



## ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SYRACUSE

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

October 6, 2014

Dear Friends,

I am writing to share personally with you the progress of pastoral planning in the Diocese of Syracuse. First and foremost, be assured that the spiritual lives of the people of the diocese will be well cared for today and in the future. It is not my intention to close parishes. However, that does not mean that parishes will continue to exist as they currently are. One of the greatest challenges for all of us is that parish life will not look or feel exactly the same as it has in the past. But change is inevitable and has already been taking place throughout most of our spiritual lives—change in pastors, change in parishioners, change in Mass schedules, liturgical changes, and change in ministerial roles. Change is a part of our lives and part of our growth.

Since September of 2013, parishes have been asked to work on new phases of pastoral planning entitled *Seeing Natural Bridges: Collaborative Vision Process* and *Crossing Natural Bridges*. During this time, each parish was asked to work with other parishes in their pastoral care area (PCA) to identify ways to collaborate and respond to the current challenges to parish life. As you may be aware, our diocese is faced with demographic shifts that have led to smaller Catholic populations, lower Mass attendance and less sacramental activity, economic stress and fewer clergy to staff individual parishes. However daunting these issues may seem, the fact is they are our current realities. I am confident that together we will address them in a way that will position our diocese to thrive and prosper today and in the future.

Twenty-five PCA planning groups representing the entire diocese have been meeting for over a year with the goal of submitting recommendations to me on how we can best move forward. These groups were asked to begin thinking in terms of working together as clusters instead of individual parishes. This involved looking at their missions, ministries, Mass schedules and resources.

I am grateful for the amount of time and effort our pastors and members of the PCA planning committees invested in this important process and for their attention to the work yet to be done. Reports were submitted to Msgr. James Lang, Vicar for Parishes and the Office of Pastoral Planning to review with the College of Consultors, in order to provide me with a recommended working plan by October 1.

You may be waiting for a list of announcements but plans will unfold gradually, not at one time on a grand scale. In reviewing these documents and listening to countless individuals both formally and informally, it is clear that some of our PCAs have embraced the call for change and others have more work to do. The next immediate step to our process is to meet with our clergy

and lay parish life directors in all four regions to review the recommendations. I will then share specific tasks that are to be addressed by their PCA planning groups before Christmas including the need to identify how they will work as clusters and to propose changes in their Mass schedules.

I encourage you to visit often the diocesan website, [www.syrдио.org](http://www.syrдио.org) for up-to-date information and resources on the process. Information will be printed in the Catholic Sun: [www.Catholicsun.com](http://www.Catholicsun.com), posted on the diocesan Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/DioceseOfSyracuse> and on Twitter <http://twitter.com/DioceseofSyracu>.

In closing, it is worth emphasizing that pastoral planning is ongoing and evolving. It will remain an important part of what we do as a diocese. It ensures that we have a plan in place or a mechanism to respond to unforeseen events that leave parishes without a pastor. The Office of Pastoral Planning will continue to work with each of the PCA planning groups and begin the very important work of identifying and coordinating appropriate training of much needed lay parish leadership.

Each of you is vitally important as we move forward. Your generosity and willingness to accept change and to be a part of this process both in prayer and involvement are crucial to the vibrancy of our diocese.

Please join me in prayer for openness, wisdom and understanding. May God bless you and all those you love.

Cordially yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert J. Cunningham". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Robert J. Cunningham  
Bishop of Syracuse