

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is the feast of Saint Joseph the worker as I write this letter to you. I remember when Pius XII declared this feast in 1955 to express the church's honor for the dignity of work and the worker. I was in our parish's parochial school and the sisters made a big thing of the new feast. Nearly all of us were the children of blue collar workers. Both my parents worked and the school was important to them. It was a full enrollment; there were 72 in my eighth grade graduating class. Now the school stands empty and the parish attendance, comprised mostly of older parishioners, is dwindling.

The story of that church of my childhood is the story of the church in the northeast of the United States in this early part of the 21st century. There are many reasons why we find ourselves where we are now. A migration of a more affluent and mobile, aging middle class to warmer climates, or moving as they age to be closer to offspring who have moved for work or the economy to other locations. The disaffection of younger parishioners, (generation X and millennials) for organized religion while retaining a certain sense of spirituality which, if real, is not as well defined as that of their parents and grandparents also figures in.

Although the scandals about the clergy and the manner in which they have been dealt with is a factor, there appears to be a decline in all "main-line" religious congregations. "Big box" churches, the ones you may see along the major highways, with their appeal to a younger worshipper with contemporary music and a basic but non-denominational Christian message, seem to draw a crowd, but the persistence of the worshippers is yet to be evaluated, so recent is the phenomenon.

As you have been hearing and reading for the past decade or so the Diocese of Norwich has been engaged in measures to increase the vitality of its parish communities. The decline in the number of active parishioners, financial resources and clergy all demand a fresh approach to the challenges presented by the current period in the story of the Catholic church in our area. Similar efforts have been undertaken in other dioceses throughout the US and in some foreign countries as well. We have learned from their experiences and from our initial efforts here at home.

In our diocese, fifteen parishes, including our three, will be working on consolidating into five parishes with a goal of achieving this effective July 1, the beginning of the new fiscal year. With this short timetable in mind, I have asked the diocesan finance office to perform an audit of our three parishes as well as the school and the cemetery. This will give us a clear and objectively determined "base line" as we go forward. The current members of the three Parish Finance Councils will work together to sort out the reams of paperwork necessary to effect this reorganization. Restricted gifts in existence will remain restricted for the purpose for which they were given initially. You will be kept informed at every step of the way.

A transition team will be forming over the next few weeks to hammer out the details of how we move forward while respecting where we have been and how we need to work together to move forward in enthusiasm and strength. We have already accomplished much of the coming together that other parishes in this phase of change will have to figure out. The Religious education program, the Bereavement and Visitation Ministries of Compassion, the bulletin, the website, and some combined services (Corpus Christi Mass and procession, healing services, Lenten Mission, First Penance, First Communion, etc.), to name a few, put us ahead of the curve. Whenever your input will be requested it will be respected. No anonymous suggestions, please. I always sign my letters to you. Please do me and our community the courtesy of signing yours.

No church buildings are closing. There will continue to be weekend Masses offered in all three churches of the Corpus Christi Catholic Community. The church names will not change. Neither will the names of the school or the cemetery change. I would suggest that we retain the name Corpus Christi, the name chosen years ago for the name of the cluster, to continue as the name of the combined parish but if you have suggestions please let me know.

Well, we've seen this coming for some time now. Someone commented to me not so long ago that my letters to you are "like a broken record" and I doubt they were referring to the Olympics (just referring to a record dates me. Doesn't it?). All I seem to talk about is change. Change is at the heart of the message of Jesus... change and new life. We have already made so many changes. I know not all of you are completely happy with some of them, but they are not made whimsically. We're not really "downsizing". We're getting in shape to enter into a more creative, a more challenging competition for hearts, minds and souls. We're competing with a tremendously strong, secular culture. How can we meet the needs of the old and the young? How can we serve families and individuals? How do we welcome the friend and the stranger, the prosperous and the poor, without judgement? How do we cherish the best of our past and present while remaining open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who leads us into an unknown future?

This is not the end of our journey. Our journey leads us into the heart of a God who made us for love, redeemed us in love and leads us through love to holiness. And we do not travel alone. We travel with Jesus, his blessed mother, Mary and their guardian, Joseph, and with one another. Aren't we blessed!

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Father Larry