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January 18, 2013

Dear Fathers and parishioners of the Northside / Victoria Deanery,

I am writing to you as a follow-up to the Pastoral Planning discussions that have taken place in the Northside / Victoria Deanery over the past year or so. These discussions have as their goal to ensure that parishioners of the entire Deanery get the pastoral care that they need for their spiritual lives. While this pastoral care is usually organized through parish communities gathered in a parish church, the reality experienced in many of our parishes makes us aware that we need some changes. We recognize numerous challenges within our diocese, including a declining number of priests, a declining and an aging number of parishioners who regularly attend church, a declining financial support, and an increase in the cost for goods and services associated with each parish. Moreover, the Legal Settlement has added a new dimension to this discussion.

Over the past several months, other deaneries have been involved in this process and parishioners have experienced hurt, anger and sadness as we move toward implementing new arrangements. We need to address the reality of the resources available (priests, finances, buildings, parishioners' support, etc.) to ensure that our parishes will be sustainable and that resources are best used to support the larger pastoral mission of the Church. The recent workshop on Team Ministry is a reminder that collaboration must be the context for providing pastoral care to everyone and that all parishes need to make efforts to pool resources and collaborate in providing the pastoral programs needed for the spiritual growth of all.

Within the Northside / Victoria Deanery, the population is decreasing and getting older and some of the sixteen parishes struggle to meet the demands that are expected in a parish that must respond to all the needs. The goal for the restructuring of our resources is to express ourselves as more living and energized Catholic communities. The following is what I view as a sustainable parish, one where people will receive more and share more of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The discussions of the Pastoral Planning Committee were done with an understanding of a sustainable parish that is based on, but not limited to, the following considerations:

- one with sufficient population to ensure a celebration of the Eucharist that has all the ministries available, and renewed, so that the liturgy will nourish all present;
- one that recognizes that within rural parishes, the church is the very center of the community, and yet the parish must serve the spiritual growth of parishioners in a sustainable way;
- one that can provide the basic ministries of word, worship, service, and leadership;
- one that can have the appropriate number of ministerial personnel, including priests,

- deacons and lay ministers (music ministry, youth ministry, etc.);
- one that has an adequate population with proportionate numbers of parishioners attending Sunday liturgies;
  - one that can extend formation to all the members of the faith community (including participation in faith development programs offered in the diocese);
  - one that can operate with the average financial contribution of parishioners;
  - one that recognizes the number of parishes nearby and the distance between parishes;
  - one where the need for pastoral care is considered (the number of baptisms, funerals, marriages, enrollment in religious education classes, presence of nursing homes);
  - one where the size and physical condition of the church and parish buildings will serve the needs of the parish;
  - one where special characteristics are acknowledged.

The Pastoral Planning Committee has reviewed earlier Pastoral Planning Reports of the Diocese, the Financials and Attendance Numbers for each parish in the Deanery, and the Demographics for Cape Breton Island. Further background to this proposal came from the parishes of the Northside / Victoria Deanery. In the Fall of 2011 representatives from each parish in the Deanery were invited to a general meeting. The challenges facing the Diocese were presented and discussed. The parishes were divided into four groups. Each group was asked to meet and to make suggestions as to how to deal with these challenges and report their suggestions back to the committee by the end of January 2012. The committee reviewed written submissions from parishes and individuals and heard from various parish groups. After carefully considering all of the responses that we received, the Pastoral Planning Committee made recommendations to me and I have formulated these recommendations into the following plan.

### **Elements of the New Arrangement**

1. A new parish will be established in Sydney Mines in June 2013 with parishioners from the present parishes of Immaculate Conception, Sydney Mines, Saint Pius X, Sydney Mines and Saint Stephen, Florence. In June 2013, Immaculate Conception, Sydney Mines and Saint Stephen, Florence will be closed and the Pius X Church will be used as the church for this new parish.
2. The pastoral grouping that includes Saint Mary's (Frenchvale), Saint Andrew's (Boisdale), Saint Barra's (Christmas Island), and Saint Columba's (Iona) and Saint Michael's (Baddeck), will undergo the following changes, effective June 2013:
  - a. Saint Mary's (Frenchvale) will remain open;
  - b. Saint Andrew's (Boisdale) will be used only for the summer months;
  - c. A new parish will be established to serve the parishioners of Saint Barra's (Christmas Island) and Saint Columba (Iona); and Saint Columba (Iona) will be used as the church for this new parish;
  - d. Saint Barra's (Christmas Island) will be closed for services;
  - e. Saint Michael's (Baddeck) will remain open for services and ongoing discussions will take place to consider how these parishioners might have further relationships with nearby parishes.
3. The pastors will meet with parishioners of the present parishes of Saint Joseph (North Sydney), Saint Joseph (Bras d'Or), the new Sydney Mines parish, Saint Joachim (Boularderie) and Saint Ann (Alder Point) to consider the following changes and to provide a report to the bishop by November 30, 2013:

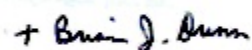
- a. while three priests and many lay people now serve these parishioners, the parishes are asked to consider how pastoral care might be organized with only two priests (or even one priest) with a pastoral team;
  - b. that the smaller parishes of Saint Joachim (Boularderie) and Saint Ann (Alder Point) consider how their faith life will be nourished in the absence of regular Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist.
4. The parishes of Saint Peter (Ingonish), Saint Margaret of Scotland (St. Margaret's Village) and Saint Joseph (Dingwall) are asked to consider ways of collaborating in the areas of finances, pastoral programs, pastoral resources, pastoral leaders, lay leadership formation, etc.
  5. Parishioners in various parishes will have a variety of responses to these plans, including a sense of loss and grief, a sense of disappointment and anger, the need to be welcomed to new churches, etc. As a large faith community, we need to assist one another as we move through this period of transition, especially by collaborating with one another. The Pastoral Planning Committee is aware of the pain that parishioners experience when facing the merger of their parish or the closure of their beloved church building. As a result, the committee made only those recommendations that were considered necessary.

At the core of our faith we deeply desire to follow Jesus Christ within the Christian community. As people of faith, we believe that the Holy Spirit can lead us in new directions. These new directions often challenge and discourage us. At the same time we recognize and believe that the Spirit guides us, and the Lord walks with us, just as He walked with his disciples. He hears our disappointment, disillusionment, sadness and anger. Yet he assists and empowers us to discover his presence even in these experiences. He helps us recognize Him in the midst of our pain and makes our hearts burn within as we become renewed and excited about our faith; His presence fills us with hope and new life. In light of the experience of living our faith, we know the present number of churches cannot be sustained; thus, we must organize our parishes to nurture our spiritual lives more deeply.

We have a deep and rich history as a Diocese with many who have given of themselves in service of the community. This continues to be so with many involved in the work of building up the church, especially with many people being involved in faith formation, in Renewal Movements such as Cursillo and the Youth Retreat Movement Challenge, and many engaged in preparation for the Diocesan Renewal Congress. These are but a few examples of how people are involved in our church and are all signs of hope for us as we face the future.

These are difficult times for all of us and yet, we need to prepare ourselves so that we can face the future with hope. We hope that we will have faith communities that will be vibrant places where parishioners can find God, care for and support one another, and grow spiritually. In this way we will be able to provide the witness that is needed as we move forward knowing that the Lord gives us the strength, courage and new life to be his disciples in our world today.

Sincerely in Christ,



† Brian Joseph Dunn  
Bishop of Antigonish