The Mission of the Contemporary Parish
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Part I – Introduction to the Mission

I am pleased to join with you for this annual Symposium for Diocesan Coordinators of Parish

Services. You gathered are invaluable resources in our contemporary church, helping not only your own dioceses and their parishes but dioceses and parishes throughout the country and beyond. In so doing you are truly beacons of light, anchors of hope, vessels of caring

and instruments of justice in a church, society and world which desperately need such. So I welcome this opportunity to thank you for your sterling contribution to our contemporary church.

Today I have been asked to reflect upon the mission of the parish at the outset of the new millennium. Talk about carrying coals to Newcastle! No one knows more about the mission of the parish and how to nurture and foster that mission than the people in this room. Through the work of the National Pastoral Life Center, the articles devoted to parish life in Church magazine and the hands-on experience in promoting parish life as diocesan and pastoral leaders, you assembled have more experience in grappling with the mission of the contemporary parish and how to enhance that 2 mission than anyone else. So today I will not try to give answers to questions about the mission of the contemporary parish but merely offer a few observations

that hopefully will serve to prime the pump for a meaningful exchange among yourselves

about your insights, expectations, hopes and vision for the mission of today's parish.

I have chosen to approach my presentation this afternoon by reviewing some of the points I
outlined in a little book I authored in 1998 titled Fulfilling the Vision, a book which reflects on the nature of the contemporary parish. After citing what I wrote then, I will propose what I would cast differently today in light both of the personal and ecclesial experiences of the past seven years. In 1998 I noted that some today gloomily predict the demise of the parish or suggest that the parish structure has become obsolete or irrelevant to the needs of today.
Quite frankly, I hold quite the opposite assumption, namely, that while the parish has
problems, its structure is more needed today than ever before, and it will remain as a hub or center of the church's life. I stress the need for the parish today and in the future because with the growing number of forces undermining the stability of family life and with the increasing mobility of our society with its concomitant fruits of isolation, alienation and 3 depersonalization, there is less structure within our nation for people to come together and to support each other through mutual interdependence. Yet the basis of our Christian faith and indeed of healthy human living depends upon this mutual interdependence, upon our willingness to be aware of and concerned about one another. The parish is the place where this interdependence can and should happen, the place where support systems for Christian formation and Christian living must constantly be developed and fashioned in light of changing needs and changing circumstances. This does not suggest, of course, that all parish communities must function in the same way or that the style of parish life in the future must be predicated on the past. Indeed forms of parish life must change and be ever responsive to the changing communities and people they serve. There will always be need, however, for tangible structures whereby people can experience the loving presence of God and

build genuine community by sharing God's redemptive and liberating love with others. That structure can be the parish community. And the ultimate purpose of the structure we call the parish is to bring people into contact with Jesus Christ and the good news he proclaimed, and to enable people to witness to

common faith, love and worship, which the parish members share in communion with Jesus and one 4 another. Jesus, therefore, must be the focus of the parish's life. It is his mission that the parish must be about, his message that it must strive to communicate to others, his ministry that its members must seek to extend into the world. If

this is not the case, if the Jesus dimension is not the central thread interwoven throughout all of the parish's life and activities, and his Gospel values are not the ultimate norm and criterion by which its decisions are made and against which its results

are evaluated, then the parish is little different in scope and purpose than that of a neighborhood association or fraternal organization. And its activities, successful as they may be from a humanitarian or fiscal perspective, will fail to impart the life-giving power, strength and inner peace that Jesus alone can give and for which people today are desperately hungry and thirsty.

I still stand by this assessment, but today I would place even greater emphasis on the centrality of Jesus for the parish's mission. At times, unfortunately, it seems that the person of Jesus gets lost in translation. Our better parishes do a great job in exegeting the Scriptures, in explaining our creedal statements and moral positions, in sacramental preparation, in advocating issues of social justice, and in fostering a sense of service and community, but at times our people, while well informed, well motivated and well intentioned, wind up acting more on the basis of

knowledge, altruism and enthusiasm for a cause than out of love for a person.

Important as such knowledge and information may be for a person's understanding of faith and religion, however, they are not the heart of discipleship. Rather, discipleship is about the surrender of our life to Jesus as the person whom we seek to follow and imitate.

Father Gerald Vann, the renowned writer and preacher, once shocked his audience when he said, "I don't believe in the dogmas, doctrines and teachings of the Catholic Church," Then pausing, he added, "Rather, I believe through them in the living reality beyond, in the person of Jesus Christ."

These words tell us, I believe, what we need among our parishioners in this third millennium of the Christian era. For it is possible to be a disciple, to give a loving response to Christ's invitation to come follow him, only if we have truly met Jesus and responded to his presence in a personal way,

Today's parishioners, then, must learn how to enter the mystery of Jesus, seeing how his life, his words, his temptations, his choices, his facing death, and his overcoming death relate to the demands of the day, to the needs of God's people and to the fears of our contemporary world and society. Our parishes, then, must do a better job in helping people understand that Jesus is present to

them here and now, walking the path of discipleship along with them.

To most people it matters little that Jesus walked on water some 2,000 years ago and that Peter walked with him. What matters to them, however, is to know that when they are sinking, this Jesus in whom they have put their faith and trust will lift them up. What matters to them is

whether they can muster the courage to step out of the boat and into the storm. What matters to them is whether they can invite others to take bold new steps into unfamiliar territory, with confidence in this Jesus.

Pastoral leaders, therefore, must constantly emphasize how all of the parish's worship, faith formation and social services are related to the mission of Jesus. The lector at Mass, for example, must be helped to appreciate that he or she is proclaiming God's holy word and that when this word is read with clarity, sincerity and conviction, it has the power to touch lives and change hearts. The woman who is preparing youngsters for first communion and the man who is instructing the confirmation candidates must recognize that they are not just helping out because there has been a decline in vocations to the ordained and vowed life, but they must understand that this is a way of fulfilling their baptismal call to holiness and ministry, and the command of their brother Jesus "to go forth and proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth." The members of the pastoral council must appreciate that they not only have

responsibility to see that the parking lot is paved and the annual bazaar conducted, but that they share responsibility for making the mission and ministry of Jesus tangible and real at this particular moment in history and in this particular place.

