

The Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church Initiative (2025-2027)

“A Time for Fortitude”



Background

Our priests have been facing new and unprecedented challenges. While these challenges have already been outlined in Bishop da Cunha’s 2024 Pastoral Letter to the Diocese, the following is a summary of these realities:

- A substantial shortage of priests in our Diocese leading to an unsustainable overextension of priests and, at times, requiring newly or recently ordained priests to become Pastors or Administrators of Parishes.
- The increasing complexity of managing parishes in the modern world resulting in an excessive focus on temporal administration rather than the spiritual life.
- The continuing fallout from the sexual abuse crisis engendering fear in some priests from entering into important pastoral moments and contributing to an erosion of trust between priests and bishops.
- Untenable living situations in which priests live by themselves in large rectories initially built for 4-6 priests, contributing to a lack of fraternity, lack of social support, and isolation.
- A highly secularized and sexualized culture combined with a lack of spiritual and moral credibility due to the abuse crisis resulting in extraordinary difficulty in preaching the Gospel.
- Priests experiencing exceedingly high levels of ministry burnout.
- Priests contracting chronic illness in midlife at twice the rate of the general American population.
- Priests experiencing high levels of depression, addiction, and trauma equal to that of the American population.

While our priests have been responding valiantly to these new challenges, it is time to courageously and innovatively adapt our Priesthood to the current church and secular landscapes so that they can be set up for success.

Overview

This initiative is called “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church,” and, having been introduced to the Diocese by Bishop da Cunha’s 2024 Pastoral Letter entitled “A Time for Fortitude,” is a three-year endeavor (2025-2027) to systematically strengthen our Priesthood and direct Diocesan and Parish resources towards this primary aim.

This vision will be achieved through a comprehensive three-year plan (2025-2027), strategically addressing organizational and individual obstacles to our priests’ success. Based on sound theology and research, the Diocese will strengthen all of our parishes and ministries by strengthening our Priesthood.

The “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church” initiative is designed to address three diocesan-centric challenges and three priest-centric challenges to priestly success strategically realized from 2025-2027. The Diocese will commit to creating a ministerial environment where priests can most readily accomplish their priestly mission, and the Priesthood will commit to addressing personal and professional obstacles to the same mission. Both are required for success.

The following are the six priorities:

Diocesan-Centric Priorities

1. Pastoral Planning
2. Parish Ministry
3. Presbyteral Culture

Priest-Centric Priorities

4. Priestly Wellness & Holiness
5. Personal & Ministerial Training and Standards
6. Vocations & Seminarian Formation



**The Stronger Priests,
Stronger Parishes,
Stronger Church Initiative
2025-2027**



Translations & More Information

Scan the QR code for access to Spanish & Portuguese translation and additional information or visit www.fallriverdiocese.org.

Diocesan-Centric Priorities

The first three strategic priorities focus on commitments the Bishop/Diocese makes to its priests.

Priority #1: Pastoral Planning

Background

50% of our pastors have multiple full-time assignments, and in the next six years, we'll have twice as many retiring pastors as priests available to replace them. By 2026 or sooner, we will no longer be able to backfill retiring pastors with new pastors. These unsustainable realities are causing multiple and dire adverse downstream effects. Coupled with decades-long declines in Mass attendance, further compounded by the pandemic, it's evident that adjustments to the number of active parishes are needed in our Diocese.

The Plan

Consequently, this initiative is a commitment to accelerating pastoral planning efforts to bring relief to our priests who are overextended by too many assignments. This will include the closure of some churches based on a substantial review of information, including Mass attendance, Sacraments, church utilization, population growth/decline, and more.

This is a continuation of the current 5-year planning phase, which began in 2019 and concludes in 2024, plus the addition of the next phase, which will be shorter—3 years—and more expedited.

The Diocesan Strategic and Pastoral Planning Office, with the collaboration of our clergy, diocesan/parish leaders, and experts, will execute the updated and accelerated three-year plan as the first priority in the "Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church" initiative.



Priority #2: Parish Ministry

Background

What would it take to design parish ministry where priests are not inordinately hampered by "bureaucracy" but given the time and support needed to focus on preaching, evangelizing, offering the Sacraments more regularly, visiting the sick, etc.?

While one might wonder why this image of parish ministry doesn't already exist in all our parishes, it is important to remember that parishes are complex organizations that, even though they have a spiritual mission, also exist in the "real

world." Consequently, sometimes "real world" factors (though important) can stifle the spiritual focus. Some of the realities that can restrain the spiritual mission of a parish include the increasing complexity of administering a parish due to the modern demands of things like Human Resources, legalities, finances, facilities management, and much more. This can be exacerbated by an understaffing of parishes requiring parish employees to perform parish administrative functions that are not in their area of expertise.

