

Archbishop Schnurr – 2020 Fall Presbyteral Convocation

Begin with the pastoral letter prayer to Radiate Christ:

**Mary, Mother of the Church and our Mother,
present our prayer of thanksgiving to your Son.
Beg from Him the graces we need to be faithful disciples
who follow Him with enthusiasm and joy.
May our witness to the love of God bear fruit
in our archdiocese, parishes, homes and hearts.
Teach us to be God’s joyful witnesses,
to radiate Christ in all we do,
so that all people might know, love and follow your Son
through this life and into the next.
Amen.**

Welcome to this very important virtual Presbyteral Convocation. Let me begin by thanking you for your perseverance and ministry among the people of God in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati during this unusual year. I know that it has been extremely challenging. I am deeply grateful for the many ways in which you have adapted and continue to work tirelessly to radiate Christ through your dedication and service.

These days, too, we look back with gratitude as we celebrate nearly two hundred years of Catholic faith in the archdiocese, and we look forward with great hope to our third century. As the priests and laity have throughout the previous two centuries, we are called to discern ways to bring the radiance of

Christ's love and mercy to the people throughout the archdiocese and to respond to the spiritual and temporal needs of those in our parishes, schools and other institutions.

For that reason, it is now time for us to enter into a new phase of pastoral planning, through which we hope 1) to build and sustain parish communities that celebrate the love of God in the Eucharist and the sacramental life of the Church, 2) to form people to live as faithful disciples, and 3) to radiate Christ through service to our neighbors.

You might ask, why must we go through another planning process? One of the things I have heard from many of you in the past few years is that we need to move "from maintenance to mission." No truer words could be spoken! The Fall 2020 CARA bulletin reports on a recent study that shows that, since 2007, religious practice has declined more significantly in the United States than in any of the other 48 countries for which they have data.

If we are to form people to live as missionary disciples, our parishes need to be vibrant, strong communities of faith. Yet, in the present situation, many of you find it necessary to spend a disproportionate amount your time literally concerned about maintenance – not just for one church building and parish campus, but for many church buildings, schools, parish centers, and campuses. This is taking a spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological toll on the well-being of many of our brother priests. We need to take intentional steps to rightly order our investments of financial and human capital by finding ways to put more into ministry and less into buildings and grounds.

Why now? Well, it seems to me that we have no option. While we have been blessed these past few years with an increase in the number of men ordained to the priesthood and in seminary formation, we have even more priests who are at or beyond retirement age who are still serving as pastors. Moreover, religious communities have informed me that they may not be able to minister in the archdiocese at the same level as they have in the past. And finally, the decline in religious practice that I referenced earlier means we need to assess whether some of our parishes fall short of the vitality we need and want.

In the recent Vatican Instruction, “The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church,” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI is quoted as saying, “The parish is a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning and hope to the lives of individuals and families.” (12)

I am struck by this image of the parish as a beacon of Christ’s light – 1) radiating Christ through His Eucharistic presence; 2) radiating Christ through the Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy and on the lips of our people in prayer; 3) radiating Christ through priests who stand *in persona Christi* with deep awareness of the sacred responsibility we bear; and 4) radiating Christ through our people as they gather and are sent forth as the Body of Christ.

As Pope Benedict notes, the parish that is a beacon of light responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart. This is what is missing in the lives of so many in our world today. Some recognize the ache in their heart but

do not know where to go to find relief. Many seek a life of purpose and yet think they can find meaning on their own. Even those currently active in our parishes need to be drawn into that deeper encounter with the Lord that will change and transform them, so that they may live and grow in faith 1) at home, 2) in their workplace, and 3) in the wider world.

Some of you may be wondering why we have hired outside consultants for this project. Is this a necessary expenditure? In my opinion, it is. In the final analysis, the guidance of professionals who have experienced this process in other dioceses will enable us to use best practices and avoid the “hidden landmines” that would ultimately cost us more in both time and money.

We cannot do this without one another. This planning process will require us to invest much more than money, but also prayer, time, and reflection in order to ensure that we are prepared for the future as fully and prudently as possible. I ask you, please take ownership of this effort and give your full heart and mind to it. You should know that this planning process will be the top priority for the entire Pastoral Center over the coming years. In a special way, the Office for Pastoral Planning has been established not only to develop and guide this process but also, most importantly, to offer you the support you need along the way.

I wish to thank all of you who have been involved in previous planning processes. You will note that I speak of the process we are now entering as a new phase of planning. This process, which we are calling Beacons of Light, builds on three previous planning processes: For the Harvest, Ministry 2000, and the Futures Project. I also thank the Presbyteral Council and Priestly Life

Committee whose leadership has guided our steps thus far. I am very grateful to our Archdiocesan Deans and the priests who are serving on the various work groups related to this process. Your time and talent will help ensure that Beacons of Light lives up to its name!

Thanks to each of you for your commitment to bringing this process to life, and through it to bringing our people to know and love our Lord, radiating the light of Christ in every aspect of their lives.

I invite you to envision parishes that are beacons of light. Hold this vision in your mind and your heart in those moments when leading your people through this time of change becomes difficult. Remember this intention as you prepare to celebrate Mass. Invite your people to offer their gifts and resources to create communities of faith that are beacons of light throughout the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.

I conclude by quoting from the Vatican instruction that I referenced earlier. In speaking of the need for the pastoral conversion of our parishes, it states, “In this way, the Christian community makes Our Lord’s words their own, as they spur us to ‘put out into the deep’ (Lk. 5:4), trusting in the Master as we pay out the nets in the assurance of hauling a ‘large catch.’”