



24 May 2024

*Friday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Bishop Koenig has blessed us, in our great apostolic tradition, with a pastoral letter, the second such letter related to the Pastoral Planning Initiative here in the Diocese of Wilmington. It is included here for your prayerful and thoughtful reflection.

Our local (diocesan) church has been engaged in an important time of deliberation. As the Church of Wilmington is spread over a large geographic area and has varying needs in its urban, suburban and rural regions, the bulk of the work of this planning has taken place in administrative units of the diocese called deaneries. Saint John the Beloved is a part of the Central New Castle Deanery along with the parishes of: Saint Mary of the Assumption (Hockessin), Saint Catherine of Siena (Wilmington), Corpus Christi (Elsmere), Saint Matthew (Newport), Holy Spirit (New Castle), Saint Peter (New Castle), Our Lady of Fatima (New Castle) and Saint Paul (Delaware City). A Deanery Leadership Team composed of representatives of each parish has been meeting with our dean, Father Joe Piekarski, to develop the goals for our local area guided by the best practices identified in the synodal process and the needs assessment that included the survey that we participated in this past autumn.

The goals identified for our Deanery are: (1) increasing youth engagement, (2) reengaging non-participating Catholics and (3) building a better sense of community. Designated members of the Leadership Team as well as some others have met to come up with proposed action steps for these three goals and the Leadership Team is in the process of reviewing those recommendations. I was present for the Leadership Team meeting earlier this week, grateful to have been invited by Father Joe to learn more about how the process is unfolding. I am very impressed by the hard work being done by the dedicated lay people from our part of the diocese serving on this team. They are doing so very well in coming up with practical ideas for how we might cooperate with the Holy Spirit in building up our parishes and our local Church so that we might be able to pray and serve well. I want to especially thank our representative, Kelly Anne Donahue.

As the proposed steps are solidified, I look forward to sharing them with you and together praying and reflecting on how we, the Saint John the Beloved parish community, may engage in this important work.

In this pastoral letter, our bishop reflects on the “dramatic transformation” of the Apostles “...generated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.” May we be open to the ways the Holy Spirit seeks to transform us! A pastoral letter is a special way in which our shepherd encourages, instructs and guides us. Please take the time to read his letter, pray for the success of this planning initiative, and ask the Holy Spirit to inspire us to be a part of the good things that will come from it.

I pray that you may have a restful Memorial Day weekend. As we celebrate the great Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, may almighty God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless and keep you always!

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "(Rev.) Michael Christopher Vannicola". The signature is written in a cursive style.

(Rev.) Michael Christopher Vannicola  
Pastor

# GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT

The Ongoing Efforts of Our Pastoral Planning Initiative

## UNITED IN CHRIST

**MOST REVEREND WILLIAM E. KOENIG, M.S.W, D.D., BISHOP OF WILMINGTON**



**To the laity, members of institutes  
of consecrated life, and the clergy  
of the Diocese of Wilmington:  
Greetings in the name of the Risen Lord.**

### Introduction

**R**ejoice, for today we celebrate Pentecost, the great Feast which brings to a conclusion our 50-day celebration of Easter. During our Masses in the Easter Season the first readings have come from the Acts of the Apostles. This essential book in the New Testament which is attributed to St. Luke is a witness to the enduring legacy of the Apostles, who played instrumental roles in shaping the early Church. It chronicles the trials, tribulations, and the victories of Peter and Paul and their companions. The description of the Apostles in Acts is strikingly different than what we find in the four Gospels. In the Gospels, the Apostles are shown as hesitant, imprudent, and often dim-witted but in the Acts of the Apostles, these same followers of Jesus are depicted as bold, confident, and articulate. This dramatic transformation was



Bishop Koenig places hands upon Dennis Stameza during his diaconate May 11 at St. John the Beloved Church in Wilmington. Dialog photo/Don Blake

generated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. During the Last Supper, Jesus promised His Apostles that He would not leave them as orphans. He assured them that His Father would send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to remind them of what He had taught them. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that animated those early Apostles and disciples and gave them the confidence, the vision, and the faith to proclaim the Gospel everywhere. The same Holy Spirit has guided our Church for nearly 2000 years and continues to direct us to and unite us in Christ. It is clear to me that the Holy Spirit has been active in our prayers, discernment and good work throughout the last year of our pastoral planning initiative, United in Christ. I wish to share with you some of the progress that has been made.

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## Walking Together

It all began in 2021 when the Diocese of Wilmington joined with thousands of dioceses throughout the world to participate in synodal listening sessions as part of the first phase of the Synod on Synodality, holding more than 67 gatherings with more than 1,400 participants. The fruit of this extraordinary initiative was a 16-page report which culminated in the identification of 10 best practices for parishes. This expansive and diverse consultation presented us with a unique opportunity to examine the vibrancy of our parishes and diocesan ministries. A desire for more vibrancy in our ministries was the genesis of our pastoral planning process, United in Christ.