So, too, must the music, youth, eucharist and bereavement ministers, those preparing couples for marriage, those exercising the ministry of hospitality, or those working in the parish soup kitchen, food pantry or thrift shop, or those engaged in outreach to the elderly, AIDS sufferers, gays and lesbians or the unchurched.

And each moment spent, each gift shared, each contribution made is a real participation in and extension of the mission of Jesus. It is only

when this is fully understood that one's participation in the life of the parish can be transferred from a rather begrudging and perfunctory fulfillment of a burdensome task and responsibility into an exciting, challenging and spirit-filled adventure that truly makes Jesus alive and present in our day.

Part II – Characteristics of Parishes that are most Vibrant and Successful

In *Fulfilling the Vision* I cited the characteristics of parishes that are most vibrant and successful. They are the same characteristics that were identified by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Parish Project, done in conjunction with the National Pastoral Life Center, 8 as ingredients contributing to healthy, mature, spiritually alive faith communities.

In an abbreviated form these characteristics are: first, good liturgy and preaching. People earnestly desire worship services which help them to pray well and preaching which gives meaning to their faith lives. Second, the ability of the parish to help people deal practically with their life concerns, such as alcohol and drug abuse, poor schools, crime and safety issues, unemployment and job stability, and especially their concerns about family and children. Third, a feeling of ownership on people's part, a feeling that they belong, that their concerns are being listened to and that they have had the opportunity to affect parish policy and practice. Fourth, an alive quality to the parish; the sense that something is going on, that there is something happening for everyone.

I would submit that these characteristics of a healthy, mature, spiritually alive parish community have not changed in the past decade. But let me share an experience I had last fall.

A few years ago I was celebrating a Saturday afternoon vigil Mass in a parish composed mostly of middle-class families in that first ring of

suburbs developed following World War II. The liturgy was superb and well planned, with excellent lectors, splendid contemporary music, a worship environment suitably appropriate for the occasion and a sterling homily which applied the Scriptures meaningfully and engagingly to the

theme of the day.

I also know from other visits to this parish that this was not an exceptional liturgy, enhanced for the occasion because the bishop was present, but typical of the type of carefully planned liturgies celebrated in this parish where the environment, music and homily are designed and coordinated to communicate a cohesive message relevant to the theme of the Scriptures and the liturgical season.

I thought to myself, "What more could people be looking for in a parish liturgy?" A welcoming environment; a well-choreographed service; maximum lay involvement, wonderful music, and a homily that informed, challenged and pulled all the elements of the liturgy in a cohesive whole. Yet the pews were only half filled, the collections in the parish had gone flat and within six months the school, which had been such a viable part of the parish since its inception in the late 1950s, had closed its doors.

I don't know all the reasons for these latter realities, except to conclude that good liturgy, indispensable as this is for a vibrant and vital parish, is not enough. I would, however, ask several questions. How carefully had the parish been assessing its environs? For example, the percentage of elderly to youth? Had too many parish resources been directed to the school, when the core parishioners are now grandparents without

children? While the music was great, it was contemporary, yet the congregation was primarily

composed of seniors. Should there be a different style of music, especially for the vigil Mass, which for a variety of reasons tends to attract a greater percentage of seniors?

In other words it is not enough to have one or two of the characteristics for a quality parish, but all four must be present and interrelated with one another. This demands constant assessment and reassessment of what's happening demographically and whether the programs and services once deemed valuable and responsive to community needs are now still appropriate and relevant. Sometimes, for example, an old guard can gain grip on the pastoral council and parish committees, and remain content to go with the tried and true, without realizing that the community and its needs have changed significantly or without being willing to yield responsibility for parish leadership to those who may have a better pulse on contemporary realities.

This leads me to say a word about parish or pastoral councils, which I believe to be absolutely essential for a vibrant parish community but which for the most part continue to be in an infancy stage of development, mired in tensions over power, authority and control, and more concerned about winning these battles than enhancing the mission of Jesus.

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Hence, for our councils to become the collaborative and visionary structures they are meant to be, we must continue in our efforts to move from strictly business boards to a community of servant leaders; from decision-making groups that happen to pray to prayerful communities that have to make decisions; from crisis management to long-range planning and stewardship of gifts and resources; from parochialism to outreach; from rule by an elite group to participation and ownership for decisions by many parishioners; from "we

have always done it that way" to creative re-centering; from damaging conflict situations to a recognition of the need for healing; from a dualism that assigns spiritual matters to the priests, deacons and religious and temporalities to the laity toward a shared responsibility for the total mission of the church by all.

Some of our parish councils have begun to assimilate these concepts, and others, quite frankly, are backsliding. The key, as always, is pastoral leadership. Without the pastor or parishlife director articulating and promoting a collaborative approach, what I just described simply as the ideal cannot happen. On the other hand, when our pastoral leaders empower council participation and when our council members truly root themselves in the message and mission of Jesus and devote as much time and effort to being as to doing, the result is that the doing is so much more effective and the council experience itself so much more enriched.

Part III – Challenge for the Parish: Evangelization

In listing the practical challenges confronting parishes in my 1998 book, first and foremost I cited that of evangelization. I noted that there is not a listening session I have had over the years with laity, religious or priests when the question of evangelization didn't surface as the No.1 priority on people's minds.

Oh, they may not use the word *evangelization*, of course, but people universally express concern about the growing number, especially among the young (40 and under), for whom faith and religion are no longer on their agenda or for whom private *spirituality*, however that term is defined, has replaced any bonds with a local parish community.

