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The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord
January 6, 2025

We Are His Witnesses

A Pastoral Letter to the Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful of the Archdiocese of Newark

The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him. (Acts 5: 30–32)

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The peace of Christ our Redeemer be with you.

On November 24, 2013, the Solemnity of Christ the King, Pope Francis published *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*). Many scholars have called this apostolic exhortation the foundational document of the Holy Father's papacy, now completing its 11th year. Everything Pope Francis has said and done since *Evangelii Gaudium* was written has developed and carried forward the ideas contained in this visionary reflection addressed to the entire People of God.

Nearly three years after the publication of *Evangelii Gaudium*, on November 7, 2016, Pope Francis appointed me Archbishop of Newark. I arrived here in northern New Jersey two months later without any specific agenda or programmatic vision for this Local Church other than what Pope Francis had written in his first apostolic exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*.

During my seven years of ministry in our archdiocese, I have learned a great deal about the hopes and fears, joys and frustrations, opportunities and challenges facing God's people in the four diverse and distinctive counties that make up the Archdiocese of Newark. In recent years, we have confronted numerous challenges, including the sexual abuse crisis, a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, social unrest, and significant demographic shifts — including both growth and decline here in northern New Jersey. Additionally, we have experienced the confusion caused by political turmoil and by challenges to the way we relate to God in our daily

lives (symbolized by adjustments in the way we express our Catholic faith, such as social distancing, masks, and the temporary closure of our churches).

A vibrant and diverse Catholic community

The good news is that we have survived this tumultuous time and are thriving as diverse communities of faith—worshipping God in Word and Sacrament, handing on our faith to children, youth and adults, and serving the needs of our sisters and brothers, especially the poor and vulnerable, here at home and in many different parts of the world. Signs of hope include population growth, the engagement of culturally diverse lay women and men in various spiritual movements and pastoral activities, and an increase in the number of donors and amounts contributed to our Annual Catholic Appeal. God continues to bless this archdiocese, and I am deeply grateful for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which sustain and renew us as a Eucharistic people and as a family of faith.

When I look at the Church in northern New Jersey, I see a vibrant and diverse Catholic community with dedicated bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated women and men, and laity. This Local Church owes much to the generations of immigrant women and men who came before us and who built our parishes, schools, and Catholic organizations. I also see an archdiocese, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that is not afraid to confront its challenges and that adapts and grows, embracing new opportunities as the world around us changes.

If you asked me today what my vision is for the Church in northern New Jersey, I would make my own the Holy Father’s words from *Evangelii Gaudium*:

I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are (EG #25).

What is this “path” of pastoral conversion and missionary discipleship that we are called to follow as the People of God here in northern New Jersey? Jesus tells us that He Himself is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). He invites us to repent, to change the way we live, and to follow Him. What’s more, He invites us to be His witnesses and to share His love and His truth



with everyone we encounter. When I reflect on what it means “to be His witnesses,” I think of the words of the Prophet Isaiah and the image of the Suffering Servant (cf. Is 43:1–20). “You are my witnesses,” the Lord says to His faithful people, “my servants whom I have chosen [and called by name] to know and believe in me.” Have no fear, the Lord tells us. We are to be people of confidence and hope. “See, I am doing something new!” God Himself assures us. “Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the wilderness I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers.” Our job is to open our minds and hearts to whatever new things the Holy Spirit is doing in our midst.

Pastoral conversion requires nothing more or less than our willingness to be open to what God’s Word is saying to us and to listen to one another. As we travel together as daughters and sons of God the Father and as sisters and brothers in Christ, united in the Holy Spirit, we are challenged to be agents of growth and change in our world. We must not be afraid to leave the comforts of home, or to risk venturing out into the world, because we are not alone. The Spirit of God leads the way, and we are accompanied by Mary and all the saints who walk alongside us as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Synodality

The term that best describes the journey that we are traveling together now is “synodality.” This term is often misunderstood today, but it is an ancient concept dating back to the earliest days of Christian history. As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit, who empowered Jesus’ fearful disciples, gathered the leaders of the young Church together in prayer, attentive listening, and dialogue to discern God’s will and to make important decisions about who they were, what they believed, and what God was calling them to be and do as missionary disciples of the risen Lord.

