

## ***For behold, I make all things new!***

*The Book of Revelation 21:5*

### **To the Parishioners of St. Bernadette, St. Catherine of Alexandria and Our Lady of Good Hope:**

The passage of time and the changes in circumstances that accompany it affect the lives of individuals, families and communities. Parishes are not immune from this. The following statement summarizes our circumstances: “We are a community of three distinct parishes working together to prepare for an anticipated reduction in pastoral leadership. We are called by the archdiocese and by our individual circumstances – both financial and human resources – to transform ourselves into something different over the coming four years.”

### **What are the archdiocese’s plans for us? What are we doing as a result?**

As many of you already know, the archdiocese’s plan for addressing the dwindling numbers of active priests entails grouping parishes into “clusters” with consolidated pastoral leadership appointed by the archdiocese. The leaders of our three parishes met last year to develop an initial, high-level “cluster” plan for the year 2020. The plan envisioned that, by then, we would share a pastor or parish director as well as some staff and some committees; that we will continue to support one school, Northwest Catholic; that we would maintain separate parish offices; and that we would have separate pastoral and finance councils, which would, however, also have joint meetings. Since then, our pastoral councils have met jointly several times to further consider our circumstances and expand on that plan.

The archdiocese expects us to take ownership of the “cluster” process. When the three councils met in January, they determined that a “steering committee” be established. This group is comprised of four individuals from each of our parishes: The pastor or parish director, the chair of the pastoral council, a trustee, and a staff member. Its role is to develop and recommend further plans for our cluster, which are to be presented to joint sessions of our pastoral councils for consideration and approval. In April, the committee recommended the drafting of a consistent message to our parishioners to inform them what is happening, and why, and what we anticipate will occur over the next several years. At the joint council meeting in May, the content, method and timing of that communication were determined. The result is this letter – the first of regular communications that will take place as events unfold and decisions are made, and that will address (to the extent possible) questions you may have in the meantime.

### **What are the factors that are driving change for our parishes?**

First of all, we anticipate changes in our parish leadership: (1) Fr. Greg’s term at St. Bernadette expires in summer 2017. (2) Fr. Mike, OLGH’s pastor, will retire in 2018. (3) Debbie Hintz, St. Catherine’s parish director, plans to retire in 2020. However, unforeseen events could accelerate any of these changes. What will happen when these events occur remains to be seen. The archdiocese assigns priests and parish directors based on availability of personnel at given points in time. The steering committee and the tri-parish pastoral councils will address the implications of such changes as they become known.

Secondly, the demographics of our parishes and our neighborhoods are also key factors. Our membership is aging. Long-time members have moved away or to retirement facilities, and many others have passed away. As our young people come of age, they move out of the neighborhood (or even farther away) in pursuit of higher education and careers. In the meantime, our neighborhood has changed drastically. Catholic families once comprised a majority of the population but now are a mere fraction of it. As a result, opportunities for replenishing our membership are limited, and we have far fewer people who are able to serve in our ministries and participate in our programs. If we are to sustain our ministries, we must pool our limited resources. At the January joint council meeting, we began considering what we can do more effectively together than we can do separately.

Finances are also a factor. Fewer and aging members result in lower income, while the costs of maintaining our facilities continue to increase. Our finance councils have been practicing good stewardship by controlling expenses to the extent possible, but shortfalls have occurred. Those have been addressed by tapping into reserves, but that is not a sustainable practice for the longer run.

**Will the consolidation of pastoral leadership affect Mass schedules?**

The answer is undoubtedly yes. We cannot place undue burdens on any of our priests, including those who are retired but able to serve in parishes. A further consideration is Mass attendance, which has been declining at all our parishes. Good liturgy requires the presence of a substantial community, rather than a small number of people who are scattered throughout the worship space. This also has implications for weekday Masses. Mass schedules will be considered jointly by the leadership of our three parishes as events unfold.

**Will parishes or sites close?**

There are no such plans at this point, but we cannot rule it out for the longer run. The sustainability of multiple sites will be a consideration. If the finance and pastoral councils decide that any sites should close, they will also have to address how our community should be legally structured, i.e., how many parishes we should be.

**The nature of Church and our future**

We recognize that these possibilities may incite discomfort or alarm. "I don't want to lose my parish or my site." But God does not reside in any particular building ("not in the dark of buildings confining," as the hymn goes) or parish; God is with, and in, his people. As much as we have emotional ties to particular places and local communities, we must recognize that our true membership is in the universal church as people of God.

With few exceptions, all parishes in the archdiocese are also becoming clusters; some are already sharing pastors and other resources as well as ministries and programs. But each situation is unique because the parishes and their circumstances are unique. We can – and must – define and build our future.

**We are already doing things together!**

We are in the midst of an evolution. As noted above, our pastoral councils have been meeting jointly and have established a steering committee. We provide two sites and support Northwest Catholic (which is now operated as a Seton school). We have a joint Christian formation program. Our human concerns committees have been meeting jointly, and our parishes have been working together in some of its programs. We have prayed together, as in our pre-Lenten mission earlier this year. There is no limit to what we can do together, and do better together! Our councils and our committees will explore further ways to come together and work together. Your ideas regarding that are welcome. Relay them to your committees and councils.

**Conclusion**

Change is difficult and challenging, but it is inevitable. The Church has gone through many changes over the centuries, but it has endured and even thrived. So it will be for our community of parishes. And change is transformative. That is why we chose the words of God that head this message: "Behold, I make all things new!"

There are questions that cannot be answered at this point, and new questions will no doubt arise as events unfold. As leaders of our parishes, we are committed not only to determining and managing the changes that are to come, but to communicating decisions as they are made and to answering questions as best we can when they arise. Please tell us of your questions and your concerns. Our plan is to provide consistent and simultaneous information to all three parishes, through various means and on a regular basis.

In the opening of this letter, we stated that we are a community of "three distinct parishes" and that we are called to transform ourselves into "something different." What we will be as a community will be determined as we move along in this process – in our journey together. To paraphrase St. Paul: We will be transformed, but what we will be has not yet been revealed.

With faith in our future as a Catholic community on the northwest side of the City of Milwaukee,

*For St. Bernadette:* Fr. Greg Greiten, pastor, and Linda Nugent, pastoral council chair

*For St. Catherine of Alexandria:* Debra Hintz, parish director, and Lynne LeMense, pastoral council chair

*For Our Lady of Good Hope:* Fr. Mike Barrett, pastor, and Edward G. Hubbard, pastoral council chair

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