Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany
Office of the Bishop

April 7, 2025

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Diocese of Albany, in the heart of a secularized region, is faced with the challenge of reimagining its fundamental approach to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Inspired by the example of St. Francis of Assisi, as articulated in the visionary teaching of Pope Francis, we aim to revitalize and strengthen our parish, regional and diocesan-wide communities, bringing the poor and marginalized into the center of our mission. With a longstanding history of vibrant parish life up until the 2000's, we now face a financial and maintenance crisis as well – we have too many buildings! – which is leading us to realign or relinquish perhaps one-third of 126 parish churches and other buildings, even some of our remaining parish schools.

If we are to have a solid, long-term future, we cannot NOT act. We are now launching a process in an effort to implement a newly envisioned future for long term growth and the formation of mission-focused disciples. Following this model throughout the Diocese, in every parish, network of parishes and region simultaneously, we can be proactive, rather than reactive, with the realities our parishes are facing. Clergy health and wellbeing, quality sacramental ministry, consistent attendance, participation and volunteerism, well maintained properties and assets have been heading in the wrong direction. The Church is Christ's beloved spouse (cf. Eph 1:23) which we have been entrusted to care for – *all* of us, by virtue of our discipleship, our baptismal priesthood. Our "Great Commission" is to follow and proclaim Christ as he leads us through this storm to the "promised land" that lies ahead (Mt 28:16-20). It is a challenge and an opportunity to re-channel our efforts and resources towards a healthier Church focused on service, growth in our relationship with Jesus Christ, personally and communally, and sustainable for the needs we have inside and outside our walls. Through a prayerful, comprehensive and participatory evaluation process, we can ensure that the mission of the Church is carried forward, not left to decline. Together we can lead so that all the faithful remain engaged and committed to our Catholic faith, identity and mission, regardless of any parish realignments or changes to centers of worship that prove necessary.

Our main objective is that every parish in the Diocese take part in a transparent, honest – and difficult! – decision-making process over several months of discernment about the mission and resources of each parish toward a realistic vision for its future. **This is not a *plan* with a narrow focus on mergers and closures. Reconfiguration or merging of parishes and the repurposing, closing or sale of some churches, rectories and schools must surely be anticipated as part of the outcome. More importantly, however, this is a *process* to focus each parish on its mission as the Church, making best use of its personal and material resources.**

We need to move from crisis to conversion, to think bigger, looking at everything we have in place, beyond a Sunday morning. *How are we held back from our greatest potential by wanting to hold to the very things that stand in our way?* This is our chance to look at and develop our mission and how our resources currently align with it. Every resource or asset – buildings, personnel, services, holdings and expenses – must point to fulfilling the mission Christ entrusts to us.

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This is our moment, a call to action! It requires sacrifice and a commitment to listen in a *synodal* way, working together as the one Body of Christ. The more we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit, resolving to participate fully and fearlessly – yes, sacrificially! – acknowledging sins and failures that have led to decline, we will live the Lord's Prayer. We unite with Jesus as a people who want nothing more than to proclaim by our actions that hope and desire, "thy will be done."

Our hard-working, dedicated pastors and parish leaders will take up new challenges and opportunities to show their boundless love for their people. As visionaries – with the patience of saints at times! – they will continue walking with them towards a future that can be handed on to their successors and to younger generations that will take up their pew and go forth to serve their community.

Our youth and young adults must be warmly welcomed and involved in this process not only for their own unique perspectives and valuable insights, but also since our decisions will strongly impact their future. Special care must be given to include the poor, persons with disabilities and the more vulnerable among us. Their stories and challenges will help us stay focused on the healing and redemptive mission of Christ. In this *Holy Year of Hope*, all of us must walk on this pilgrimage with Jesus Christ, trusting his guidance on building a stronger foundation for future generations, longing to bear active witness to his saving word.

The details of the process will be unfolded in weeks to come and launched on Pentecost Sunday. It is centered on sound principles of pastoral care, unified action and evangelization, ensuring every participant feels heard, valued and supported as we walk together with Christ in this transition. If it seems like something we already do, or have done before, consider that we live in a landscape of more difficult circumstances, very much like the first Christians in a pagan world, skeptical and hostile to a message of hope in life beyond death and of freedom from the shackles of sin. This will not be another "Called to be Church," which served other needs in another time. So much has changed for our people whose care and well-being we are responsible for. The faith and trust of so many have been shaken. **We need to focus now on re-evangelization, re-education and becoming the *mission* Church we long for and know we can be.**

My prayers for you now are for a fruitful and richly blessed Holy Week and a joyful Easter season. We have every reason to be confident that the graces yet to unfold throughout and beyond this *Holy Year of Hope* will reveal that our best days are yet to come. In the beautiful words from the Hebrew Scriptures (Nm 6:24-26), I pray: "The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The Lord look upon you kindly and give you his peace!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Edward B. Scharfenberger

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Bishop of Albany