PASTORAL LETTER
LOOKING BACK IN THANKSGIVING—LOOKING FORWARD IN HOPE

To the Faithful of the Diocese of Beaumont and the Community of Southeast Texas

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I am writing this Pastoral Letter to share some very important information about our diocese and our current and future challenges. Acknowledging our deep faith and grateful for our many accomplishments together these past 50 years, I want to be transparent with you regarding the gravity of the shortage of priests. Some may think there is no shortage because there is usually a priest at the altar for Mass, even if he is not the pastor. Most of these replacement priests are retired and are substituting when the pastor is on vacation or becomes ill. Permanent deacons have also reduced the impact of the shortage, because they assist the pastor by witnessing weddings, presiding at funeral services, preaching the homily at Mass, baptizing infants, and other spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Adapting to the shortage will change the level of pastoral care that our priests will be able to provide, and it will necessitate adjustments on your part, in terms of your expectations. The Second Vatican Council called for greater involvement of the laity in the life of the Church, and by virtue of baptism, you, too, are called to be collaborators in Christian pastoral service. The hard work of handing on the faith demands the participation of all the People of God—clergy, religious, and laity.

In this letter I will present a context and then address our accomplishments, our present challenges, current efforts and future adaptations that may have to be made in the future in order to respond to the shortage of priests and emerging pastoral needs.

Introduction:

On September 18, 2016, over 4,000 Catholics and non-Catholics gathered at Ford Park Arena to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of our Diocese. This was a time to look back with hearts of thanksgiving and to look forward with hopeful hearts. We have come this far through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the deep faith of our ancestors. The celebration of the Eucharist was magnificent, and the gathering of the community of faith was a visible sign of the centrality of the Eucharist as the source and summit of our Christian life.

The Vatican II document on the Ministry and Life of Priests clearly states, “The Eucharistic Action is the very heartbeat of the congregation of the faithful over which the priest presides.” “Priests fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.” “The Eucharistic Sacrifice is the center and root of the whole priestly life.” The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church further emphasizes, “...the priest alone can complete the building up of the Body in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.” In addition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church clarifies, “Only validly ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and consecrate the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord.”

This is the context for addressing the main purpose of this letter—our shortage of priests.
Accomplishments:

Through the years, we have seen many accomplishments – the entry into the Church of many individuals and families through the parish R.C.I.A. process every Holy Week; the renovation of St. Anthony Cathedral Basilica; the Golden Jubilee of the founding of our diocese; our fruitful ecumenical and inter-faith cooperation and mutual respect; the pastoral outreach of Catholic Charities; our civic collaboration; and the generous response to our recent Capital Campaign for $25,000,000.00 to fund endowments for ministries (evangelization and catechesis, youth ministry, schools, the Infirn Priests' Fund, Catholic Charities, Holy Family Retreat Center). And, even in crises we always have found opportunity as was wonderfully demonstrated by the stewardship of so many within and from outside Southeast Texas in responding to our natural disasters. The liturgy aide that was distributed at our 50th anniversary celebration contains an extensive history of the diocese and presents in greater detail our accomplishments over the decades. You will also find this history on our diocesan website (www.dioceseofbeaumont.org) under the link “Home”. Photos of the 50th anniversary celebration and stories about our history are also under this same link.

Yes, we face a grave shortage of priests now and for many decades ahead. Your bishops now and in the future will make personnel assignments and organizational decisions, which, though at times inconvenient and perhaps initially irritating, will always be for the common good of all the faithful, urban and rural, and the efficient distribution of our priests and deacons. Always the primary motivation will be to provide for you and your families the Eucharist, which is the summit and perfection of Catholic faith. I have lived among you for nearly 20 years as your chief shepherd, and I have confidence that you will support and adapt to our accommodations to the new reality and that you will step forward in your developing responsibility for the Body of Christ, the Church.

Present Challenges:

In view of the history of the diocese and its evangelical ministry, I now direct your attention to the present challenges we face due to the shortage of priests.

The Diocese of Beaumont was established a year after the conclusion of Vatican II (1965), and has enjoyed the fruits of the Council for the full 50 years of its existence. In 1966, the total general population of the 15 counties in the new diocese was 586,992, and the Catholic population was 89,181, which is approximately 15%. At that time, there were 32 parishes, 20 missions, 3 high schools, and 20 elementary schools. There were 51 active diocesan priests (ordained for the service of the diocese) and 33 active religious order priests (members of Religious Institutes assigned by their Superior to a diocese to provide priestly ministry). We had 198 Women Religious serving within the diocese. There were no permanent deacons.