I would say that this issue of responding to the alienated, the fallen away and the unchurched continues to be the No.1 challenge confronting our church and the

parish. The critical question, however, is how do we respond effectively and constructively?

Unfortunately, I'm afraid that our initial approach tends to be programmatic. We have Follow Me, or RENEW, or Go Make Disciples, all of which provide excellent methodologies and content, but all of which presume some commitment on the part of participants to engage in a structured program -with

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teaching, peer mentoring and socialization - usua l l y conducted at determined times and places. And G o d forbid if you are not free on a Sunday morning or Tuesday evening or whenever the "program" is held. As a matter of fact, Father Frank DeSiano, the president of the Paulist community and an expert on evangelization, has suggested that the biggestobstacle to people reconnecting with the parish community is the inability to meet the preordained parish schedule for receiving new members or for linking up with those who have drifted away.

There are four movements to evangelization as found in the Gospel: *koinonia*, friendship; *diakonia*, service; *kerygma*, proclamation; and *eucharistia*, thanks and praise.

Evangelization, then, is first and foremost an exercise in communication and developing relationships. All communication and relationships must begin with listening; otherwise we end up talking to and communicating with ourselves. Therefore, we must recognize that even if we get no farther then the first thrust of this process (friendship and service), we are evangelizing. And when we look at the mission of the parish we need to give special attention to our performance on these first two.

For example, when Jesus cured the Syro14 Phoenecian woman's daughter (Mk. 7), he gave the

mother what she asked for, then sent her home happy. He didn't say, "I'll see you at the synagogue on Saturday."

The priest psychologist Father Desmond O'Donnell of Maynooth Seminary in Ireland observes that "alienation is the pathology of our age." So many people in our contemporary society live on the margins. The search for meaning - what does it mean to be human - is the religious question of the day, and young people in particular are asking it.

However, Father O'Donnell suggests that what young people need first is not faith-formation programs or ritual but the mutual support of a community. In short, young people and those not so young may not be interested in embracing the third or fourth steps of evangelization - proclamation and the eucharist - because they have not experienced the first step: friendship.

The fact is, we can help people connect or reconnect with the parish and the church only insofar as we have befriended and loved them. After all, God didn't appear to talk to us. God came down in the person of Jesus and lived among us: washed our feet, cried with us, laughed with us, drank our wine and touched our world. He especially touched the people on the edge, the poor, who today are those with no meaning in their lives and, therefore, the poorest of all.

What I would add, then, to my 1998 observation about the challenge of evangelization is that it's not so much a lack of programs or resources that is at the heart of the problem, but a lack of relationships, both in terms of our people being willing to engage others in their search for meaning and of being confident that such an engagement is not so much a matter of having answers to questions they may have or providing programs for their information and edification, but

evangelization is a matter of being willing to listen, to understand and to walk with them in their spiritual quest.

In this regard I would note the fastestgrowing Christian churches in our nation are the evangelical denominations. There are many features of their attraction to people which I do not believe we in the Roman Catholic community would want to emulate: a "God and me" approach to spirituality; a failure to recognize complexity in moral decision making; a tendency to engage in shrill and righteous denunciations of those with whom they disagree; a rather simplistic ABC approach to salvation, just to mention a few. But we can learn much from evangelicals about creating an environment of welcome and hospitality; of fostering lively community and giving members a sense of belonging and ownership; of making stewardship of time, talent and treasure a genuine way of life; and of motivating members to engage in outreach to and recruitment of new members.

One evening last month I had Mass with the seminarians at our discernment house where four candidates for the priesthood reside while doing college studies in philosophy. The house itself is the former rectory of a parish that closed two years ago. The church was sold to an evangelical Lutheran community. As I sat in the living room in the midst of an ice and sleet storm, I watched 30 to 40 young people and three adults troop into the church basement for an evening experience of Bible sharing. The seminarians told me there are activities in the church every evening, seven days a week, and that the collection from their congregation of 30 families (approximately 120 people, including children) averages $3,000 per week!

Further, the pastor, his wife and half the congregation are former Roman Catholics who

probably would have been outraged if their Catholic parish had made such demands on them. What's wrong with this picture? What is very wrong, I believe, is that our people are afraid to engage in the evangelizing process because they associate evangelization with the pushy tactics of the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the God-on-my-sleeve approach of some born-agains, or the blatant hucksterism of some of the televangelists - all of which coalesce to give evangelization a bad name among Catholics. And this has led to a loss of energy, zeal and an enthusiasm for sharing our faith heritage with others.

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This awkwardness or uncomfortability, I believe, is why we in our Catholic Christian community have had such difficulty in coping with the growing trend toward fundamentalism within our society and why our efforts at evangelization have generally been unsuccessful. It is also why our response to the call of our recently deceased, Holy Father Pope John Paul II for a new evangelization is so urgent and critically important.

Yes, the insights of our Holy Father, coupled with that of documented research, reveal conclusively that people today are longing for someone to share faith and spirituality with them; for someone to be open and vulnerable, willing to take the time and to run the risk of initiating the evangelizing process.

Thus, I am convinced that in the new millennium, through a person-to-person, peer-topeer approach to sharing faith with others, we can break the quiet, reserved, privatized posture and the programmatic response to evangelization that have tended to characterize American Catholicism and offer a dynamic new approach to evangelization - one that is not coercive, that is not flamboyant or hysterical, one that does not engage

in spiritual mugging, if you will, but an approach that emanates from the love of the Lord and the movement of the Spirit within us, and that responds to the call to discipleship that has been given to each of us.

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In emphasizing this call to evangelization, I am not unmindful of the problems, difficulties and challenges that confront us. We are a sinful people and live in a church that is ever in the process of reformation and renewal. And because of such, there are some who would maintain that the time is not ripe for evangelization, especially in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse scandals; that we should wait until either we personally or the church at large is in exemplary spiritual condition, with all questions and doubts resolved and all living in perfect harmony. But as Father Alvin Illig, the great promoter of evangelization, so rightly said: "For 2,000 years the church has never been in perfect order and never will be. Christ told us to preach the good news of hope and salvation, but he also told us that there will be obstacles to plague our steps. If we wait for the perfect time, either for ourselves personally or for the church as a whole, we will wind up doing nothing at all."