There is an opportunity to better coordinate parish administration to allow our priests to focus on spiritual life and evangelization, which is the heart of priestly ministry, rather than spending excessive time on Parish administration.

For these and other reasons, the USCCB, in the Guide to Ongoing Formation of Priests (2023), encourages priests to avoid being simple "caretakers of an institution" rather than being "planters of the faith" in their parish.

The Plan

Accordingly, the outcome of the Parish Ministry priority is to design parishes with the systems necessary to allow priests to minister primarily as "planters of the faith" and not mere "caretakers of an institution."

This outcome will be accomplished by a newly appointed Parish Life & Ministry Task Force. The purpose of the Parish Life & Ministry Task Force is to distinctly understand the obstacles and solutions to priests' accomplishment of their true spiritual mission in the parish. The Parish Life & Ministry Task Force will perform this analysis in 2025 and submit recommendations to the Bishop. Upon approval, the Task Force will oversee the implementation of parish enhancements toward this aim during 2026-2027.

Priority #3: Presbyteral Culture

Background

It is a well-established fact that a positive culture is the most important factor in any community or organization's ability to achieve its goals. As Peter Drucker, one of the foremost experts in organizational growth, famously said, "Culture trumps strategy."

Based on this reality, addressing the factors negatively impacting a thriving priestly culture is imperative.

The Plan

The outcome of the Presbyteral Culture priority is to have a more positive priestly culture characterized by fraternity, care, accountability, and stability. To reach this outcome, the following action steps will be taken:

1. Improve feelings of psychological and ministerial safety, security, and stability among our priests through a number of new initiatives.
2. Build greater Diocesan/Presbyteral trust and improve ecclesial relationships through new opportunities for clear, regular, candid, and transparent communication and social occasions for fraternity.
3. Establish an explicit presbyteral culture of norms, values, expectations, and assumptions.

Priest-Centric Priorities

The second three strategic priorities focus on commitments the presbyterate makes to its Diocese.

Priority #4: Priestly Well-being and Holiness

Background

Parish and Diocesan stability ultimately hinge upon priestly well-being and holiness. This is because a priest's growth in holiness always produces greater pastoral charity (cf. Guide to Ongoing Formation of Priests, #153). For this reason, "The priest can give no greater gift to his people than his own resolve to grow in sanctity" (ibid.).

However, spiritual and physical health can easily deteriorate in Diocesan priests due to various factors that are being addressed throughout this initiative. Still, to reach our goals, priests must re-commit with a renewed passion for healthy and holy living.

The Plan

The intended outcome of the Priest's Well-being and Holiness priority is to have priests who are thriving in mind, body, and spirit.

This will be accomplished through several new measures, including:

1. Priest's personal responsibility and own commitment to healthy and holy living.
2. Bi-monthly priest support groups.
3. Annual Individual Wellness Checks for priests with licensed professionals
4. A traveling St. John Vianney relic and prayers dossier, which go to each priest for a private 9-day novena throughout the three-year process.
5. Enhancements to rectory living arrangements through a newly commissioned Rectory Life Task Force.
6. Professional and individual coaching processes to establish a Life Plan for each priest.
7. Retreat to end the three-year process leading up to the final event (Celebrate Our Priesthood Dinner).
8. Fostering greater spiritual support for priests throughout the Diocese.

Priority #5: Personal & Ministerial Training and Standards

Background

Today's ministerial environment is an increasingly complex place to minister and manage. In addition to priests' own commitment to professional excellence, there is a need to enhance training for those who support priests, especially parish staff and parishioners.

The Plan

The intended outcome of this priority is to have priests highly prepared and confident to meet the complex demands of today's ministry.

There are four primary action steps to accomplish this outcome:

1. Priests personal responsibility and own commitment to pastoral zeal and ministerial excellence.
2. Successive one-year training programs for the priests (2025), parish staff (2026), and parishioners at large (2027).
3. Understanding priests on an individual level to make data-driven personnel decisions, including:
 - a. Improved utilization of priest strengths through objective assessments and talent inventories.
 - b. Enhanced priest personnel decision-making (including succession planning) based on objective standards, matching priests with compatible assignments and looking for ways priests can "specialize" in ministry.
4. Offering enhanced and individualized support, guidance, and accountability to our priests through specific "assignment plans" and increased contact with the Bishop and Diocesan leaders.

Priority #6: Vocations & Seminary Formation

Background

The sixth and final priority addresses the priest shortage in our Diocese by enhancing the number and formation of vocations to the Diocesan Priesthood.

As noted, the Diocese will run out of replacements for retiring pastors by 2026 or sooner. **We do not have enough priests to replace retiring pastors.** There is an urgent need for more vocations in our Diocese because without priests, there is no Eucharist, and without the Eucharist, there is no Church.

