

The Pastoral Plan for The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Archdiocese is, at her core, a family. As in any family, it is important periodically to gather around the table and just talk. What's working and what's not? Are we the people who we say we are—who God calls us to be? How can we be better? The time to have those conversations, of course, is when things are calm and everyone is healthy, not during moments of crisis or euphoria when nerves may be raw and judgments clouded.

When I arrived in the Archdiocese of Atlanta 10 years ago, one of the first things we did was to have just such a conversation, which resulted in a thorough review of and strategic plan for our Archdiocesan family. That plan focused on the structure of the Archdiocese, the facilities of our parishes, our areas of ministry, our business practices, and generally the best ways to support at every level our mission to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in these 69 counties and the world. Such strategic planning was a necessary and, I think most would agree, a very fruitful undertaking. I believe that the plan developed in that process has served us well in implementing a structure of support for our parishes, missions, schools and other institutions.

Since that first review was done, the Church in north and central Georgia has continued to expand. It became more and more apparent that together we needed to understand more clearly and address the very real challenges and, equally, the incredible opportunities before our faith communities. Such assessments lead to what is generally called a Pastoral Plan.

The foundation of any diocesan Pastoral Plan is the continued need to share the Good News of Jesus Christ, which is that God knows us intimately, loves us dearly, and challenges us to know Him intimately. With the confidence of Jesus' unconditional love, hope prevails. A deep joy is possible even in the midst of trials and tragedy. In Jesus is found happiness and a peace that the world cannot give. Jesus' love is for *you* ... and for everyone.

Knowing, Living and Sharing our Catholic Faith is the call of the baptized. Inside and outside the Church, everyone seeks purpose and meaning in this life. Jesus—God made man—came to reveal the depth of God's love for humankind. The Good News of Christ is to be lived and shared!

In March of 2014, I invited all Catholics, practicing or not, to join me on a journey to discern a new Pastoral Plan for our Archdiocese. This starting point began the work of creating a new plan that would meet today's pastoral needs of the people of God. In the past few weeks you have likely seen or heard the question, "Am I in it?" or "Are we in it?" Yes, each one of you is in the Pastoral Plan because the hope and the love of Jesus Christ are for each of you. It is my well-founded hope that this plan is implemented in such an inclusive way that all who call north and central Georgia their home will feel very much a part of our family and will see themselves in this visionary statement.

The timing of this process was fortuitous. Just as we were setting out on our journey, the Universal Church asked for direct input from the faithful for the first time in history in preparation for the forthcoming Synod on the Family. An exciting new spirit of collaboration among our laity, religious and clergy emerged.

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In a striking demonstration of your desire to participate actively in the life of our Archdiocesan family, unprecedented numbers of you responded to our online survey. Between the survey conducted by the Holy See in preparation for the Extraordinary Synod on the Family and our own Archdiocesan survey for this Pastoral Plan, we received input from more than 20,000 households!

Your generous response was encouraging, inspiring, and even a bit overwhelming. It indicated a desire among the people of this Archdiocese to be heard, as well as a desire to participate in identifying and addressing our most pressing pastoral priorities. It demonstrated a trust and a confidence in me as your Shepherd, which I assure you is mutual! It exemplified the kind of shared responsibility that is necessary for our family to remain healthy and to grow by relying on and communicating with one another in new and innovative ways—confident of the Presence of the Holy Spirit.

Surveys were tabulated and four areas of Catholic life were strongly identified to be in need of our attention:

- Knowing Our Faith
- Living Our Faith
- Spreading/Keeping Our Faith
- The Evolution of Our Parishes

After these four areas were identified, I asked our parishes to suggest courses of action relative to each. Again you responded enthusiastically, supplying some 400 ideas. Last fall 12 separate sessions to prioritize these parish recommendations were held throughout the Archdiocese. These sessions were conducted with parish representatives in each of our 10 deaneries, with our permanent deacons and religious men and women, and with our priests, who devoted their entire biennial Convocation to this effort.

These 12 gatherings revealed great enthusiasm and extraordinary consistency among the members of our family—lay, religious, and clergy—about what must be done to become the local Church our people need and deserve. The input gathered and synthesized at those sessions also revealed that many of the approaches that have been used in our parishes for decades are no longer working well. Creative and fresh approaches are needed to minister effectively to our Catholic community and beyond, along with broader implementation of existing programs that have proven successful.