Part IV – Parochialism and the Parish
(What does this have to do with me)

Another challenge which I mentioned only in passing seven years ago, which I would highlight more today, is parochialism. Too many parishes are concerned only with their own immediate local needs and fail to appreciate fully that they are part of a diocesan community and the universal church, and hence are called to be responsive to the needs, concerns and priorities of

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the wider community beyond the parish's own mission. The parish, in other words, must pursue its mission as part of the overall mission of the

universal and diocesan church, not as a separate, isolated entity.

It was precisely this type of isolation and separation from the wider church for which Paul chastised severely the church at Corinth, and this lone ranger syndrome, if you will, remains deeply ingrained in many contemporary parishes.

Combating this parochial elitism and isolationism becomes particularly significant, of course, in addressing the challenge facing almost every diocese today: staffing and serving parishes in light of the severe decline of vocations to the ordained and vowed life. Some parishes need to close because they no longer have a legitimate mission. But even those parishes which remain vital and viable will be able to survive only if they are willing to collaborate with neighboring parish communities in joint articulation of mission, in sharing personnel and resources and in programming together, for example in marriage preparation, youth ministry, the operation of food pantries, social service programs, etc.

We can no longer cater to parochial convenience. For example, in the city of Albany we have 14 parishes and 14 Saturday vigil Masses, all at 4 p.m. Most of these parishes are within five minutes of their neighboring parish and providing liturgies in churches that are only at 30 percent to

40 percent occupancy. Meanwhile, we have rural parishes which are facing priestless weekends and suburban parishes that can't assimilate the numbers of people attending liturgies.

However, if we had only four parishes with Saturday afternoon vigils in the city of Albany, we could easily accommodate all the Mass goers and free up 10 priests to celebrate needed Masses in the suburban and rural communities. Of course, there would have to be all kinds of negotiations about which parishes would have the Saturday

afternoon vigils, how to assist those parishes which would lose revenue without a vigil Mass, which priests would be willing to travel and how to communicate to parishioners the reason for such changes. This type of cooperation will be needed as well in any kind of restructuring and reconfiguration for parishes within the diocese.

Part V – Ecumenism

Another additional emphasis I would give in a contemporary reflection upon the parish, and an important antidote to what I have just said about parochialism, is ecumenism. Not only is ecumenism necessary for fulfilling the prayer of Jesus on the night of the Last Supper, "May they all be one, Father, as you are in me and I am in you; may they be one in us that the world may truly believe it is you who have sent me" (Jn. 17:21), but very pragmatically we can learn much from our fellow Christians about how best to fulfill the various dimensions of the parish's mission. For

example, from the fundamentalist churches we can learn reverence for the sacred Scriptures. From the evangelicals we can learn love for Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. From the Orthodox churches we can be moved by the splendor of their liturgy, with its focus on the transcendent. From the Mormons we can be inspired by their missionary zeal. From the conservative branch of the so-called mainline churches we can begin to appreciate the value of tradition, and from the liberal branch the importance of social action. And from the small storefront churches we can learn the need for intimacy and the value of belonging. It is important, then, that as we reflect upon the mission of the contemporary parish we keep the ecumenical dimension in focus. By way of illustration, in planning for building new churches or parish edifices do we consider seriously sharing facilities with other Christian denominations or

entering into joint building projects? Do we engage in joint staffing for youth ministry ventures or for rendering services to the elderly, poor, addicted and incarcerated? Is there a specific Protestant, Orthodox or Roman Catholic way to operate a food pantry, to counsel an alcoholic, to transport the elderly for a doctor visit or shopping? Of course not! Therefore, for the clarity of our witness and for the effectiveness of our service, more and more of our parishes must be looking for opportunities to partner ecumenically in addressing the great social issues of our day:

war, terrorism, economic disparity both nationally and globally, family breakdown, sexual and environmental exploitation and gender identity, as well as the spiritual ills of hedonism, individualism, consumerism and secularism that can corrupt the spirit and the progress of understanding life's ultimate meaning and fulfillment.

The recent presidential campaign demonstrated there is a great concern on the part of many Americans about moral values. But what precisely do people mean by this convenient catchall phrase moral values?

Are moral values only applicable to issues like same-sex marriage, embryonic stem-cell research and abortion, or are not moral values also at stake in decisions about war, in drawing lines against torture, in addressing poverty or in providing desperately needed housing and health care?

It is illustrative to note that for every injunction in the Bible regarding sexuality, there are hundreds regarding care for the poor. All of human life, not just sexual matters or personal behavior, is shot through with moral and ethical issues.

However, as Peter Steinfels, the religious columnist for The New York Times, notes, "While

it is necessary to enlarge the framework for the discussion of moral values, it is another thing to equate the so-called moral values voters with Jihad-driven Muslim terrorists or to imply that

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their concerns are merely a disguise for ignorance, irrationality and intolerance."

What is needed, I would submit, is civil and informed discussion on these polarizing issues. And where better to foster this type of constructive dialogue than within our parishes and between our churches?

I emphasize this point because more and more in our contemporary society tolerance, moderation and a commitment to healing, reconciliation and the search for common ground seem to be in short supply. This polarization is epitomized, I believe, by in-your-face journalism or by shock radio and TV hosts.

In varying degrees, we are all caught up in it. We have all been affected by and perhaps have contributed to the environment of anger, resentment and hostility that poisons the debate, polarizes the options and prevents us from finding real solutions to the problems that affect us. Consequently we all have a stake in seeing that this assault on decency and fairness is met with a new civility.

