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Dear Brother in Christ,

I am writing regarding the bishop's decision to suppress or merge a dozen or more parishes without their consent. It is one thing when a bishop helps parishioners close a parish at the end of its life. It is quite another when the faithful (lay and clergy) diligently discern they are "vibrant," but the bishop decides "not vibrant enough."

Over the past few months, I have been meeting with dozens of parishioners from "protesting" parishes. I have seen their churches and heard their stories. My family and I belong to one of the "suppressed" parishes. We joined Historic Saint Peter, the other downtown church, more than three years ago.

We feel *duped*, not unlike Jeremiah (20,7). And all of our efforts to resolve this dilemma have been dismissed, rebuffed, or just plain ignored by the bishop's office. These claims may sound offensive, but there are no other words that describe our experience over the past several months.

Membership from protesting parishes started meeting six weeks after the letters were sent from Bishop Lennon's office last March. We chose a name – "Endangered Catholics." (www.endangeredcatholics.webs.com) We seek the reversal of decisions to close parishes that were suppressed without the consent of the membership. We continue to write letters and we have been witnessing outside the Cathedral on Wednesdays from 4 to 6PM. Most of the individual parishes have appealed to Rome. Other strategies are being considered, but it is my belief that our greatest hope rests in the several hundred thousand Catholics of this diocese. And a great deal of that hope rests in you.

I have spoken to a dozen priests and deacons in five counties about these parishes. Not one of them said the bishop's decision was "fair." Not one. They were quick to say, however, that these are trying times and that the challenge that awaited Bishop Lennon was complicated and overdue. And none of them disputed what canon law allows. But decisions as far reaching as these do not rest solely on canons. They cannot. They must include an equal measure of pastoral consideration. And it is the assessment of all who are protesting the closures that the pastoral dimension has been sorely lacking, or missing all together.

Tom Roberts from *The National Catholic Reporter* posted an interview on nronline.com on June 9. He was in Newark NJ speaking with Archbishop John J. Myers and his auxiliary from Brazil, Bishop Edgar da Cunha about their ongoing cluster process called "New Energies." +Myers, who arrived in 2001, opened with a wonderful statement: "First of all, I am very impressed and grateful for the presbyterate here. It is a very highly educated and very sophisticated and good-hearted presbyterate."

The bishop went on to speak about the cluster process in Newark: “Rather than cram it down their throats all of a sudden, I’d rather take the time and let them feel some ownership and let their ideas really have some effect on the process.”

NCR’s Robert’s reminded both bishops that, in other dioceses, plans mandated the reduction of “seven parishes to five here or five to four there.”

+Edgar da Cunha responded: “We wanted people to be part of the process because if we would just tell them Parish A and Parish B are going to merge or link and tell them what to do, we know there is going to be more resistance. We don't pretend to hold all the knowledge and truth. We need to get their input for their sake and our sake, too. That is what we started.” (The interview is lengthy, but I encourage you to read it for yourself: “Myers, da Cunha discuss problems, promise of Newark.” It is a straightforward exchange.)

In Cleveland, our cluster meetings often included such “knowledge and truth,” and final recommendations were submitted faithfully. But that is where our experience departs substantially from that in Newark.

Bishop Lennon was the architect of the clustering process he mandated in the Cleveland diocese. He designed it in Boston and ran an abbreviated version there five years ago. Sixty parishes closed and there are round-the-clock vigils in five churches waiting on their appeal to Rome. Several parishes originally slated to close have been allowed to stay open. It was, and remains, a difficult process in Boston.

On November 13, 2004 during an interview with the Boston Globe, Cardinal Sean O’Malley made a statement regarding the “Reconfiguration,” Bishop Lennon’s inaugural cluster effort. +O’Malley said: “I never imagined I would have to be involved in anything so painful or so personally repulsive to me as this [closing parishes]. At times I ask God to call me home and let someone else finish the job, but I keep waking up in the morning to face another day of reconfiguration.”

The Cardinal from Boston may be employing some Irish hyperbole in his quote, and certainly no ordinary relishes the closing of faith communities in his diocese. But here are two very different approaches. In one, the input of the faithful is sought out and respected. In the other, our voice still has no bearing. One is thoroughly pastoral, and one is not. One acknowledges the role of all the baptized to the end, and one does not. One is acceptable, and the other is not.

If the bishop still feels a case can be made for a need to downsize, we suggest a model more like that of the Newark archdiocese in which the input of the people was a determining factor and parishes were not suppressed without their consent. With the fate of a dozen parishes at stake, it is never too late to change course or start over. *Metanoia* and new beginnings are the methodology of the Gospel.