As I expressed in my previous pastoral letter, it was important to me that our pastoral planning not be a top-down process. If we are truly United in Christ, then we all must have the opportunity to actively participate in shaping the future of our Diocese. While a Core Diocesan Leadership Team was established which provided oversight and coordination, in a spirit of synodality, regional teams were formed in all 7 deaneries throughout the diocese. These “Deanery Leadership Teams” were comprised of parishioners, lay leaders, and clergy who were asked to imagine what increasing vibrancy might look like in their particular region. Each Team was tasked to



Participants in the listening process. Dialog photo/Connie Connolly

develop a pastoral plan to present for inclusion in a diocesan-wide pastoral plan.

## Forging Our Shared Future

The Deanery Leadership Teams began with the design and implementation of a needs assessment tool for each deanery. The purpose of the needs assessment was to ascertain what each parish needed in order to increase vibrancy and encourage full, active, and conscious participation. Every deanery chose to implement their own unique survey which allowed parishioners to express their feelings and ideas about the vibrancy of their parishes. With thousands of parishioners participating around the diocese, a pattern of ideas and goals began to emerge.

For example, the surveys revealed an insight that unfortunately should come as no surprise

and that is the noticeable absence of youth and young adults in our pews along with the scarcity of parish-based programs and events specifically geared to them. Survey participants also expressed concern for the growing number of lapsed Catholics and “Nones,” those who claim no religious affiliation. Guided by the needs assessment results and the list of 10 best practices from the Diocesan Phase of the Synod on Synodality, each Deanery has articulated attainable goals that they would strive to achieve.

The work that has been accomplished during the past year by the Deanery Leadership Teams, the Core Leadership Team and the Deans has been nothing less than extraordinary. I have been most impressed by the high level of communication and cooperation demonstrated everyone involved in this undertaking. I am most grateful for the dedication

and enthusiasm of the many talented people who have and continue to be a part of this process. The bottom-up approach to pastoral planning took some getting used to but through a great deal of prayer and discernment of the Spirit, we have been brought to an exciting moment filled with opportunities for grace, stronger communities, and increased evangelization and participation. The fruits of this work go well beyond our United in Christ Pastoral Plan as it has given us a process for continued and future discernment and collaboration as a diocese.

## Building Capacity

In addition to the development of this pastoral plan, we needed to make sure that our diocesan leaders and administrative offices have the tools and capacity they need in order to support the implementation of the pastoral plan.

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Bishop Koenig blesses the host during Holy Thursday Mass at the Cathedral of St. Peter Church, March 28, 2024. Dialog photo/Don Blake

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I, along with the Deans and my senior staff took part in Catholic Leadership 360, a leadership development tool which gave us insights as to our strengths and areas for growth as leaders of this initiative. I also engaged the Leadership Roundtable, our partners in ministry, to conduct an evaluation of our central administrative offices to aide us in our efforts to build capacity and efficiency.

### Vision to Action

I have approved all the goals that

were submitted to me by the Deanery Leadership Teams. I find them to be worthwhile, reasonable, and achievable. The next step will be for the Deans to establish small teams to implement their chosen objectives. Implementation will make the goals concrete and will recommend specific steps that deaneries and parishes can take in order to bring their goals to fruition.

As we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, there is indeed reason for us to rejoice for it instills hope by demonstrating the ongoing presence and power of the Holy Spirit

to inspire, guide and transform lives, bringing about positive change and renewal within individuals and communities. Just a few weeks ago at the Easter Vigil, 238 people throughout the Diocese of Wilmington were welcomed into the Catholic Church. This is but one example of how the Holy Spirit continues to ignite the hearts of those who seek a deeper relationship with the Lord.

I encourage the faithful of our Diocese to tap into the Gifts of the Holy Spirit to inquire about how to get involved in their particular deanery/parish initiative.

And to do so with the same enthusiasm as we see the Apostles do in Acts, impelled and infused with the same Spirit who works as strongly today as at the first Pentecost.

**Given in Wilmington, Delaware,  
at the Chancery Office,  
on the 19th day of May  
in the Year of Our Lord,  
two-thousand and twenty-four,  
Pentecost Sunday.**

*+ William E. Koenig*

**Most Rev. William E. Koenig,  
M.S.W., D.D.  
Bishop of Wilmington**



**DIOCESE of** | **UNITED**  
**WILMINGTON** | *in Christ*

Pastoral Planning for Our Parishes and Schools