Pope Francis frequently reminds us that synodality is not about changing Church teaching. It is, first and foremost, a way of living the Gospel. Synodality is a style of pastoral leadership that is

Synodality

Synodality is the act of engaging in authentic dialogue within and beyond the Church, fostering a united, inclusive, and missionary community.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, synodality requires listening, prayerful discernment, and active collaboration among all the baptized. It calls pastoral leaders to involve all members of the Body of Christ in a co-responsible way, open to God’s will in fulfilling the Church’s mission. Synodality encourages the rejection of individualism and rigid ideologies, embracing the communion of all members of Christ’s Body, both living and deceased. We are one in Christ, traveling together as sisters and brothers in God’s Family.

As St. Pope Paul VI said, “The Church must engage in dialogue with all people of good will, inside and outside the Church. Its catholicity is no idle boast.” All are welcome.



open and responsive to the needs of people today. Synodal leadership affirms the fact that every baptized person has the right and the responsibility to participate in the Church's life and ministry. It recognizes that we are all members of the one Body of Christ and that every one of us is called to conversion and to missionary discipleship in Jesus' name.

The same is true of our ecclesial structures—our parishes, schools, and all our Catholic institutions and ministries. As the Holy Father says, "We cannot leave things as they presently are." We must allow the Holy Spirit to renew us, as individuals and as communities, so that we can effectively carry the joy of the Gospel to others here at home and to the ends of the earth.

Synodality urges us to reject the individualism and rigid ideologies that are so prevalent in our culture today and to embrace the communion that exists among all living and deceased members of Christ's Body. We are all one in Christ, and we travel together as sisters and brothers in the one Family of God. This fact demands that we respect one another regardless of our differences, that we listen to each other despite our disagreements, and that we work together to build up the Kingdom of God here in northern New Jersey.

The Final Document, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, which was approved by the Holy Father at the conclusion of the Synod in Rome last October, makes this powerful observation:

The Church exists to bear witness in the world to the most decisive moment in history: the Resurrection of Jesus. The Risen Christ brings peace to the world and gives us the gift of His Spirit. The living Christ is the source of true freedom, the foundation for a hope that does not disappoint, the revelation of the true face of God and humanity's ultimate destiny (#14).

Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is the principle that decisions should be made at the most local level possible, ensuring everyone has a voice and can contribute. It empowers individuals and communities to participate in decisions that affect them.

Subsidiarity prevents personal interests from conflicting with the common good, fostering personal responsibility and liberty. It affirms that local groups have unique insights into what's best for their communities.

Catholic teaching holds that subsidiarity creates a fair society by promoting co-responsibility, collaboration, and engagement. It supports programs that allocate resources to local communities, as long as they are regularly evaluated for effectiveness and necessity.

When the need arises, higher-ranking structures must provide assistance to those of lower rank in matters where they require help.



We are His witnesses. We exist to bring Christ's peace to a world at war. As missionary disciples, we are called to bring the living Christ, who is the source of all freedom and hope, to our sisters and brothers who have abandoned hope, whether here in northern New Jersey or anywhere else in the world. We are compelled to bear witness to the lost and the lonely among us, and we believe that Jesus Christ is "the face of God and humanity's ultimate destiny." Through Him, with Him, and in Him, God is with us, so we never have to be afraid.

Questions

Several important questions naturally arise: How can we be faithful witnesses to this extraordinary truth in our world today? How can we respond to the call for pastoral conversion and missionary discipleship in the present moment? How can we prepare our archdiocese for the challenges of future ministry when we have no clear understanding of what that future will look like or what it will require of us?

To address these questions and many others like them, our archdiocese is embarking on a multi-year initiative aimed at providing a pastoral and missionary response to the evolving circumstances of northern New Jersey. This response will be built on fostering new relationships within our archdiocesan community (synodality), and it will involve establishing or updating structures that can engage every member of the faith community in the Church's mission (subsidiarity and solidarity). At the heart of this process is a spirit of collaboration and co-responsibility between archdiocesan and parish leaders as we work alongside the people we serve to discern the future of the Archdiocese of Newark together.

