



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIocese of YOUNGSTOWN

April 5, 2019

Lift Up Your Hearts!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Two weeks ago, I announced the continuation of the pastoral planning process in the Diocese of Youngstown. The infographics of the reality of the Church in our area show the urgent need to be proactive in addressing these challenges. I have heard from many people that they did not realize the number of priests in active ministry and their ages. It also surprised them how much regular Mass attendance and participation in parish life has declined. Moreover, they have commented on the diminishing population in northeastern Ohio due to the number of people who have moved away and the reality of more deaths than births.

These circumstances are serious and can tempt us to be discouraged. But we know from history that the Church has faced many challenges and overcome them. The same is true today.

The Church exists to evangelize, according to Pope Saint Paul VI. An honest look at the situation of the Church today calls us, clergy and laity, to work together to reenergize the Church and fulfill the mission given to us by the Lord. The goal of regionalization is not to close parishes, although that may be necessary if it aids the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is to create more vibrant parishes through regional collaboration. What do I mean by a “vibrant parish?” A vibrant parish is a community of faith-filled men, women, and children who together exhibit these and other characteristics.

1. A sense of welcome and hospitality to all those who come to the parish.
2. Liturgies that open us to the experience of God and inspire participation.
3. Recognition of the unique character of that particular parish within the mission of the wider Church.
4. Openness to collegial leadership.
5. Discernment of the gifts of the people and encouragement to use those gifts for the building up of the Church.
6. A focus on youth and young adults and programs to minister to them.
7. Outreach to inactive Catholics and those who have no faith.
8. Active involvement in the community, especially in caring for the needs of the poor and marginalized.
9. Responsible planning for a sustainable future.
10. A community life that supports families, promotes vocations, and is present to one another during difficult times.

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In his letter *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis encouraged everyone in the Church to be “bold and creative in [the] task of rethinking the goals, structures, styles and methods of evangelization in their respective communities (33).” The proposed regional approach to pastoral planning allows local communities to recommend creative solutions that fit local needs. Rather than focusing on maintaining structures that have served the community well in the past, the focus now is on changes that will foster an even greater vibrancy within our parish communities in the future.

I will have more to say on the Pastoral Planning Process as we go forward during the next few months. In the meantime, I hope you will see this as an opportunity for renewal on the personal and parish level. Please join me in prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the consultation process continues.

Yours sincerely in our Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "G. Murry SJ". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G" and a distinct "SJ" at the end.

Most Reverend George V. Murry, SJ
Bishop of Youngstown