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To parishioners and all the faithful of the Diocese of Antigonish,

As I celebrate the first anniversary of being installed as Bishop of Antigonish, I wish to take this opportunity to review with you some of the developments that we continue to face together as a diocese at this time. I want to offer some reflection and encouragement for us all. First and foremost, it is important for me to thank you for the ways that you have welcomed me to the diocese and have assisted me in making this my home. Thanks to the priests who have welcomed and supported me and thanks to those in parishes whom I have had the opportunity of meeting.

Since the installation last January, I have visited numerous parishes and have had liturgical celebrations in every region of our diocese. During these visits, I have discovered parishioners who have tremendous faith and who are struggling to remain faithful in these difficult times. I have also met others who are quite disturbed by the developments of this past year and some who have expressed strong disappointment and anger. I have reflected on these responses and I continue to pray that the Lord will lead us through this period of transition.

During this time, we experience numerous signs of hope as individuals and as faith communities. We see signs of a regenerated faith in those who participate in the renewal movements; in young people who participate in Challenge weekends; in lay leaders who have prepared themselves to assist in the spiritual leadership of our communities; in those who commit themselves to serve consistently in liturgical ministries; in seniors who offer constant examples of faith; in the laity who have the longing to learn more about their faith; in priests who remain faithful to serving their people even in the midst of difficult circumstances; in those who desire to bring reconciliation and justice into a broken world; in parishioners who long to grow in their spiritual lives through prayer, fasting, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and listening to the Word of God.

Particular Challenges

In the midst of these signs of hope, we have also experienced, during this difficult year, a stark recognition of the presence of sin in our whole Church, and within our spiritual leaders, especially through the sin and crime of sexual abuse by some of our clergy. As one who represents the whole diocese, I apologize to anyone who has been a victim of this abuse. Those who committed these crimes and those who did not do everything in their power to stop it, have gone against everything the Church and the priesthood represent. We are aware that so many people have suffered – first and foremost victims/survivors and their families. I have reviewed the accounts of much of this suffering

and I can attest that it has been quite devastating for all who have been victimized. Because of the actions of the few clergy who committed these crimes, all of us continue to suffer today.

As a local Church, we need to continue to have a compassionate response to victims/survivors and reach out to those who have been harmed. We acknowledge the courage of these victims/survivors who have come forward and who have told their story even after decades of feeling ignored. We need to challenge any behaviour and attitudes that lead to clergy sexual abuse. We need to ensure that leaders are accountable for their actions.

As you are aware, it has been over a year since the diocese entered the Legal Settlement Agreement as a way to provide some compensation to victims/survivors of sexual abuse by some of the clergy of the diocese. The image that assists me in this whole process is the image of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul states, when one member of the body suffers, the whole body suffers (*1 Corinthians* 12:26). This image helps us to realize that those who have been victims of sexual abuse have been deeply hurt and their lives have been changed forever. We need to continue to focus on this reality as we reflect on all the other issues associated with the Legal Settlement.

Through the experience of the collection of the liquid assets and the selling of parish properties, many parishioners have been angered and disillusioned as they see the results of much hard work being lost to the parish. This has been a difficult task for all of us. I want to thank priests and parishioners for their commitment to staying with the process that has been set out for us through the Legal Settlement. As the process has unfolded, we have attempted to keep everyone informed of the developments connected with the Legal Settlement.

Besides addressing the requirements of the Legal Settlement, we are in the process of introducing certain new developments within our parishes. The Responsible Ministry Protocol is an attempt to create an environment whereby all parishioners, especially children and vulnerable adults, will be respected and where all will be attentive to signs of abuse. The protocol provides guidelines and direction for the screening and supervision of volunteers, priests and lay staff. While some parishioners may question this protocol, most people seem to appreciate that the protocol is a prudent step which many other public organizations have also initiated. As well, the Professional Standards Committee has been revitalized, with some new members and a review of its mandate. This committee provides advice on issues of misconduct within parishes and is in the process of revising its protocol.

One of the consequences of the Legal Settlement was the realization that new ways of civilly structuring the diocese are necessary. To this end, a new corporation, the Newman Catholic Land Company, has been established as a property holding corporation for any assets that might be placed there. At present, this corporation holds the new Pastoral Centre (the former convent in Sydney Mines that was donated by the CND Sisters). In connection with this, we are also giving consideration to the incorporation of individual parishes, a move that is being considered by other dioceses in the Atlantic area.