This new pastoral planning process is called ***We Are His Witnesses***. With this pastoral letter, I outline what we hope to achieve together, guided by the Holy Spirit and supported by the active participation and prayerful discernment of all members of our archdiocesan family.

Solidarity

Solidarity affirms that all people are God's children, connected as sisters and brothers. It emphasizes our interdependence, where we need each other to live in peace and harmony. The Catholic Church teaches that solidarity is key to living God's love by helping others and creating a united, compassionate world.

Though differences exist among individuals and communities, all are part of God's family. This family extends beyond immediate relatives, neighbors, or citizens of one country. We must appreciate these differences, care for each other's well-being, and ensure fair treatment and access to necessities.

Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti* #116, "Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights."



We Are His Witnesses will address the following questions:

- **Where are we today?** What are the opportunities and challenges we face in the changing landscape of northern New Jersey? How can we more effectively embrace the concept of synodality as a way of being Church? How can we develop and sustain a bold missionary outreach here in northern New Jersey?
- **Where is God calling us to go?** What new opportunities is the Holy Spirit opening for us as we proclaim the joy of the Gospel in the diverse neighborhoods of Bergen, Essex, Hudson, and Union counties? How can we respond to the growing desire for life-long faith formation and spiritual renewal? How do we develop and sustain a deeper sense of co-responsibility and collaboration among leadership here in our archdiocese?
- **How will we get there together?** What changes do we need to make in our pastoral ministries, systems, and structures to meet the demands of pastoral conversion and missionary discipleship, both now and in the years ahead? How can we better use regional structures to encourage collaboration among parishes and promote the concepts of subsidiarity and solidarity? How do we engage in pastoral planning that truly is grounded in our mission?

Each of these areas will be explored through prayerful discernment, attentive listening, and respectful dialogue. We approach this process without preconceived judgments or ready-made solutions. We are eager to hear the voices of all the people in our archdiocese concerning the opportunities and challenges we face as a missionary Church, both now and in the future.

I want to make it clear that ***We Are His Witnesses*** is not a project with a hidden agenda for closing or consolidating parishes, schools, or other institutions. We have something very different in mind, namely the pastoral conversion of our hearts and minds to prepare us, as an archdiocese, for the work of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ now and in the future. Changes will certainly arise from this process of spiritual growth and renewal because, as noted earlier, “We cannot leave things as they presently are.” While realignment may be necessary, it will only be in response to the question: Where is the Holy Spirit calling us to go? We must be bold and courageous in responding to God’s call, but any changes to ministries, services, or structures will be the result of careful consultation, open dialogue, and prayerful discernment of God’s will for His Church.



Collaborative Leadership

Our purpose is to respond wholeheartedly to the Great Commission given to us by the Lord Himself: “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” (Mt 28: 19–20). As Pope Francis reminds us, the task before us is serious:

If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (EG. #49).

We are His Witnesses—the mind and heart, the hands and feet of Jesus at work in our world. This means we must be ready to go wherever we are needed and do whatever is necessary to serve our sisters and brothers in Christ.

I am pleased to announce that Bishop Michael Saporito, Regional Bishop for Bergen County, will lead this initiative. Bishop Saporito will oversee and coordinate all aspects of the planning process, ensuring effective communication with pastoral leaders and their communities and facilitating broad consultation in a transparent manner.

I am also happy to introduce the members of our newly formed Commission on Pastoral Planning. These gifted individuals have generously volunteered their time and talent to assist Bishop Saporito in the design and implementation of this comprehensive initiative. Their leadership and insights will help us foster collaboration and co-responsibility among all members of our archdiocesan family.