After careful consultation with Catholics throughout the 69 counties of our Archdiocese and with prayerful consideration, I am pleased to share my vision of the Pastoral Plan that will guide our Archdiocese for the next five years. This document focuses on “what” we must do. There are many details that will be worked out regarding “how” we will move forward as we continue to communicate our expectations of and our commitments to one another as members of this unique and remarkable family of faith.

The lasting fruit of this Pastoral Plan will be revealed in the way that we, as Church, fulfill the **Great Commission** Jesus gave His apostles and us: “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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 28:18-20] It should be noted that

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the manner in which we move forward may differ among our parishes—and this is good—since each of our faith communities, while tightly connected to the Universal Church, has its own unique culture and character.

In the pages that follow I will share the recommendations gathered from and prioritized by you over the past few months. Our goal is that this Pastoral Plan will guide our Church in the mission that is so clearly and wonderfully articulated in Jesus' words.

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Knowing Our Faith

“Take to heart these words which I command you today. Keep repeating them to your children.” [Deuteronomy 6:6-7]

What We Heard - Reflections taken from the survey of our people...

“I believe that the Archdiocese of Atlanta is a rich and thriving community, and there is a great opportunity here to help people grow in faith and get excited about the Lord. I believe that there are many good people here, but they often lack knowledge of basic fundamentals of Catholicism and Christianity. I think that people must be taught how to: Pray, develop a personal relationship with God, and discern and follow His will. Persons must be excited about the Lord themselves if they are to get others excited.”

“Any and all help in catechizing the laity is desperately needed, especially those teaching it to the next generation.”

“The Faith can be complex and appear inflexible if not taught with a sense of understanding to reach the people where they are.”

“Recognize the hunger parishioners have to learn more and grow in their spirituality.”

“I’d like to see better support for the way families truly live ... more opportunities that readily are available to all families.”

Discernment Session Recommendations

We will work together to:

- Move to a family formation model that recognizes the diversity of family units today and that emphasizes the head of the family’s role in faith formation.
- Prioritize adult catechesis.
- Offer more opportunities to participate in parish life as a family—service days, spiritual activities, social events.

Our Vision

Pope Francis exclaimed, “How precious is the family as the privileged place for transmitting the faith!” [World Youth Day, July 26, 2013, the Feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne]

Faith formation begins in our homes. Our challenge is to support our Catholic families as they persevere in this vital task of knowing our faith. To do this we need to take a fresh look at our catechetical program offerings, which are meant to build on parents’ efforts. **We have been challenged by our clergy and faithful to focus on family catechesis, which will require us to rethink comprehensively how we support our parishes in passing on the faith.**

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All family members need ongoing opportunities to learn more about and deepen their understanding of their rich Catholic Faith, whatever their age or state of life. There is wonderful work being done in our Parish Schools of Religion and Catholic Schools with our youth, but we must recognize that it is in the family where those lessons must begin and then be sustained, reinforced and lived.

Christian formation will only succeed if it is nurtured in the home, and that includes a commitment by Catholic families to participate in catechetical, service, and social activities at the parish. In return, our parishes must create opportunities for such participation that are accessible and relevant. They must be designed to work in a community routinely overscheduled.

Recognizing the need for a variety of formation models and approaches, the Chancery will be available to help the parishes in reviewing their practices and, where requested, help design a makeover of current Parish School of Religion and catechetical programs for all ages. Our efforts must focus on the family as that privileged place where faith takes root and is fostered.

We must creatively use the technology available to all of us. We live in a moment where instant answers are the expectation, so we must be sure that our Archdiocese provides resources that may be shared in this high-speed environment. With support from the Chancery, parishes and missions must develop and identify learning options that may be accessed any place, any day, at any time!

We've all heard this question during the Sacrament of Baptism of children: "You have asked to have your child baptized. In doing so you are accepting the responsibility of training this child in the practice of the faith. It will be your duty to bring this child up to keep God's commandments as Christ taught us, by loving God and our neighbor. Do you clearly understand what you are undertaking?"

Indeed, this responsibility is shared by every member of our Catholic family. All must recognize that each of us is in a different place in terms of our faith formation. Our catechetical offerings must be developed in such a way that we help those who are making their first steps into the process as well as those who have been on the journey all their lives. Jesus met people where they were. He encountered their brokenness, their sinfulness, their lack of understanding, their resistance to his teaching. And yet He loved them. He taught them with words and actions. He did not threaten or judge. His model must become ours so that we can embrace, love, and assist all of our people in the role of passing on the rich faith that Jesus gave to each of us.