The Plan

The intended outcome of this priority is an increase in vocations to the Diocesan Priesthood with well-formed men and the enhancement of current seminarian formation practices to ensure that our newly ordained priests are prepared to thrive after leaving the seminary.

Increasing vocations will be undertaken through additional support for the Diocesan Vocations Office and its many new initiatives. Likewise, the Bishop will appoint a Seminarian Formation Task Force to conduct an analysis in 2025 to understand better the formation our seminarians are receiving and any potential defects in current seminarian preparation. The task force will follow the analysis by executing the approved changes in 2026-2027.



Timeline of Major Plans

January 2025-December 2025 (Year 1)

- Accelerated pastoral plan begins (2025-2027)
- Parish Life & Ministry Task Force conducts the parish ministry analysis (2025)
- The Rectory Life Task Force performs the rectory living analysis (2025)
- The Seminarian Formation Task Force conducts the seminarian formation analysis (2025)
- 1-year training program for priests is executed (2025)
- Improvement initiatives to ecclesial relationships are enacted (no end date)
- Bi-monthly priest groups begin (no end date)
- Annual Individual Wellness Checks for priests with licensed professionals begin (no end date)
- Laity awareness and participation in these efforts begins (no end date)

January 2026-December 2026 (Year 2)

- Escalated pastoral plan continues (2025-2027)
- The Parish Life & Ministry Task Force executes enhancements resulting from the Parish Ministry analysis (2026-2027)
- The Rectory Life Task Force executes approved enhancements resulting from the rectory life analysis (2026-2027)
- The Seminarian Formation Task Force executes approved enhancements resulting from the seminary formation analysis (2026-2027)
- Psychological and ministerial safety of priests is enhanced through multiple initiatives (2026)
- A professional and individualized coaching process to establish a Life Plan for each priest is conducted
- 1-year training program for parish staff is executed

January 2027-December 2027 (Year 3)

- Escalated pastoral plan continues (2025-2027)
- The presbyteral council undertakes a planning process to formalize an explicitly defined priestly culture
- 1-year formation period for parishioners to support priests is executed
- Improvements are made to the utilization of priest strengths through objective assessments and tools
- Enhancements are made to the priest personnel decision-making process
- Individualized guidance and accountability of priests through specific "assignment plans" begins November 2027
- A 3-day retreat for priests takes place to end the three-year process leading up to the closing event (i.e., Celebrate Our Priests Dinner)
- The first ever Diocesan Celebrate Our Priests Dinner takes place to close the 3-year process

Common Questions

Why is this initiative necessary?

The Diocese of Fall River (including all our priests, parishes, and apostolates) is facing various and unprecedented realities. These realities make the "status quo" impossible to maintain should we want to accomplish the mission entrusted to us by Christ. While these secular and ecclesial realities have forced themselves upon us, the Church has yet to fully adapt itself to this new set of challenges and, in many ways, continues

operating as if nothing has changed. This is, in effect, the Church fighting "enemies" of times past rather than re-orienting itself to the current landscape.

Given the current challenges to our Diocese and priests, former operating methods cannot be maintained. Continuing along the same path leads to more of the same unfeasible realities. However, these challenges can be addressed and changed if we do so with the help of our Lord.

Consequently, this initiative seeks to begin the process of re-orienting the Diocese around priestly thriving and holiness, knowing that this is the most significant factor in the success of our parishes and apostolates.

Does this mean we have been doing something wrong?

Absolutely not! Many bishops, priests, deacons, and laity have faithfully led the Diocese of Fall River for many decades. We continue to be grateful to God for the many leaders who have gone before us who love the Lord and the Church and have sacrificed for our local Church.

This new initiative does not infer those previous ways of operating or doing things were "wrong," instead, it acknowledges that new information has come to light about the state of our Diocese and the Priesthood, and it is, therefore, our responsibility to act.

Oftentimes, our focus is on doing things right when the focus should be more on doing the right things.

What makes this initiative different from previous "programs"?

While many types of action plans and renewal efforts have come and gone throughout the history of the Diocese, there has never been such a comprehensive plan ordered singularly towards a thriving Priesthood as the basis for strengthening all parishes and ministries.

Has this been a consultative process?

Yes. This plan has been in the developmental stages throughout 2024. Over 40 individuals (including 30 priests, 10 experts, and lay leaders) have been consulted, and their input has been utilized.

How can I help?

There are three ways to support this initiative.

1. Prayer is the most important form of support. You are invited to keep this initiative in your regular prayers: "Dear Jesus, please ensure this initiative's success and provide it with Faith, Hope, and Love." Likewise, please offer this initiative's official prayer regularly.
2. You can take immediate action to support our priests and this initiative in several ways. Those initiatives are available at www.fallriverdiocese.org.
3. While this initiative is spiritual in nature, funding is necessary to help our priests succeed. You are invited to consider donating to this work at www.catholicfoundationsema.org/shepherds/.