

December 21, 2009

Mr. John Owens
9 W. Boulevard Parkway
Rochester, NY 14612

Dear John:

My gratitude goes to you and the other members of Eastern Greece/Charlotte planning group for the time and incredibly hard work you devoted to developing your pastoral plan. I appreciate the ways you involved pastoral councils, staff members, and parishioners in its creation and the fact that the six pastoral councils could all affirm the plan that was eventually sent to me.

I approve your pastoral plan. While it contains many elements that will build a strong future for the Catholic Church in your part of the diocese, the recommended closing of Our Lady of Mercy parish represents, I am sure, both pain and sorrow. I will take your recommendation to the Presbyteral Council as part of my own consultation before I make a formal decision to close the parish. In the meantime, I encourage the parishioners and leaders of Our Lady of Mercy to continue to remain filled with faith and to turn to Christ and one another for consolation.

Your plan recommends that five priests be assigned either as pastor or sacramental minister in a parish led by a pastoral administrator. The additional priest will be assigned to one of the four largest parishes after the pastoral leaders make a recommendation to the Priest Personnel Board. Your intent that he also be available to help in the other parishes of the planning group makes sense. Conceivably the pastoral leaders could suggest that his ministry be divided among two parishes, depending on the circumstances.

I read your section on Mass schedules with interest. I, too, am grateful for the graciousness and magnanimity of our retired priests. While you plan to make no changes in your weekend Mass schedules (other than moving a Sunday morning Mass from Our Lady of Mercy to Holy Name of Jesus), I do expect you to be ready for a time when retired priests may not regularly be available to your parishes. Therefore, for those parishes which have not already done so, by June 30th I ask pastors to work with their pastoral councils and parishioners to determine the weekend schedule they would implement if they needed to reduce their number of Masses (Holy Name of Jesus to two; Our Mother of Sorrows, St. Charles Borromeo, and St. John the Evangelist to three; and Holy Cross to four). While this Mass schedule—or a similar one depending on changing circumstances—might not need to be implemented for an indeterminate period of time, there could be an emergency situation where it would need to go into effect within a matter of weeks or months. I also ask you to help parishioners understand that they can enjoy their current Mass schedules solely because of the generosity of the retired priests serving among them. Your intention to continue to monitor the attendance at each weekend Mass makes sense and will allow individual parishes or the planning group as a whole to make decisions based on accurate information.

It is evident that the Eastern Greece/Charlotte finance committee made valuable contributions to the development of your pastoral plan. Its continued work, particularly in considering ways to increase parish revenues, will benefit the stability and growth of the parishes.

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I applaud the steps already outlined in this pastoral plan for focusing on the future. In particular, the plan for faith formation and youth ministry seems to envision a future where all of the parishes work together to offer faith formation across the age spectrum, building on the strengths of the individual parishes with the whole equaling more than the sum of the parts. In light of declining involvement in church and declining Mass attendance, your approach to evangelization seems appropriate and likely to bear fruit. Improved communication efforts will allow people within the Eastern Greece/Charlotte neighborhoods to know of the many opportunities your parishes offer.

The sections of your plan on the church elsewhere, ministry with seniors/the homebound, and the marginalized are basically carryovers from your 2005 pastoral plan. These were well written but could not be implemented because of the new work which began in 2008. I am glad that you will be able to address them now and that you are beginning to focus on how you can promote a “culture of vocations.”

Karen Rinefierd will continue to serve as your planning group liaison as you move into the implementation of your new pastoral plan. My prayers are with the people of your parishes, particularly the members of Our Lady of Mercy, during this Advent and Christmas season.

With every good wish I remain,

Your brother in Christ,

†Matthew H. Clark
Bishop of Rochester

Copies: Rev. Alexander Bradshaw
Rev. John Firpo
Rev. John Forni
Rev. John Gagnier
Ms. Karen Rinefierd
Rev. Thomas Wheeland