In the late 1980’s, the Diocese of Tyler was created, and with additional re-alignment of our boundaries, the Beaumont diocese was reduced to nine counties. In 2017 we have a general population of 625,140 and a Catholic population of 71,902, which is approximately 11.5%. We have 44 parishes, 7 missions, 1 high school, and 4 elementary schools. There are 31 active diocesan priests and 20 religious order priests. Five of our retired priests regularly provide replacement ministry in parishes. We have 16 Women Religious and 28 active permanent deacons. We also have 5 seminarians and 10 permanent deacon candidates.

The changes in numbers (above) are indicative of shifts in demands for pastoral care, involving the reduction in Catholic school attendance and the continuing shortage of vocations.
to the religious life and priesthood. The crisis of the shortage of priests is occurring in many contexts, all of which affect each other and overlap to various degrees. Research on the Catholic Church in the U.S. reveals that currently only 22% of Catholics attend Sunday Mass regularly. The savagery of Gulf Coast hurricanes and flooding remains evident and drains human and financial resources. Most of our young women and men seek employment and residence outside our area, in population centers with rapid economic growth and job opportunities. Our population remains more or less stable, due primarily to Latino immigrants, most of whom are Catholic.

The situation of our shortage is not unique to our diocese. Most dioceses in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Australia experience a similar decline.

In years past, most of our parishes had a pastor and one, two, or three associate pastors. Today, most parishes have only a pastor with no associate pastor.

In addition to the 2017 statistics mentioned above, I will now provide a brief analysis of available clergy to serve the parishes and missions in the Diocese of Beaumont.

**Diocesan Priests:**
We have 23 diocesan priests who are pastors of parishes, and they range in age from 42 – 83. Four of these pastors are above the normal retirement age of 70. Four are almost age 70. These 23 pastors cover 26 parishes and 3 missions. Three of these pastors cover 2 parishes. We have 3 associate pastors who assist at the 3 largest parishes in the diocese. There are currently 5 seminarians studying for the diocese. Recently, one of our retired priests graciously agreed, for the second time, to be parochial administrator for several months at a vacant parish, since we had no other priest available to assign as pastor. All of our able-bodied aging clergy generously continue to serve beyond retirement age.

**Religious Order Priests:**
Seventeen (17) religious order priests are pastors, and they range in age from 42 – 95. These 17 pastors cover 18 parishes, 4 missions, and 1 Mass Station. One pastor covers 2 parishes. Another pastor covers 1 parish, 2 missions, and 1 Mass Station. As with diocesan priests, many religious order priests often serve beyond retirement age. Religious Congregations also have an aging population and fewer vocations. Thus, religious superiors may have to withdraw their priests from the diocese for assignment elsewhere.

**Permanent Deacons:**
Appointed by the Bishop, permanent deacons are valued collaborators with pastors and serve in parishes on a very limited basis. Deacons may witness marriages, preach the homily at Mass, baptize infants, preside at funeral services, and provide other spiritual and corporal works of mercy; however, deacons cannot offer Mass nor hear confessions nor anoint the sick and dying.

A major concern for me is the stress placed on our priests as they stretch themselves to provide leadership, sacraments, pastoral programs, and ever-more complex administration. The generosity of our active diocesan and religious order priests and our retired priests has spared our diocese the distress and divisiveness many American arch/dioceses are experiencing, namely, closing parishes and missions and asking those parishioners to register at a nearby parish, while continuing the expense of maintaining those empty buildings and real estate. Moreover, our diocese is not yet experiencing a significant reduction in weekend
Masses that would permit our priests more easily to go from parish to parish to celebrate Masses.

