in the Sacraments is declining.

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We also have to face the fact that the number of priests available to serve our people is also declining. (Approximately 25 current pastors will reach retirement age in the next five years. We have nine seminarians now, some entering in September. This is good news but it is not enough to replace those who are planning to retire.) These new realities present a challenge to the future sustainability of some of our parishes.

We have parishes that are within one and two miles of one another. How do we help all our parish communities, but especially those that are in distress, to rebuild in faith and hope?

We may have more parishes than are needed in the future. How do we face this reality with openness, honesty and compas-



sion for those who may lose their Spiritual home?

As we move forward, parishes will begin a process of renewal designed to help them rebuild Spiritually and materially. Most likely, parishes (especially those within close proximity) will be encouraged to collaborate with one another and perhaps to operate as partners or clusters. Other situations may require mergers



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or even closures. If it becomes necessary to move in this challenging direction, we will work closely with pastors and parish leaders to make decisions that truly are in the best interest of our Church. In order to take next steps, over a year ago we began a process of evaluation in which we engaged more than 800 lay people and clergy in parish core teams who worked with a diocesan-wide task force; surveyed our priests and people in the pews; studied our demographics and Sacramental trends. In February, their findings were compiled in a comprehensive report and presented to our priests. An implementation team is now in place to take all the available data and formulate final recommendations and suggested next steps, by May. As your bishop, I will walk with you in conversation and courageous discernment of God's Will for our Diocese and its people.

Rebuilding in Faith and Hope means revitalizing parish life. I'm confident God will do this rebuilding if all of us work together to plant seeds, cultivate the soil and provide abundant water!

## *Schools*

**I**n 2015, a Task Force on Catholic Education was established with representative leaders from Church, business, education and philanthropy. The purpose of this task force was to assess the Diocese of Fall River's Catholic schools in the areas of academics, enrollment and marketing, finances and governance. The results of this assessment will help us to rebuild our Catholic schools in faith and hope!

Our vision for Catholic schools is simple, but powerful:

Academically excellent, vibrant and sustainable schools, inspired and guided by Catholic values, are a cornerstone of thriving Catholic communities. Our Catholic schools represent one of our brightest hopes for the future.

If you look closely, you can see that nearly every word in this vision statement speaks volumes.

"Academically excellent" commits us to educating the whole person — body, mind and Spirit. It challenges us to provide the very best education possible, to meet and exceed established standards for educational excellence, and to do this with deep

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respect for the intellectual, cultural and economic diversity of the students entrusted to our care.

“Vibrant and sustainable” means that we are determined to rebuild our schools in ways that ensure growth, vitality and economic stability. We want Catholic school enrollments to grow, not decline. We want our schools to be centers of faith and learning which allows students and every member of the school community to reach their full potential as children of God. We want our schools to be accessible and affordable for all — at the same



time we want to ensure that every school has the human and financial resources necessary to remain strong and healthy.

“Inspired and guided by Catholic values” is the most important statement of all. We believe it is our Catholic identity that makes everything else possible in spite of all the obstacles we face.

Catholic schools are a treasure that we dare not take for granted or neglect. We welcome students from every race, religion and social standing. We gladly share with them our faith in Jesus Christ and our commitment to teach the wonder of God’s Creation and the fundamentals of religion, science, history, mathematics, literature, geography, social studies, technology and so much more.

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Based on this vision, all 22 Catholic schools in our Diocese are developing a three-year strategic plan. This plan will provide a GPS system (a road map) for each school to achieve the following goals:

- To become centers of re-evangelization — an intentional proactive family outreach by pastors and educators to provide opportunities for families to develop and deepen their faith.
- To become centers of academic excellence utilizing the best instructional practices with diverse groups of student learners ranging from students with mild and moderate special needs to gifted and talented students.
- To maximize the use of technology to enhance instruction employing a blended learning approach and to create administrative efficiencies.
- To pro-actively and successfully reach out to and enroll diverse student populations with special focus on traditionally under-served groups such as Latinos.
- To grow tuition assistance funding to serve students living at or below poverty level.
- To become financially sustainable.
- To establish effective governing boards.

To help with the accomplishment of these goals, our Diocese is blessed with the expertise brought by our new Superintendent of Schools and newly-formed Diocesan Catholic School Board. This is an incredibly ambitious agenda, but once again we are confident that God's Grace makes all things possible if we commit



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ourselves to rebuilding our Catholic schools in faith and hope.

## *Leadership Formation*

Parish ministry demands fully committed and trained pastoral leaders. The same can be said for our schools and for all diocesan ministries. No Diocese can effectively carry out its mission without dedicated, faith-filled leaders (clergy, religious and laypeople) who collaborate with their bishop in his teaching, Sacramental and pastoral ministry.