Members of the Commission include:

Ms. Carol Conklin-Spillane | St. Pius X - Old Tappan
 Mr. Tom Abrams | St. Helen - Westfield
 Mr. John Camargo | St. Mary - Plainfield
 Dr. Anthony Carlino, MD | Immaculate Heart of Mary - Scotch Plains
 Dr. Thomas Ortiz, MD | St. Cassian - Montclair
 Ms. Maria Zamora | Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart



Mrs. Brigid D'Souza | St. Aedan - Jersey City
 Mr. Marco Guerrero | St. John Paul II - Bayonne
 Mr. Philip DeRosa | St. Joseph - Oradell
 Mrs. Sonja Garlin | St. Patrick & Assumption/All Saints - Jersey City
 Ms. Rosemary Nwabueze | Christ the King - Jersey City
 Ms. Christine James | St. Teresa of Calcutta - Montclair
 Sr. Sandy DeMasi | St. Rose of Lima - Short Hills
 Mr. Chris Haliskoe | St. Ann Hoboken
 Mr. Paul Eberle | Our Lady of the Lake - Verona
 Ms. Maria Pilar Salamanca | St. Joseph - Jersey City
 Mr. Carlos Peña | St. John the Evangelist - Bergenfield
 Fr. Juan Jose Esteban | St. Catherine of Sienna - Cedar Grove
 Msgr. Thomas Nydegger | St. Helen - Westfield
 Fr. Kevin Kilgore | St. Pius X - Old Tappan
 Fr. Esterminio Chica | Christ the King - Jersey City

While Bishop Saporito, the Planning Commission members, and archdiocesan staff will facilitate the day-to-day operations of this pastoral planning initiative, it is important to note that everyone in the Archdiocese of Newark will have a role in responding to the opportunities and challenges of the future. As this initiative moves forward, we will provide additional information on how you can participate. In the meantime, I invite you to begin by praying for the success of this initiative. ***We Are His Witnesses*** will only be effective in addressing the questions outlined above if we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us and join together in prayer as sisters and brothers united in Christ for the good of all.

Our proposed timeline aims to present a unified pastoral plan by the summer of 2026. Together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will shape a future rooted in Christ's mission and responsive to the needs of His people here in northern New Jersey.

Our future

What will this future look like? Will it be very different from our past or present? My hope is that we will build on the successes and accomplishments of the past and present while also remaining open to the new directions that the Holy Spirit is asking us to pursue. I pray that what will emerge from this new initiative is a true pastoral conversion and a profound expression of missionary discipleship that responds to the deepest needs of our people for the things that only Christ can provide.



As initial steps in the process of pastoral planning, I have asked that by July 2025, every parish establish fully functioning pastoral and finance councils and that parish leaders receive training in the synodal style of leadership with a missionary outlook. I am also asking every pastor to lead his parish in reflecting on what it means to be a “shared parish” and to provide faith formation opportunities based on the Word of God in small groups. Additionally, I am asking every parish, regardless of size or location, to be open to new alliances with other parishes that can enhance our ability to discern the shape of the future.

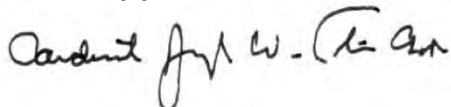
Christ alone can satisfy the hungry hearts of His people in Word and Sacrament. Only Christ working through us can feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, heal the sick, and comfort those who are in distress. Our mission is to make Christ present to people in all four counties of our archdiocese. In doing so, we acknowledge the serious responsibility we have been given to be His witnesses and to ensure that no segment of our community is “living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life.”

We Are His Witnesses provides our archdiocese a chance to prepare for the opportunities and challenges that confront us as a missionary Church that is synodal and co-responsible in its pastoral leadership. By following the guidance of the Holy Spirit and by listening carefully to the Word of God and the voices of all our sisters and brothers, we hope to be faithful witnesses to our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Once again, I ask you to pray for the success of ***We Are His Witnesses*** and to commit yourself to active participation in this process in whatever ways are appropriate for you. Together, we will respond in faith to the changing circumstances of our time and continue to be the people that God calls us to be here in the Archdiocese of Newark.

With confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, let us go forth in hope to proclaim the joy of the Gospel to all.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

