

Bishop Pentecost Script

My Sisters and Brothers in Christ, as we celebrate the great Solemnity of Pentecost, we recall the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and the birth of the Church. The story of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles tells us:

“When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”

This gift of the Holy Spirit continues to be poured out upon the Church, upon us! With the gifts of wisdom and understanding, knowledge and piety, counsel and fortitude, fear and awe of the Lord, we are empowered and equipped for our life of discipleship. From the efforts of the first disciples to us today, the Gospel of Jesus Christ has spread to more than 1 billion baptized Catholics around the world.

Yet, as we are well aware, the world we live in today presents many challenges for us to propose the Gospel in a compelling and impactful way. We cannot ignore the realities we face. However, we are full of hope as we trust the prompting of the Holy Spirit to engage in a new apostolic age of missionary discipleship.

It is in this hope that I announce today the decisions that have been discerned regarding the structure of the parishes in the Diocese of Peoria for the future. We certainly call upon the Holy Spirit to open our minds and hearts to these necessary changes to create a more vibrant, mission driven and sustainable Church for growing disciples.

It is important that we understand our current difficulties. The Diocese of Peoria covers nearly 17,000 square miles, across 26 counties in north-central Illinois. At the moment there are 156 parishes which serve communities that are rural, urban and suburban. There are, at present, 145 active priests; however, our priests are aging and the projection is that within the next ten years we will have fewer than 100 active priests. The demographics of our diocese continue to change overall, with 49% fewer people in our parishes over the last decade. Furthermore the trends show that more people are leaving the practice of their faith. As an example, statistics show that nationwide 85% of children who are Confirmed, stop practicing their faith by the time they turn 21! 85% - this is staggering! We find ourselves with fewer people, fewer priests, fewer resources and a greater responsibility to respond to the call the Gospel anew!

So, two years ago, I initiated a process in our diocese which we call “Growing Disciples.” The process was not centered upon the reality of decline, rather it has been a process of renewal seeking opportunities for growth. Originating from listening sessions of my first two years serving as Coadjutor Bishop, we articulated five foundations on which to create a better, more vibrant Church: Evangelization, Discipleship, The Eucharist, Vocations and the legacy of Archbishop Fulton Sheen. We enlisted the help of the Catholic Leadership Institute to guide our

process of assessing our current structure and discerning a more mission-driven sustainable structure for the future.

Our process was quite thorough. We worked with every parish and ministry in the diocese. We gathered hard data, lots of it! Baptisms and funeral trends, Mass attendance counts, the number of active priests, upcoming priest retirements, trends in candidates for the seminary, maintenance costs for the churches, parish budgets, projected costs for repairs, geography and population trends - these are some of the factors we dove into. It must be said that the numbers do not tell the whole story, so we engaged in learning the other important information - the stories of our parishes, your stories. We asked many questions and we listened to the responses. Our Core Team, Consultants, Priests, Curia Offices, Diocesan Planning Commission, Key Parish Leaders provided opportunities for conversations, prayer and discerning. We gathered feedback from thousands of parishioners and community members as we went through several rounds of parish modeling. I am grateful for your insights and ideas, and for your passion about our parishes and faith. Ultimately, a third draft of parish models was developed and recommended by the Presbyteral Council for my prayerful discernment and decision. Because of the extensive process we engaged in and the committed work of so many, I believe our work has been validated as the work of the Holy Spirit.

Having read every email and letter that was sent to me, I am keenly aware of your hopes for your parishes, of your concern for your priests and your dreams for a more vibrant Church. Therefore, I have taken my responsibility as your bishop very seriously, and the weight of my decisions have been heavy on my mind and heart. I know for some, these decisions will bring a great deal of sadness and pain, asking you to let go of the comfort of what is known as your parish. For all of us, we have to use the gift of the Holy Spirit, to understand the necessity of change and have the fortitude to look beyond our own parish to the wider mission we are embracing to bring new life to the Church.

Therefore, as we look to the future, the landscape of parish structures in the Diocese of Peoria will be reshaped from 156 individual parishes to 75 parishes. These modifications will be achieved through the merger and closure of our parishes, bringing together communities to create new parish entities. Four of these parishes will be pastored by religious order priests. The rest will be pastored by diocesan priests. We will begin implementing these decisions on July 1, 2024 and envision a three year process to complete the new canonical structures.

All of our parishes, even those where there is no planned structural change, are asked to evaluate their current schedule of Masses, their efforts of pastoral care, discipleship making and evangelization to renew the life of the parish ensuring a mission driven vibrancy towards growth.

The details of the new parish configurations, as well as the assignments of priests can be found on the Growing Disciples website: growingdisciplescdop.org

My dear sisters and brothers, I am convinced that we are moving in the right direction to a more vibrant, mission-driven and sustainable Church to grow disciples for generations to come! These difficult and yet necessary changes will create greater freedom to engage in this new

apostolic age. The first disciples, including the Blessed Mother Mary, were filled with the Holy Spirit and commissioned by Jesus to go make disciples. May we encounter the same gracious outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us today - setting our hearts ablaze for Christ, so that we too may bear fruit for God's kingdom in our local Church.

Venerable Archbishop Sheen - pray for us!

God bless you and God love you!

Come Holy Spirit!