The parish must be the center for support of the family through special service opportunities, liturgies, spiritual exercises and family-oriented social events. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but its primary goal must be to support the family first.

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Living Our Faith

“For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.” [James 2:26]

What We Heard - Reflections taken from the survey of our people...

“I have to believe the way of our Lord is the way to heaven. So the emphasis of the Church and its parishioners should be to assist those who are poor, infirm, weak of spirit, discriminated against, and cannot help themselves. Follow the lead of Pope Francis.”

“More preaching/teaching about why we believe what we believe.”

“Connect the heart and the head. Not so much of a focus on the rules but on why they are instilled.”

“More opportunities for families to serve and worship together. For example, family Stations of the Cross, a family holy hour (open to even the youngest).”

“More concentration on a personal relationship with Jesus through the Scripture studies and practical interpretation of the Scriptures.”

“Ignite the love of Jesus within a person. As I watch people come to Mass on Sundays, it looks like a duty rather than a blessing. Evangelized communities where Jesus' teachings are lived rather than just read.”

Discernment Session Recommendations

We will work together to:

- Promote understanding the “why” behind the Church’s teachings.
- Prioritize charity and service as the epitome of living out the faith.
- Encourage a deeper personal prayer life.
- Build a stronger sense of unity within the parish and increase personal connection to the parish.

Our Vision

The first Christians were easily identifiable by the way they lived their lives. **We need to study, learn, and use the Acts of the Apostles as a guide for how we conduct ourselves as people of faith.**

Actions speak louder than words; our faith must move us to action since faith without works is dead. But that faith must be fed. Where will that happen? As we have discussed, it must begin in the home, but it must not remain there. We must each make the personal commitment to carry it outward. We need to deepen our own personal prayer lives. Unity with Christ and His message will sustain us on this journey of faith—unity lived out moment by moment in each disciple’s life.

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Our parish communities are to be beacons of faith, living out the Gospel by reaching out in love to all who are in need, all who live on the margins of society, all who live in fear and loneliness. The Catholic Church's response to this challenge of how we live our faith is given structure and meaning through her teachings. But do we really know what those teachings are?

I believe that many of us are challenged by a question recently asked by the Holy Father, "What does your faith look like?" A principal objective of this Pastoral Plan will be to identify and to provide educational opportunities in our parish communities to explain the "why" of the Catholic Church's teachings.

Often when we speak of social justice, the topic becomes so politicized that we can forget that the core of our teachings comes directly from the words of Jesus regarding how we should live our lives and how we will one day be judged. We can share the very real human connection that is required of each of us when we are moved by a deeper and richer Catholic Christian faith. The quest for social justice is the fruit of that faith.

Parishes and missions will identify outreach programs in all of their communities and share the successes of those programs so that they may be expanded throughout our local Church. In addition to these actions and programs, we need to become visible advocates for social justice in our parishes and the broader community by addressing the systemic causes of injustice in society. We need to make the words of the hymn come alive in our hearts and in our behavior: "They will know we are Christians by our love."

Our parishes and missions must become the hub for this life of faith. They must create opportunities that support what is happening in the lives of individuals and families who are part of their faith communities. We must ensure that our parishes and missions are welcoming to all of God's people so that we may experience in equal measure the love and goodness of God!

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Spreading/Keeping Our Faith

“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 ...” [Matthew 28:19]

What We Heard - Reflections taken from the survey of our people...

“Attract more people to the faith by casting a larger net and welcoming more. The Catholic Church can seem intimidating to those outside of the faith looking for a church. We need to be more inclusive. Pope Francis is doing this and has set the attitude for us to attract more people to the Church that have never attended or been away for a long time.”

“So many of the teens, upon receiving Confirmation, do not continue to be active Church members.”

“Promote the Catholic Church better through the TV, radio, media. Other Christian churches are more effective.”

“Listen to those who are hurting and reach out to those who have left the church.”

Discernment Session Recommendations

We will work together to:

- Promote and provide infrastructure for small faith communities to keep people connected to the Church.
- Use new technology and social media to keep the Church up to date and present in the lives of Catholics.
- Foster whole family programs to keep parishioners centered on the parish.
- Develop more formal outreach programs for groups who feel disenfranchised from the Catholic Church.

