



Mt. Hope Catholic Community

St. John of God / St. Francis of Assisi / St. Dominic

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

When I was asked by Bishop da Cunha last year to become the pastor of three parishes I was somewhat taken by surprise, but nonetheless accepted immediately. The surprise was compounded in sorts by the three that he had in mind: St. John of God, St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic. While I could easily see St. Francis and St. Dominic being grouped together, I didn't understand why St. John of God, a Somerset parish, would be thrown into this particular mix. A week or so later when I saw the bishop again, I asked about it. His response, quite sincerely, was that it was what the people wanted and asked for. I figured at that point that if that's what the people want and asked for, then it's going to work.

Just about as soon as I arrived, in talking with the various groups of parishioners who had worked with the Pastoral Planning office, I discovered that it was in fact not what the people wanted. Likewise, Fr. Costa who at the same time was asked to assume the pastorate of St. Thomas More, St. Louis de France and St. Patrick was also told that it was what the people wanted. His parishioners told him exactly what I was told. No one had asked for the six parishes of Somerset/Swansea to be made into these two groups or any two groups. The hope of the planning groups was for three groups of two, not two groups of three.

Almost immediately I had people suggest that the bishop had lied to me and lied to the people. Let me make one thing perfectly clear. The bishop lied to NO ONE. It has become perfectly clear to me that the bishop was simply given bad information. His intention was in fact to give the people what they wanted. When I first suggested to him that the grouping was untenable due to the vast difference between the towns of Somerset and Swansea, he was very surprised and very open minded to the possibility of unlinking St. John of God/Somerset from the two Swansea parishes. The biggest problem that the bishop faced was manpower in staffing an "un-linked" St. John of God.

We all need to understand the real need for Pastoral Planning. The number of people attending Mass on a regular basis and thus supporting parishes has dropped dramatically over the past 35 years. The number of active priests who are able to serve in a parish has dropped dramatically in the past 35 years. The number of new priests being ordained in the Northeast of our country has dramatically dropped in the past 35 years. The number of priests being ordained for traditional religious communities like the Franciscans, Dominican, Jesuits, Holy Cross Father etc., have dramatically dropped over the past 35 years. We have been retiring priests at a much greater rate than we have been ordaining them. All of these things grouped together should make clear to anyone who wants to be honest enough to look, that things have to change. We need pastoral planning that is realistic, sensible and sustainable. We do NOT need pastoral planning that is parochial, territorial, self-centered, obstinate or close minded. Things have to change if we expect to have any parishes 25 to 50 years from now. The Catholic presence in SE MA is vastly different from when I was growing up. It is vastly different from when I was ordained in 1985. It will be vastly different when I expect to retire in 2030. And for those of you, who like me, don't

particularly like change - too bad! Buck up! We can't always have what we're not entitled to. And we can't stop the future from happening.

Because Bishop da Cunha is listening and has been listening to us right along, he has agreed to un-link St. John of God from the Mt. Hope Catholic Community **for the foreseeable future**. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic parishes shall remain linked. This becomes official on Tuesday June 30, 2020. While I shall remain pastor of both St. Francis and St. Dominic, I shall cease to be the pastor of St. John of God. Bishop da Cunha has re-appointed Fr. Jason Brillhante to serve once again as the administrator of St. John.

Bishop da Cunha realized that a once vibrant St. John was, for lack of a better term "withering on the vine." His un-linking of the parish is an attempt to reverse this, which I suspect will happen with Fr. Jason. Nonetheless, the people of our three parishes, as well as of the three on the other side of Somerset/Swansea need to realize that whatever shape our parishes have today **WILL OF NECESSITY CHANGE AGAIN IN THE NEXT TEN YEARS**. We are not sustainable, any one of us, in our present form and we might as well get used to it. And no .. it's not the bishops fault. It's not my fault or the fault of a past pastor. It's simply reality that people have lost faith in the Eucharist and the need to not only go to church to worship God, but to support their respective parish families materially. We're not living in 1980, 1990, 2000 or even 2010 and we might as well admit it.

If we hope to leave a church/Church for our children and grandchildren as our parents and grandparents left for us, then it's high time we as a Catholic people pull our heads out of the sand and face reality. Parish identity is not nearly as important as Catholic identity. If we don't accept that, then we're not really Catholic in our faith. Having suitable, up-to-date and user-friendly worship spaces, fellowship halls and classrooms to educate our youth AND adults is also a necessity. Putting "band-aids" on outdated structures and throwing good money after bad rather than re-grouping with fellow Catholics for the greater good and the greater glory of God has to change. There are real challenges that face us as a Catholic people and we need to stop seeing ourselves as members of a particular parish only, at the expense of being part of a wider Church. If we stubbornly refuse to accept change because we simply don't like it, then what does that say about our commitment to Jesus? Not much!!!

I am particularly grateful to Bishop da Cunha for allowing this change to happen for the good of St. John of God parish. I want to publicly thank him for his paternal concern for this parish and the parishes of the diocese. I want everyone to know too that this was not an easy decision for the bishop. By providing for our need at this particular moment in time means one less priest to provide for the need in another part of the diocese. The bishop will ordain ONE new priest this year. FOUR priest are retiring and ONE of our active pastors died at the beginning of the year. We also have several priests, like our own Fr. Albino, who are working despite being past the current retirement age of 70.

With the un-linking of St. John of God and the return of Fr. Jason to Somerset, Fr. Albino will be returning to St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Fall River as parochial vicar to the pastor of Espirito Santo parish. He will have residence at St. Anthony. As Fr. Albino prepares to leave Somerset/Swansea and our Mt. Hope Catholic Community, I wish to likewise express a public word of thanks and appreciation to him for his work with us during this past year.

To the people of St. John of God: This past year has been a struggle for all of us. Every step along the way I have tried to be as completely honest and open with you as I could possibly be. While there may have been some missteps and misunderstandings along the way, I have nonetheless enjoyed every moment of being your pastor. As I mentioned at Masses in January, my working with the bishops office to bring about this un-linking is not because I do not want to be pastor of St. John of God, but **BECAUSE** I am pastor of St. John of God. As pastor, I wanted to see the community re-invigorated so as to be

prepared to enter the future. It is my hope and my prayer that with Fr. Jason once again, the community will grow in faith and its appreciation of its part in the wider Catholic community.

To the people of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic parishes: It's time now for us to buckle down and start making serious and realistic plans for our future. At this moment, we as the current configuration of the Mt. Hope Catholic Community stretch from parts of Somerset into all of Swansea and parts of Dighton, Rehoboth, Warren and Seekonk. We need to continue to grow spiritually strong as a Catholic people. We need to continue to help our fellow parishioners to see beyond parish identity to a wider Church identity. We need to recognize that as members of the body of Christ, we're all in this together and need to work together to see Jesus' love spread and the gospel proclaimed. We also need to recognize that we have two campuses that are in dire need of costly repair, neither of which adequately serve our needs. We need to work at rebuilding the faith and providing for space not only for our own needs, but for the greater glory of God. With God, all things are possible! And the time should be now!

With gratitude and prayer!

Fr. Hamel