**Current Efforts and Future Adaptations:**

Following the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the role of the laity in carrying out the mission of the Church, we have been preparing youth and adults for Christian service and leadership, especially in the past 25 years. The following are a few examples. Our Catholic schools have formed and educated children and youth and prepared them to live their faith in their families, parishes, and their adult lives and to be of service to the Christian community. For the past 20 years, our Department of Catechesis has sponsored the “Catholic Education and Ministry Institute” (CEMI), which has provided lay ministry formation to 5,857 adults. For the past 10 years, the Department has also partnered with the University of Dayton for the “Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation” (VLCCF), which offers on-line courses for adults to prepare them for lay ministry. Certificates have been issued to 217 adults who completed various VLCCF courses. Our Hispanic Ministry Department has provided faith formation and leadership training for youth and adults, so they can be active in their parishes and assist their pastors with Christian service. In the past year, this Department has also partnered with the University of Dallas for its online “Certification of Pastoral Theology” program. Approximately 70 Hispanic adults are currently being educated through this 6-semester program. The Office of Worship has provided an abundance of workshops, conferences, and trainings over the years to prepare parishioners for service in various liturgical roles (e.g. lectors, Eucharistic ministers) and sacramental preparation (e.g. assisting with preparing couples for marriage). These and numerous other opportunities are available to prepare you, our lay faithful, for greater participation in the life of the Church as we adapt to the shortage of priests.

Some adaptations have already been made throughout the diocese. At this time, we have 4 pastors who are covering 2 parishes each. In some of these cases, parish programs are combined (e.g. religious education of children and youth). In many of our parishes, qualified (i.e. properly formed, educated, and trained) lay parishioners are assisting their pastors by taking on greater responsibility for programs and services. Occasionally, there is not a priest to celebrate Mass, so a permanent deacon or a qualified layperson provides a Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest (which is not a Mass). For almost 4 years, our Multi-Parish/School Accounting program has been helping pastors with bookkeeping and financial expertise, and currently 22 pastors are receiving this assistance. Through this program, pastors can entrust complex financial matters to trained accountants so they can focus more of their energy on pastoral care and the sacraments.

I have no immediate plans to close parishes and missions. Still, I ask myself, how much more 24/7 work can be expected of our priests? If death or disability strikes one or two pastors in the foreseeable future, then our largest parishes may be reduced to one priest—the pastor alone—or a smaller parish may not have a resident pastor and will be “twinned” with a neighboring parish.

Undoubtedly, we will have to make additional adaptations in the near future, such as:
- Two or more parishes may be clustered under one pastor with a team to assist him (e.g. an associate pastor and/or a permanent deacon and well-formed/trained lay leaders).
- There may be a combined administrative office at the core parish in a cluster, instead of an office at each parish.
- The core parish of a cluster may be the central location for weekend Masses.
- There may be one parish pastoral council and one finance council in the cluster.
• Some parish programs may be combined (e.g. one religious education program for all parishes in the cluster, or one youth program, or one RCIA process).
• A Parish Pastoral Coordinator, most likely a permanent deacon, may be assigned to a priestless parish to manage the day-to-day administration and pastoral care. He will be under the direction of a canonical pastor from another parish, with the assistance of a sacramental minister and lay leaders.
• Mass schedules will be adjusted in parishes and missions, since the pastor or replacement priest will not be available to celebrate the number of Masses that were previously scheduled. A Mass with very low attendance will most likely be eliminated, and parishioners will be asked to attend another Mass or a Mass at one of the other parishes in the cluster.
• Pastors of all parishes will not be able to offer the same level of pastoral care as in the past, because their time and energy will be focused on providing the sacraments that only a priest can offer.
• Pastors will have to balance their time between/among parishes.
• Administration, financial management, and the day-to-day operations of the parish(es) will be delegated to experienced and well-trained layperson who are professionally compensated.
• Qualified lay parishioners will take on greater responsibility for programs and services.
• Two or more parishes may be merged into one.
• A parish or mission may be closed, especially if there is another parish nearby.
• Other emerging reconfigurations and adaptations may be implemented.

Conclusion:

I am providing this information to you so you will be aware of the growing shortage of priests and the adjustments that are being made and the changes that may have to be made in the years to come. I have always called you “my partners in grace” because you always have stood in solidarity with me as we met various challenges with God’s grace. As we face future challenges because of the shortage of priests, I ask you to again partner with your bishop and meet these challenges as the Holy Spirit guides us. I also ask you to continue to pray for vocations to the priesthood, the permanent diaconate, and religious life. And finally, I ask that you nurture vocations within your families.

As bishop, my successor will continue to face the same challenges, and you, the lay faithful, will be asked gracefully to embrace the current reality. You have demonstrated a strong faith and been resilient with past challenges. You are a people of hope who remember St. Paul’s encouragement, “We know that all things work for good for those who love God.” (Rom. 8: 28)

The words Jesus spoke to his apostles before ascending to heaven are words he speaks to us today: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always until the end of the age.” (Matthew 28: 19-20)

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Rev. Curtis J. Guillory, S.V.D., D.D.
Bishop of Beaumont