Our Vision

It seems counterintuitive, even contradictory, to say that to move forward we need to look back, but it is true. **Our “new normal” in terms of connectedness, engagement, and outreach just might need to look like a “very old normal.”**

The early Church was based principally on small faith-sharing communities. Much of this was cultural, and some had very practical safety reasons. The early Christians were being persecuted. While in our culture that may not be the case, we must build on the strong tradition of small faith groups to help build up the life of our parishes and support our families as “the privileged place for transmitting the faith.” One thing we need to remember is that these small faith groups need to support, not compete with or supplant the liturgy of the parish.

There is no more accurate image of the Church than when we are gathered for the Eucharist—especially the Sunday Eucharist. Here we are the family of God most perfectly. Our worship life is the source of our strength and identity. Listening to God’s Word and sharing the Bread of Life and

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the Cup of Salvation in joy is where we are most the Children of God. Good worship is magnetic and inviting both to those who share in the liturgy and for those who observe the Church at prayer and long to be invited to the Lord's Table. The liturgy is the source and summit of the Church's identity and mission. When we worship well together, we invite others to join us. When our liturgy is reverential, welcoming, warm, and inspiring, we rouse those who partake in that worship to become even more perfectly the reflection of God's invitation to the entire world to draw near to that family over which He is the one Father and Lord. Good worship is evangelization in action.

Service projects and programs are a wonderful way to get Catholics of all ages more involved in their parishes and communities. Most of these projects will be performed in our local communities, and some of them may not be sponsored by our parishes and missions. While mission trips are often tied to high school and college service initiatives, and the work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is typically the purview of the adults in the parish, neither endeavor is mutually exclusive. We must facilitate worthwhile opportunities for all Catholics to answer meaningfully the question: "Does my faith call me to have compassion for and to help another?"

We are all inspired by our people who share their talents assisting with services and events for those who are differently abled, and we are equally moved by those who participate. There are many opportunities to do so—interpreting for the hearing impaired at Mass or volunteering at our Archdiocesan Toni's Camp for people with developmental disabilities are just two examples. Programs that exist should be promoted more effectively and new ones should be identified. Expanding our parish and Archdiocesan outreach to those with special needs and their families should be an important component in this process as well.

It is often said that good news travels fast. The Good News of Jesus Christ has traveled both fast and far in the past 2,000 years. We as Catholic Christians are called to share this Good News through better use of social media and technology. We should use every means available to us to inform, educate, and encourage our people in their love of Jesus Christ and their involvement in spreading the Good News.

There was a time when the parish was the center of life for our Catholic families and communities, and in many places it still is! We should continue to encourage participation in the life of the Church by every member of every family. Programs that support, enliven, and build up family and parish relationships should be fostered.

Our Holy Father has reminded us of the words of Jesus - we are not called to judge our neighbors but to love them. So many people are marginalized by lifestyle, physical illness, mental and emotional difficulties, financial, and other challenges. Jesus embraced and loved all He encountered. We can do no less.

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Evolution of Our Parishes

“We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome ... yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.” [Acts of the Apostles 2:9-11]

What We Heard - Reflections taken from the survey of our people...

“Our church facility is not adequate to support the activities needed in a parish our size. While we can seat a sufficient number at Mass, our largest gathering room holds just over 150 people. It is difficult to bring the community together with these limitations. Our staff is very limited, mostly part-time employees. It is time to make some investments in our future.”

“Much, much, MUCH more help is needed to aid the integration of cultures.”

“We need an encouragement to share resources within area parishes, and to ‘see’ each other.”

“I also believe we must be more supportive of the spiritual and mental health of our priests.”

Discernment Session Recommendations

We will work together to:

- Let qualified laity/deacons do more administration so priests can focus on sacraments/catechesis.
- Empower deaneries to collaborate and share ministries, staff, and clergy resources.
- Create a welcoming and nurturing environment for all cultures within the parish.

Our Vision

At present, in our Archdiocesan family, there is simply not enough room for everyone at the table. Sufficient worship and gathering space—access to the Sacraments for every soul wishing to participate—is a high priority, a fundamental responsibility, and, at a moment when too many dioceses are closing worship sites, the happiest ‘problem’ an Archbishop could ever hope to face! Parishes created with anticipated congregations in the hundreds now, in some cases, number in the thousands. Church buildings are sometimes undersized before the ceremonial ribbon is cut. **We must reallocate the resources of the Archdiocese in creative ways to fund and support this expansion of facilities in our high growth areas.**

To accomplish this, our Archdiocese will need to provide both financial resources and support teams. We are blessed with many good and holy priests, as well as a number of men in formation for the priesthood, but we must acknowledge that the growth in parishioners is far outpacing the number of priests serving our parishes. Many of our priests are reaching the age where they are ready to transition to senior status with fewer administrative responsibilities. Who will fill these roles?