The past two-and-one-half years have shown me — beyond any doubt — that our Diocese (our parishes, schools and our other Catholic ministries) are abundantly blessed with outstanding leaders. I would be negligent in my responsibility as bishop if I did not acknowledge these generous and talented women and men. Thank you!

At the same time, we need to renew and strengthen our ability to provide authentic Christ-centered leadership for the people we serve.

Rebuilding in faith and hope begins with each one of us. We must grow in our knowledge and love of our Savior Jesus Christ. We must continually open ourselves to the Word of God and the Grace of the Sacraments. We must practice what we preach, setting aside our own wants and desires in order to serve others. To be successful in our personal and professional efforts to rebuild in faith and hope, we must have access to mentors (those who have been there before us and can show us the way).

## *Vocations*

Parish ministry demands fully committed and trained pastoral leaders. We begin, of course, with the need for priests to serve our parishes as Good Shepherds. Vocations must be our number-one priority as we seek to rebuild the Church here in the Diocese of Fall River. We are blessed with dedicated, holy priests today. However, the demand is growing fast and it becomes a great challenge to replace those who are reaching retirement age in the coming years. We must remember St. Paul's admonition

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that “God does the growing” but that we are required to plant seeds, cultivate the soil and provide water.

In response to the need to be more active in promoting vocations and fostering a culture that supports vocations, we have created a Diocesan Vocation Board that is looking at the many aspects of the Church, our Diocese, and how we can bring forth



a greater awareness, understanding, and promotion of vocations. Along with building up what already exists, some new efforts include:

- Our parishes now have Vocation Awareness Teams. These teams look at their particular parishes and promote praying for vocations, educate parishioners, give support to those who are living their vocations, and create ways to challenge people to think about their own call.
- All parishes have been asked to pray for vocations every week in the Prayers of the Faithful at Sunday Mass as a direct response to the command of Christ to ask the Master to send laborers to the harvest.
- We are offering a variety of retreat experiences for boys and girls to learn more and reflect on how to know the Lord’s call.

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## *Forming our Laity to Lead*

In addition to promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life, we are responsible for ensuring that our parishes have access to well-formed laywomen and laymen who can serve as staff and volunteers. The leadership of laypeople is absolutely necessary to our rebuilding efforts. We must commit ourselves to recruiting, training and supporting the men and women who will serve as “construction managers” and co-workers in the demanding but rewarding work of Rebuilding in Faith and Hope. Also, vitally important are the particular vocational calls that our parish and diocesan staff, teachers, lay ministers and other Church personnel receive from God. We acknowledge and respect the universal call to holiness extended to all baptized Christians, and we seek to nurture and grow all the diverse gifts and charisms given to the People of God in order to rebuild Christ’s Church in



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faith and hope.

It is essential that we have opportunities for Spiritual renewal and professional development that can guide us in this internal rebuilding process — and that is why on March 11, 2017 we had



our first Women and Men's Conference, "Thirsting For Hope." More than 800 people from around the Diocese and beyond gathered at Stonehill College for the opportunity to be renewed in their faith and energized in hope. Participants spent quality time preparing themselves to receive the Graces needed to draw closer to God: by participating in morning prayer, listening to the speakers, going to Confession, taking a moment in the Adoration Chapel and attending Mass. Comments were made on how happy they were to attend, how touched they were by the speakers, how energized they felt and hoping there will be another event next year. I can promise you this "first" won't be our "last."

## *Looking Ahead*

Every year during the celebration of the Chrism Mass during Holy Week, clergy and lay representatives from par-

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ishes in all regions of our Diocese gather at St. Mary's Cathedral in a demonstration of our unity and solidarity as the Church in the Diocese of Fall River. This annual gathering is a powerful reminder of who we are — and who we are called to become — as missionary disciples called to give witness to the Gospel and to rebuild in faith and hope the Church which has been given to us by the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

As we seek to rebuild the Church — both materially and Spiritually — we embrace a “theology of abundance” which reminds us that God has given us everything we need to cultivate, water and plant the seeds of growth in our Diocese.



DIOCESE OF FALL RIVER  
**REBUILDING**  
IN **FAITH** AND **HOPE**

Through prayer, reflection on God's Word and Church teachings, and our collaborative efforts to rebuild Christ's

Church in faith and hope, we want to carry out our mission faithfully and cooperate with the Grace of the Holy Spirit so that our Diocese will grow in faith, hope and love. Please join me in this call to action to “cultivate, plant and water” so that our loving and merciful God can rebuild the parishes, schools and other Catholic ministries throughout Southeastern Massachusetts, Cape Cod and the Islands.

My prayer for you, brothers and sisters, is that guided by the inspiration and example of Our Lady of the Assumption, we will be enthusiastic and engaged co-workers with Christ. We are standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us while looking forward in hope. If we do our part, rebuilding in faith, hope and love, we can be confident that God will do the growing!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Edgar M. da Cunha".

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