Not that we always have to agree with one another or see eye-to-eye, but we must seek to understand each other by listening to one another instead of labeling each other and by being sensitive to each others' needs, concerns, viewpoints and contributions. We, then, of the faith community in our parishes, our ecumenical

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partnerships and our interfaith relationships must make dialogue, community building and respect for the dignity of each person priorities in our personal, social and ecclesial lives. Especially we

must demonstrate that we can keep our deepest convictions and still maintain our civil courtesy; that we can test others' arguments but not question their motives and that we can form communities where conflicts are not avoided but resolved peacefully.

Part VI – Another Challenge for the Parish: Social Justice

Finally, if I were to revise my 1998 reflection on the mission of the parish I would put much greater emphasis on the commitment of the parish to social justice.

How can people believe we are a community of disciples if we do not love one another and seek ways to become a voice for the poor and powerless? Pope John Paul II has made this a consistent theme of his papacy. As recently as last month he noted that despite the fear they may not be up to the task, or that our principles of social justice are "too great and noble" to be actualized in this world, "lay Christians are to be the living instruments who witness the values of the church's social justice teaching in our world."

I underscore this point because Catholic social justice advocacy and ministry flowing from

the exhortations of the Scriptures, papal encyclicals and bishops' pastoral letters still remain a secret for most of our parishioners. A recent survey revealed that less than 40 percent of our parishioners are familiar with Catholic social teaching and fail to realize that this teaching is an integral part of our faith heritage - as much a part of our tradition as the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments.

We then must make Catholic social teaching part of the credenda (things to be believed) which then become for the believer a basis for the agenda (things to be done) which the believer must implement.

Hence, it is vitally important that we strive mightily to acquaint our people with the social teachings of the church and to encourage them to be supportive of those causes and crusades which address the needs of the poor and vulnerable, be it opposition to the death penalty, be it health care or Social Security reform, be it challenging zoning ordinances that seek to deny those with AIDS, mental illness or developmental disabilities or those addicted to alcohol and drugs the right to live in our neighborhoods or be it familiarizing ourselves with the legislative agendas of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops or with our state bishops' conferences that seek to address the needs of the poor on a wide range of issues such as prenatal care, decent housing, adequate public assistance benefits or alternatives to

incarceration.

As chairperson for the Public Policy Committee of the New York State Catholic Conference, who has to meet with the governor or testify before the Legislature, I know full well that when we advocate on behalf of these and other issues with those in state government, our elected representatives often feel free to dismiss our concerns because they know that frequently we bishops are like generals without armies, and thus to ignore our pleadings will not cost them at the polls. If our Catholic Christian vision and philosophy of life, especially as it pertains to the poor, is to be translated into reality, then it is imperative that our parishioners become aware of the issues confronting our society, be educated on these issues and be willing to let our elected officials know of their support of or opposition to particular public-policy concerns. And the more credible our witness becomes in this regard, I believe the more attractive our parish ministry of word and sacrament will be.

Part VII – In Conclusion

In conclusion, let me suggest that addressing the needs I have mentioned and exploring the solutions I have suggested will demand renewed determination, zeal and enthusiasm on the part of all. For these are challenges that do not readily admit of facile solutions, and humanly speaking we might want to

cling to the status quo or to retreat to the serenity of a previous age where life and ministry in our church seemed more stable, more secure, more clear-cut, to a time when there seemed to be a consensus in the church, wherein roles were clearly defined - where answers appeared black and white, and where the ideological litmus tests, mean-spiritedness and lack of civility that polarize people and poison the debate in our contemporary climate did not exist. While we can eliminate the ideological litmus test, the mean-spiritedness and lack of civility because such have no place in the community of love, healing and reconciliation the parish is called to be, we can't turn back the clock; we can't hide our heads in the sand and pretend that the knotty problems and perplexing challenges which God has laid at our doorstep do not exist. They are real, and the tensions and ambiguity which they produce cannot be ignored.

"Evangelical daring is not power, it is vulnerability; it is not pure calculation, but simplicity of heart and trust in the wisdom and power of God. Evangelical daring is not a clenched fist, but open arms."

By now you may be wondering, "What is this man smoking?" We've been living through the greatest scandal in the history of American Catholicism, with dioceses declaring bankruptcy and parishes bleeding members. We are coping with the enormous forces of secularism, individualism, hedonism, utilitarianism and moral

relativism, which are antithetical to the core values of our Catholic Christian heritage. We have a beloved pope who is melting away before our eyes, as a recalcitrant Curia seeks to steer the barque of Peter back to a pre-Vatican II model of theology, ecclesiology and governance. We are faced with a severe vocation crisis to the ordained and vowed life. The financial foundation of the church, 55 years and older Catholics, are gradually dying off. We are closing, merging and consolidating parishes and schools in older dioceses, and trying to keep pace with unprecedented growth in the South and West. And this man is talking about reversing parochialism, fostering ecumenism, encouraging evangelization and promoting social justice as keys to revitalizing the mission of the parish. He makes Mary Poppins sound like a pessimist.

Doesn't he know that the church and the parish are not always the vibrant, dynamic communities they are idealized to be? Too often parishes seem more like gas stations rather than loving communities of faith and service. People pop in to fulfill an obligation rather than to gather around the altar as the people of God. The parish liturgical team prepares a great feast, while many parishioners just want a quick bite before racing out to watch football, to go shopping or to take the kids to an amusement park. This is not surprising, because today's urban and suburban territorial parishes by and large do not build on any natural sense of community, and even ethnic and rural

parishes have often lost the close-knit ties that formerly bound them together. While we in church leadership may see the parish as our primary community, many parishioners would ~ place the parish far down on the list of places to which they belong after their homes, the schools their children

attend, the places where they work, their golf or country club or even the neighborhood bar.