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Our Archdiocese needs to look at new models of parish leadership, which could mean in some cases expanding the role of qualified deacons and lay administrators to take on non-sacramental responsibilities. Parishes and missions will need to work within their deaneries (geographic groupings of parishes) to identify opportunities to share faith formation initiatives, administrative services, and even meeting space. Our Chancery offices will need to be realigned to provide support for these new configurations.

Our Archdiocese must find new tools to help our parishes adapt to operating in a multicultural environment since our church family directly reflects the changing demographics of our 69 counties! In many of the most highly populated counties in our Archdiocese, there is no longer any single ethnic group that equals more than 50 percent of the total population.

Since the concept of “parish” varies by culture and country, the evolution of each parish will be affected differently depending on its unique cultural mix. The experience of Catholicism varies for those of different cultures. As our parishes continue to adapt to this reality, they are urged to share with one another their inclusive and flexible approaches to meeting the pastoral needs of all parishioners. The Chancery will also work with our parishes to help them identify common stages in this evolution, as well as best practices that allow diverse cultures to share fully in parish life in our local church.

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Implementation and Conclusion

As I stated at the outset, the intent of this Pastoral Plan is not to try to detail every nuance of its implementation. We must do that together, and it will take time. Every person who participated in the discernment sessions was reminded repeatedly that they were to think not just about their own parish when prioritizing the recommendations, but to consider our entire Archdiocesan family.

As your Archbishop I commit myself to work with our priests, lay leadership, councils, and my Chancery staff to support these initiatives. I will count on our priests, deacons, religious and the lay members of this local Church to do the same. In recent weeks I have met with each of our 10 deaneries to review the Plan and discuss how we can work together to bring it to life.

I urge our parishes and missions to propose and pilot ways to begin to address the “how to” in regard to implementing each of the recommendations outlined herein. Successful concepts that are already in place and those that are created will be highlighted. My prayer is that we can share the successes of individual parish and community efforts through our deaneries in order to expand them throughout our Archdiocese and beyond.

Our deaneries should regularly dedicate a portion of their meetings to reviewing and sharing these ideas and plans, the “how to” that will allow us to move forward. They should nurture a spirit of collaboration and accountability so that all of our people may benefit from their efforts. Our Deans will be encouraged to report progress on these efforts to the Council of Priests and the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council.

Implementation of this Plan will occur over the next five years. While the majority of the work will be done in the parishes and deaneries, our Archdiocesan offices and ministries will be repositioned to support and enhance the creative efforts taking place in the parishes. To that end we will begin a comprehensive review of our agencies to develop teams that will focus on these four areas of attention.

We will communicate regularly in *The Georgia Bulletin*, on our website and through other media about how we are doing in response to these important focus areas. I commit to make an annual update on our progress.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, together we can make an enormous difference in the life and legacy of this local Church, but it will take all of us. I invite each of you to join me in praying for the success of this important effort. We have been abundantly blessed in this Archdiocese. We must use all the gifts and talents with which we’ve been blessed to build up God’s Kingdom here on earth. Each of us is called to do our part to Know our Faith, to Live our Faith, to Share our Faith and to participate in the Evolution of our Parishes as we continue to grow.

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As we move forward with implementing our Pastoral Plan I am asking our pastors and administrators to:

- Share our pastoral vision with all members of their parish or mission.
- Form a parish team to prioritize the recommendations for each issue for their specific faith community.
- Create implementation teams to review current practices, develop innovative new approaches and share the results of their efforts with other parishes.

I am asking our Chancery leadership to:

- Ensure that the priorities of this pastoral vision become the priorities of their staff.
- Identify the structural changes and resources that will be needed to support our parishes and missions as they implement these recommendations.
 - A website dedicated to the Pastoral Plan has been established.
 - By July 1, 2015, the following will be completed:
 - Implementation of a central number and email address to receive pastoral plan questions from parishes and missions.
 - Creation of a Multicultural Office to help parishes address the challenges of welcoming and meeting the needs of all cultures within the parish.
 - Realignment of the Advocacy Ministries.
 - By October 1, 2015, the Chancery will develop a digital networking strategy to guide efforts that will enable parishes and missions to share information quickly and easily.

I ask you to join me in praying each day for the success of our Pastoral Planning process. May the Lord richly bless every member of our Archdiocese of Atlanta family of faith!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Wilton D. Gregory
Archbishop of Atlanta