Our Vocation Committee continues to work with those who are experiencing a call to priestly ministry. The committee collaborates with them so that they are supported as they respond to their vocation. Sandy MacDonald is our only seminarian at present, but a few other young men are expressing interest. The Committee for the Ongoing Formation of Priests makes efforts to

accompany priests along their journey, providing opportunities for continuing education and for spiritual development. This past year we had several opportunities for the priests to gather and be renewed in their spiritual life. As well, we have eight men who are in various stages of formation for the permanent diaconate. We look forward to some of them being ordained this fall. The Faith Development and Ministry Office with its graduates sponsored a conference reminding us of the fact that by baptism we all have a responsibility for the mission of the Church. The Emmaus Centre continues to support the catechetical formation of children and young people. This ministry continues to require faith filled catechists and a concerted effort on the part of every parish, so that our young people may be formed and educated in the faith. The Office of Worship has been assisting with the formation of liturgical ministries and is beginning to prepare for the implementation of the new *Roman Missal*. The Mi'kmaq had a wonderful celebration of the four hundredth anniversary with the visit of Cardinal Marc Ouellet, the special envoy from the Pope. Cardinal Ouellet subsequently promised to arrange a special audience with the Pope for the leaders of the Mi'kmaq people and the Mi'kmaq Pastoral Council is discussing this.

A new Pastoral Planning Committee has been established to assist in addressing a number of challenges that affect the quality of parish life, including the number of priests available for parish ministry, the shifts and changes in population, the reality that a number of parishes are struggling financially, and the significant decline in the religious practice of large numbers of parishioners. This committee will consider the number of churches in light of the number of priests and the number of parishioners who attend these churches. The committee will endeavor to promote future growth by considering ways of improving pastoral care to the people of the diocese.

During the year, I have met with the members of the six religious congregations in our diocese. These Sisters provide an inspiring example of witness for us all. I want to express to all of our Sisters the sincere gratitude of our diocese for their courage and commitment in journeying with everyone in prayer, and through their personal and financial support.

I have had the privilege of celebrating the Sacrament of Confirmation in many parishes in the diocese and these visits have given me the opportunity of meeting many parishioners. These parish celebrations have been very enjoyable for me as I begin to get to know the unique aspects of each parish. I have been delighted to meet young people and I appreciate their letters stating why they want to be confirmed. My vision for the diocese is that each parish would make concerted efforts to ensure that young people would be a part of our faith communities where they would receive all the spiritual support that they need for their lives.

Challenges of This Period of Transition

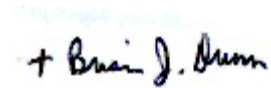
This time of transition within our diocese is much like the period when the People of Israel were leaving Egypt and moving toward the Promised land. That transition period was a time of formation for them as they grew in their relationship with the Lord. While the people were inspired by the hope and freedom of the promised land, they frequently longed for the more familiar experience and security of their time in Egypt. During their journey, many began to murmur and complain that the time of transition was not fulfilling for them.

As a diocese we are in a period of transition. Some of the characteristics of our faith communities have certainly changed and we await the kind of Church that is emerging. This period challenges

us to ask questions about our own spiritual growth, about our relationship with our Church, about the kind of Church we desire, and about our belief in the God who journeys with us at this time. Moments of crisis always give us opportunities of knowing God in a new way – as One who is creating something new in our lives and in our Church. During this past year, I have had a profound experience of God as One who is carrying us all along our journey (*Deuteronomy* 1:31). This experience of being carried by the Lord has emerged especially when people express that they are praying for me and for the diocese.

As I close this reflection, I want to share the hope that I experience, a hope captured in the First Letter of Peter: “You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials; but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendor of fire-tried gold, may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ appears” (*1 Peter* 1: 6-8). I believe that this time in our diocese is a moment of grace for us all. May we all grow in hope as we realize the Lord’s presence in our faith journey. I would also like to reaffirm my openness to being available to meet with any person who needs some time. May the Spirit of the Lord continue to guide us as we journey as a local Church and as we grow in our response of faith. I remain,

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "† Brian J. Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive style.

† Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish