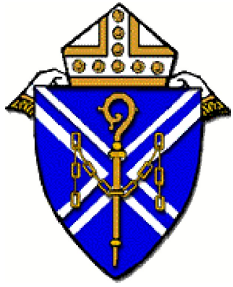


## Office of the Bishop



May 12, 2011

Dear Parishioners of the Diocese of Antigonish,

I wish to address the entire diocese on an important issue that touches all of us in some way. Since I have come to the diocese, one of my concerns is to ensure that parishioners get the pastoral care that they need for their spiritual lives. To this end, I have established a Pastoral Planning Committee to consider the most effective ways of serving the people of the Diocese through the preaching of the Word of God and the provision of the sacramental life.

By being organized as parish communities, we provide for the spiritual life of parishioners through the pastoral care offered by the pastor with the assistance of various lay people. This pastoral care is often rooted in the church building as the gathering place for the community. Throughout our diocese, we have many parish churches that were built and cared for by parishioners and have become sources of pride as sacred places where our faith has been celebrated and nourished. As we review the location of many of these churches, we realize that they were built when our population was much larger and when transportation was more limited.

Besides the number of churches, we have other pastoral planning challenges. Our population is decreasing in almost every part of the diocese mainly because of our migration and a lower birth rate. We also recognize that parishioners generally attend less frequently and support the church in a lesser way than in the past. Furthermore, the Legal Settlement has required that many surplus parish and diocesan resources have been depleted. As a result some parishes are having (or will soon have) difficulty raising sufficient funds to maintain their church structures and to meet their other financial obligations. Another challenge is that we have fewer priests available to serve in parishes and these priests have a higher average age. In 1996, 82 diocesan priests (with an average age of 55.9) served the needs of our diocese, while in 2011, 50 diocesan priests (with an average age of 61.2) serve the needs of the diocese. Furthermore, in 2016 we expect that we will have only 44 diocesan priests available for full time ministry by 2021, we expect to have only 30.

In light of these factors, the Pastoral Planning Committee will be undertaking a consultation over the next year or so in each Deanery of the Diocese with a view to see how we can best respond to our present situation. There are options available. Perhaps we will need to consolidate parishes and create larger pastoral units which could be more viable. These larger units could have pastoral teams made up of ordained and lay people. The diocese has many lay people trained to help with the ministry in our parishes. This might be one way in which we could proceed. The deanery consultations may discover other ways whereby we might deal with our present pastoral challenges.

I recognize that over the past number of years there have been consultations of this nature throughout the diocese. However, I would point out that this process has as its end goal, the development of a specific action plan which is to be implemented throughout the diocese.

Our faith has been passed on to us by those who have gone before us, and we are invited to nurture our faith with all the resources that we have. At the same time, we are called to continue to pass on this renewed faith to those who come after us. The challenge that we face today is to make the appropriate changes so that we will have stronger, more viable parishes with richer and stronger faith communities.

With generous and discerning hearts and with a commitment to what is best for the church, we will be able to meet these challenges together. I pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us as we move through this pastoral planning process.

† Brian Joseph Dunn  
Bishop of Antigonish