This reality that for many people the parish is not the primary community in their lives may give us the feeling that we are failing. But as the Dominican theologian Father Timothy Radcliffe notes: "The archetypal Christian community was the Last Supper. Think what a dismal failure that community was. One of the disciples sold Jesus, another went on to deny him, and the rest ran away. Jesus failed to gather them into a community on that last night (after three years of intensive formation), so we should not be surprised that we do no better than he did.

"What Jesus did was to offer the sacrament of communion; a sign of the kingdom that is to come as a gift in its own good time. If the parish is not a great and dynamic community, then this may not be a sign of pastoral failure at all. Sometimes we can do no more than enact signs of what is to come."

Yes, as Father Radcliffe suggests, the Last Supper is our foundational story, the story of God's covenant with us and with all. The paradox of this

story is that our community was founded just at the moment it was in the process of breaking up. And that has been true down through the course of Christian history: at Pentecost, in the persecution of the early church, during the fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of the Dark Ages, at the time of the Reformation to the Avignon Papacy, the collapse of the papal states and the modernist controversy and now in the face of the present crisis of trust and confidence created by the clergy abuse scandals. And just as at the Last Supper the moment of betrayal and shame became a moment of gift and grace, the present crisis can be one of rejuvenation and joy. It can lead us to become a church where it is clear that Jesus came to call

sinners, not the righteous; it can help us be a community which finds a place at the table for those who have been excluded by virtue of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and marital or immigration status. It can bring to birth a church that is less clerical and secretive, and enable us to be a more transparent church in which the laity are recognized and empowered to exercise their full dignity as baptized Christians. It could mark the end of a church functioning as sort of a multinational business, operating through a distant and unaccountable bureaucracy, and can lead us to become more evidently a community of disciples.

Most of all, then, we need to be people of hope. For living and dynamic hope is the quintessence of the Gospel message. Hope was more than the theme of the apostles' preaching, it

was the very purpose of that preaching. For example, St. Paul wrote the Colossians, "Hope is the lesson you have learned from the truth-giving message of the Gospel" (1Col:4-6).

The renowned theologian Teilhard de Chardin stated that the world will belong to those who can offer it the most hope. His fellow Frenchman Cardinal Jean Danielou put it this way, "It is not that the world doubts Christians, but it is Christians who no longer believe in hope in themselves."

This, I believe, is the problem of our day. Too often we as Christians present to a world starved for hope not, as St. Paul proclaimed, the image of a people sure of who we are and what we stand for, but the image of a people more cowed by fear than borne up by hope.

Granted this is a tall order and that the battle against cynicism, discouragement, disillusionment, apathy and indifference is a constant one, but the hopeful mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus requires nothing less on

our part.
For this to happen we must grasp the
challenges of the moment with the boldness of Jesus
Christ. We must evidence what Archbishop
John Quinn, the retired archbishop of
San Francisco, has called evangelical daring.
Evangelical daring is not power, it is vulnerability;
it is not pure calculation, but simplicity of heart

and trust in the wisdom and power of God.
Evangelical daring is not a clenched fist, but open
arms.
It is what Archbishop Oscar Romero
showed when he tenaciously proclaimed the good
news in the face of deadly hostility. It is what
Mother Teresa evidenced when she left her
original religious community to found the
Missionaries of Charity to work among the poor
and forgotten on the streets and in the garbage
dumps of Calcutta. It is what Cardinal Bernardin
demonstrated when he forgave the man who
accused him falsely of sexual misconduct. And it
is what Jesus witnessed to when he accepted fully
our human condition and transformed the scandal
of the cross into his throne of glory, and it is what
we must evidence if we are to be his faithful
disciples in today's world.
May we, then, embrace this challenge, accept it
and fulfill it for the honor and glory of God and for
the hope, peace and betterment of God's people

“The Mission of the Contemporary Parish”
by Bishop Howard J. Hubbard
Study Guide
Introduction:
Bishop Hubbard's speech reflected upon "the
mission of the parish at the outset of the new
millennium.” He challenges us to:
• **Make Jesus Christ the focus of parish life**
• **Develop vibrant and dynamic parish**

communities
• Respond to the alienated, the fallen away and the unchurched
• Collaborate with neighboring parish communities and see ourselves as part of a wider community beyond our own parish
• Engage in constructive ecumenical partnerships and interfaith relationships
• Place a greater emphasis on the commitment of our parish to social justice
• Renew our zeal , enthusiasm and personal hope for our parish and our church.

It is our hope that this study guide will enable you to reflect deeply on the challenges before us.

Purpose of the Study Guide:

This Study Guide was developed by an Education Sub-Committee of the Diocesan Pastoral Planning Advisory Council.

The purpose of the Guide is to:

• Encourage people to think about the mission of the parish on a personal level, and how to nurture and foster that mission, using the mission and ministry of Jesus as a guide.
• Help people see their roles – we are Church and Jesus is our center.
• Distribute the Bishop's comments to as many people as possible in the Albany Diocese.
• Help people change minds and hearts to embrace and internalize these ideas.
• Provide a tool to use as a catalyst for discussing and creating a preferred future in the parish, deanery, or cluster.

Before Using the Study Guide:

This Study Guide is intended to be used in conjunction with ***"The Mission of the Contemporary Parish"*** by Bishop Howard Hubbard. All materials are available from the Diocesan Pastoral Planning office.

Prior to using this Guide, please:

• Familiarize yourself with ***"The Mission of the Contemporary Parish"*** by **reading the article** or **watching the DVD**.
• Use this section on **"Before Using the Study Guide"** to plan how you might use these materials in your parish or group.
• Review Part I through Part VII of the **Study Guide**.
• Each section begins with quotes from the Bishop's text. The questions encourage deeper reflection, discussion and ideas for actions.

What can this Study Guide do for the parish?:

_ Remind us that we want to keep Jesus as our center.
_ Foster interactions among parishioners/group members.
_ Build relationship and trust.
_ Help people get to know each other and listen to each other.
_ Focus on the Bishop's ideas and how they relate to our parish/group.
_ Begin a process to create a preferred future for our parish/ group.
_ Invest our time and energy to prepare for future challenges.
_ Create a strong foundation for when we might face difficult decisions.