In I Corinthians 12, Saint Paul treats us to an image that sustains our sacred mission and our sacramental identity. “We are all members of one body.” He suggests that no part of the body can say to another: “I do not need you.” He goes on: “Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to

be weaker are all the more necessary.” Furthermore, he says that “if [one] part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it.” If our diocese were truly conformed to the apostle’s image, every parish should be *feeling the pain*. That does not, however, appear to be the case.

I am writing because I believe we share a collective responsibility for every Catholic in the Cleveland diocese. You and I, in our respective roles, have an obligation to address the needs of the all the members of the body, especially the parts “that seem to be weaker.” There are several canons that declare this to be the case. Here are a few:

Can. 212 §2 Christ’s faithful are at liberty to make known their needs, especially their spiritual needs, and their wishes to the Pastors of the Church.

Can. 212 §3 They have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the Church. They have the right also to make their views known to others of Christ’s faithful, but in doing so they must always respect the integrity of faith and morals, show due reverence to the Pastors and take into account both the common good and the dignity of individuals.

Can. 213 Christ’s faithful have the right to be assisted by their Pastors from the spiritual riches of the Church, especially by the word of God and the sacraments.

If you find yourself in agreement with this line of thinking, whole or in part, this is what I am asking you to consider:

1. *Bring this concern to your meetings with your peers.* Speak candidly and listen carefully.

Many of the clergy with whom I have spoken said frankly that they hesitate or are unwilling to address this issue with the bishop because they “are currently negotiating a new assignment,” “are nearing retirement,” or “were recently reminded that they promised the bishop obedience and respect.”

It would be cavalier of me to dismiss your legitimate, personal concerns. But you have undoubtedly counseled others to overcome their fears, and there is strength in numbers. And there is comfort, too.

Religious communities among us have written volumes on obedience. It makes for good order and clarity when it comes to ministering to several hundred thousand souls. But obedience, as experience tells you, does not preclude discernment on your part. It must never be blind.

2. *Find an occasion to share these comments about the cluster process with parish leadership.*

Most Catholics do not know there are other ways to address demographic shifts and diminishing resources. But all of them know that the Eucharist binds them eternally with those who gather at altars everywhere. They know I Corinthians. They have heard that Word and the preaching that followed. By your invitation, they can now explore how to put that Word into action.

Furthermore, it is my observation that many, many people (clergy included) feel the way I do about the dozen plus parishes. I believe they will feel empowered when they hear you and others voice similar concerns. Mutual support can grow exponentially.

3. *Speak up and write*: bring your pastoral expertise and experience to the discussion.

Make your voices heard. Pick a week in September, or as soon as possible, and write to Bishop Lennon. A separate letter from everyone willing to add her or his voice is better than a single letter with many signatures. Letters from children are most welcome. Jesus said something once about the leadership they can provide.

Send them as a bundle, but send individual letters. And, in a manner that is convenient for you, please let me know how many letters your parishioners sent in so we have an idea how united the diocese is on behalf of our urban and ethnic parishes.

I believe Bishop Lennon thinks the plan he crafted in Boston and brought to Cleveland is sound and “good medicine” for ailing times. We would expect no less from a spiritual shepherd than his best effort. But I also believe it is bad medicine for a diocese to allow the suppression or merger of parishes whose parishioners faithfully discerned otherwise. In the eyes of some, we may be “weaker.” In the words of Saint Paul, we are worthy of your support.

Yes, I am asking you *and* the faithful men, women, and children of this diocese to insert yourselves into this ongoing cluster process before it is done. I am asking you to believe that your lifelong experience and dedication to the Church of Cleveland provides you with a critical advantage when it comes to determining the future of this diocese. I am asking you to raise your voice and request that the bishop afford the protesting parishes the same grace he showed to Saint Colman, Saint Ignatius, and Saint Stephen. That would be fair. They must demonstrate their vibrancy. We respectfully ask for the same opportunity. No more. No less.

The end results may be the same. In four years time, perhaps all of these parishes in question will succumb to the numbers and the dollars. But at least it will be their doing, not solely that of the bishop. Your intervention may not be welcome at the bishop’s office since closing dates are on the calendar already, but a good shepherd welcomes any and every sincere offer of assistance when it comes respectfully and in charity. You know his sheep as well, if not better, than he does.

Finally, I leave you with a quote from Louis Fischer’s book about Gandhi. Of this little man who became the “Father” of the largest democracy on Earth, the biographer wrote: “His greatness lay in his doing what everybody else could do, but doesn’t.” It is not so much a quote about achieving greatness as much as it suggests that the world changes only when people with great faith do what they feel compelled to do. Any effort you can make to support the efforts of the protesting parishes *will* make a difference. For that, my friends and I will be very grateful.

Much peace,

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