Suggestions for Pastoral Leaders and Pastoral Leadership Teams:

_ Invite the laity to participate with you in using the Study Guide.
_ Consider using with pastoral councils, ministry groups and parish staff.
_ Feel free to customize the Study Guide Questions.
_ Plan a series of meetings in which to

discuss the material.
_ Enlist a facilitator to work with you in planning and running each session.
_ Include prayer as part of every meeting.

Suggestions for Facilitators:
_ Set the tone; explain what you hope to accomplish with the group.
_ Offer ideas for appropriate ground rules for working together.
_ Create an open environment for people to say what's on their minds.
_ Provide a few minutes for people to reflect/make notes on the questions, after watching the video.
_ Get people talking; draw them out.
_ Help everyone listen respectfully to differing opinions and ideas.
_ Ask to hear from people who have not yet contributed.
_ Be comfortable and wait with silence after a question is asked.
_ Trust the group to focus on questions that are most relevant for them.

_ Stay with the group's discussion rather than pushing forward.
_ Ask appropriate follow-on questions to encourage in-depth discussion.
_ Keep discussion on track.
_ Not every question will be meaningful to everyone.
_ Not every question needs to be asked.
_ Encourage people to share responsibility and get involved.
_ Help the group focus on identifying specific actions they might take.

_ Debrief each session with pastoral leadership.
_ Learn from each session to plan for the next.

Prayer in Time of Change
Beloved Jesus, anoint us to do your will. May the joy of your dwelling in us draw us closer to each other. Expand our vision to recognize your plan; warm our hearts by the flame of your Love; open our lips so that we can speak your Word; extend our arms so that we can embrace each other as your people; speak to us so we can discern the role you have for us, your Body, your Church. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, empowering us to become vital expressions of growth in your changing church. Your Kingdom is now! Help us to discover and live your will.
Amen.

PART I – Introduction…What is the Mission of Your Parish?

"There will always be need, however, for tangible structures whereby people can experience the loving presence of God and build genuine community by sharing God's redemptive and liberating love with others. That structure can be the parish community.
And the ultimate purpose of the structure we call the parish is to bring people into contact with Jesus Christ and the good news He proclaimed, and to enable people to witness the common faith, love and worship, which the parish members share in communion with Jesus and one another. Jesus, therefore, must be the focus of the parish's life."
"Today's parishioners, then, must learn how to

enter the mystery of Jesus, seeing how His life, His words, His temptations, His choices, His facing death, and His overcoming death relate to the demands of the day, to the needs of God's people and to the fears of our contemporary world and society. Our parishes, then, must do a better job in helping people understand that Jesus is present to them here and now, walking the path of discipleship along with them."

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Focus Questions for Part I:

1. How would you define *the church*?
2. What is the mission of our parish? Do we have a mission statement? How is it used?
3. How do we experience Jesus? How can we help each other experience Him?
4. Identify the ways that Jesus is central to and alive in our parish ministries.
5. What is your hope for the future church?

Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:

What will you personally commit to doing to fulfill your hope; and how will you help others to believe in the church?

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PART II– Characteristics of Parishes That Are Most Vibrant and Successful

"In an abbreviated form, these characteristics are: ***first****, good liturgy and preaching. People earnestly desire worship services which help them to pray well and preaching which gives meaning to their faith lives.* ***Second,*** *the ability of the parish to help people deal practically with their life concerns, such as alcohol and drug abuse, poor schools, crime and safety issues, unemployment and job stability, and especially their concerns about family and children.* ***Third,*** *a feeling of ownership on people's part, a feeling that they belong, that their concerns are being listened to and that they have had the opportunity to affect*

parish policy and practice. ***Fourth****, an alive quality to the parish; the sense that something is going on, that there is something happening for everyone."*

Focus Questions for Part II:

1. Are all four of these characteristics present in our parish? Give examples:
2. Which of these characteristics are strongest in our parish? Give examples:
3. Which of these characteristics could we strengthen? How?

4. Name at least two parish ministries that are active and growing.
5. Name a parish ministry that has served its purpose, and needs to be let go of.
6. Name a parish ministry that is needed and does not exist.
7. Who do you consider the lay leaders in your parish? Why?
8. How do we currently identify and train parish lay leaders?
9. How are pastoral council members selected?
10. Are they a prayerful, collaborative visionary team?
11. How are decisions made? Do collaborative teams exist?

Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:

What one thing could we do to help our parish become more vibrant in any of the four characteristics?

PART III– A Challenge for the Parish: Evangelization

"I would say that this issue of responding to the alienated, the fallen away and the unchurched continues to be the No. 1 challenge confronting our church and the parish. The critical question, however, is how do we respond effectively and

constructively?"
"There are four movements to evangelization as found in the Gospel: koinonia, friendship; diakonia, service; kerygma, proclamation; and eucharistia, thanks and praise."
"Evangelization, then, is first and foremost an exercise in communication and developing relationships. All communication and relationships must begin with listening, otherwise we end up talking to and communicating with ourselves. Therefore, we must recognize that even if we get no farther then the first thrust of this process (friendship and service), we are evangelizing."
"The fact is, we can help people connect or reconnect with the parish and the church only insofar as we have befriended and loved them."
"Evangelization is a matter of being willing to listen, to understand and to walk with (them) in their spiritual quest."

Focus Questions for Part III:
1. How does our parish reach out to the alienated, fallen away and unchurched in our community?
2. How might we think about "befriending and loving" the people who participate with us as well as those who do not?
3. Is our parish youth and young adult friendly? Do young people serve in ministry and on committees?
4. Can you identify ways our parish community offers mutual, non-judgmental support to each other?
5. Can you remember the last time you personally reached out with love to someone in need? To someone you may not particularly like, or whose theology you do not agree with?
6. In what ways are we already an evangelizing community?
Question to inspire action as an individual or a

group:
In what ways can we encourage the development of relationships, in order to walk with each other in our spiritual quest?
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PART IV – Parochialism and the Parish (What does this have to do with me?)
"Too many parishes are concerned only with their own immediate local needs and fail to appreciate fully that they are part of a diocesan community and the universal church, and hence are called to be responsive to the needs, concerns and priorities of the wider community beyond the parish's own mission. The parish, in other words, must pursue its mission as part of the overall mission of the universal and diocesan church, not as a separate, isolated entity."
"Even those parishes which remain vital and vibrant will be able to survive only if they are willing to collaborate with neighboring parish communities in joint articulation of mission, in sharing personnel and resources, and in programming together, for example, in marriage preparation, youth ministry, the operation of food pantries, social service programs, etc."
Focus Questions for Part IV:
1. Is your parish part of a deanery? What is the name of it and who is the dean?
2. What parishes are in your cluster? Which parishes make up your deanery?
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3. In what ways is your parish already collaborating with other parishes?
4. How is the future of your parish linked to these others? Is there a plan for the future of the church in your deanery or cluster, should c change in its structure become a necessity?
5. How would any change be negotiated and communicated to parishioners?
Question to inspire action as an individual or a

group:
What specific things might we do to remind our parish of its relationship to the diocese and universal church?

PART V – Ecumenism
"An important antidote to what I have just said about parochialism, is ecumenism. Not only is ecumenism necessary for fulfilling the prayer of Jesus on the night of the Last Supper, "May they all be one, Father, as you are in me and I am in you; may they be one in us that the world may truly believe it is you who have sent me" (Jn. 17:21), but very pragmatically we can learn much from our fellow Christians about how best to fulfill the various dimensions of the parish's mission. For example, from the fundamentalist churches we can learn reverence for the sacred Scriptures. From the evangelicals we can learn love for Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. From the Orthodox churches we can be moved by the splendor of their liturgy, with its focus on the transcendent. From the Mormons we can be inspired by their missionary zeal. From the conservative branch of the so-called mainline churches we can begin to appreciate the value of tradition, and from the liberal branch the importance of social action. And from the small storefront churches we can learn the need for intimacy and the value of belonging."
"We, then, of the faith community in our parishes, our ecumenical partnerships and our interfaith relationships must make dialogue, community building and respect for the dignity of each person priorities in our personal, social and ecclesial lives. Especially we must demonstrate that we can

keep our deepest convictions and still maintain our civil courtesy; that we can test others' arguments but not question their motives and that we can form communities

where conflicts are not avoided but resolved peacefully."

Focus Questions for Part V:

1. How do we currently share space, resources, or programs with local churches?
2. How have we partnered ecumenically in addressing the social issues of our day, like: war, terrorism, economic disparity, the breakdown of the family, gender identity, environmental issues…?
3. What does "moral values" mean to you?
4. In what specific ways, have we in our parish stood up for what we believe?
5. How might an interfaith dialogue on polarizing issues be possible in our parish?

Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:

What will I do next? What next step has been suggested by our discussion?

PART VI – Social Justice

"Finally, if I were to revise my 1998 reflection on the mission of the parish I would put much greater emphasis on the commitment of the parish to social justice."

"How can people believe we are a community of disciples if we do not love one another and seek ways to become a voice for the poor and powerless? Pope John Paul II has made this a consistent theme of his papacy. As recently as last month he noted that despite the fear they may not be up to the task, or that our principles of social justice are "too great and noble" to be actualized in this world, "lay Christians are to be the living instruments who witness the values of the church's social justice teaching in our world."*

"We then must make Catholic social teaching part of the credenda (things to be believed) which then become for the believer a basis for the agenda (things to be done) which the believer must implement."

"It is imperative that our parishioners become aware of the issues confronting our society, be

educated on these issues and be willing to let our elected officials know of their support of or opposition to particular public-policy concerns. And the more credible our witness becomes in this regard, I believe the more attractive our parish ministry of word and sacrament will be."

Focus Questions for Part VI:

1. Does our parish have a social justice committee?
2. How have our homilies addressed social justice issues?
3. How does our parish demonstrate familiarity with the Catholic Social Teachings?
4. When is the last time you or your family did community service?
5. How do we ensure parishioners get current in formation on public policy?
6. Does our parish participate in lobby day in March?

Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:

What do we need to do now? How will I be involved personally?

PART VII – In Conclusion

"In conclusion, let me suggest that addressing the needs I have mentioned and exploring the solutions I have suggested will demand renewed determination, zeal and enthusiasm on the part of all. For these are challenges that do not readily admit of facile solutions, and humanly speaking we might want to cling to the status quo or to retreat to the serenity of a previous age where life and ministry in our church seemed more stable, more secure, more clear-cut, to a time when there seemed to be a consensus in the church, wherein roles were clearly defined - where answers appeared black and white, and where the ideological litmus tests, mean-spiritedness and

lack of civility that polarize people and poison the debate in our contemporary climate did not exist"
"Most of all, then, we need to be people of hope. For living and dynamic hope is the quintessence of the Gospel message."
"Granted this is a tall order and that the battle against cynicism, discouragement, disillusionment, apathy and indifference is a constant one, but the hopeful mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus requires nothing less on our part."
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Focus Questions for Part VII

1. Describe the ways that the people of our parish look like "resurrected people."
2. How can we revitalize the mission of our church?
3. What would it take for us to be a loving community of faith and service?
4. How can we help families to form households of faith, and to identify with the church as their primary community?
5. How can we help others to welcome and support change?
6. How can we create a community of disciples equipped to enter into the church of the future, with open arms?

Question to inspire action as an individual or a group:

What specific steps must we take as a parish to help us move closer to our preferred future? In what way(s) will I commit myself to being involved?