

With the grace of God, strategic planning will bring new life, vitality

By Bishop Charles C. Thompson

For some time now, the Diocese of Evansville has been engaged in a strategic planning process. This process, which began prior to my appointment as bishop, was initiated to begin addressing the need for parish reorganization. The ultimate purpose of this process, however, is to strengthen the mission of the Catholic Church throughout Southwest Indiana.

Change is almost always met with resistance, and often results in an experience of grief. The experience of any given loss can often resurface unresolved issues of previous losses in one's life (e.g. death of a loved one, loss of employment, a move, lingering consequences of an accident, a serious illness). The temptation is to become so focused on the loss aspect of any given change that one is unable to realize the potential for new life, new growth, new opportunity and new vitality. After all, given the limits of our human condition, it is difficult for us to imagine beyond the present to something not yet experienced and known. Consequently, we all must admit to some level of anxiety, uncertainty, discomfort and frustration. Such feelings are not unlike those experienced by the apostles during the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Yet, our faith assures us that the Risen Christ will not abandon us anymore than He did with those confused and frightened apostles in the locked room.

While I have no pretense that this current process will not involve grief, as a result of the sadness and pain related to loss, it is my firm belief that the victory won for us by Jesus Christ, through His passion, death and resurrection assures us that death gives way to new life, challenges become occasions of opportunity, fear dissipates before love and beyond every cross on Calvary is to be discovered an empty tomb.

The Church faces various challenges in the 21st century. Not only do I believe that we are up to these challenges, but I am confident that meeting such challenges will result in opportunities for occasions of grace. Obviously, we must be realistic about the recent decline in the number of priests. This is particularly stressful, given the fact that it was only a few decades ago, immediately following the Second World War, that the Church experienced its greatest influx of priests. We also must take into consideration the increasing effects of technological advancements, ever-developing infrastructure, shifting demographics, evolving societal behavior, and the wave of new associations and movements within the Church. Finally, it is essential that we keep before us the distinction of what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable. The Church (including all its parishes, associations, movements, ministries and services), after all, is ultimately a means to the end. We must never confuse this reality. The end or goal is the Kingdom of God, the Salvation of Souls.

Several diocesan staff members are working diligently to assist in the various aspects of this process. In addition to our diocesan staff, I want to express my gratitude to our priests, deacons, parish life coordinators, planning committee members and core group participants for their respective roles of leadership in this process. I also take this opportunity to thank parish staffs and parishioners for your courage, prayers and witness of faith throughout this process.

While it is difficult for any of us to truly envision or fully appreciate the unknown, I believe that we will ultimately realize a new vitality in our Catholic identity and presence throughout the twelve counties that make up the Diocese of Evansville. We may look a little different, and we will need to be patient with ourselves during the necessary period of adjustment. Ultimately, however, the challenge before us will give way to opportunities for the renewal of faith. In the long run, I believe, this will also evolve into a richer culture of cultivating vocations for the priesthood and religious life. It will take time, effort and, above all, prayer. I humbly ask you to join me in prayer, invoking the grace and presence of the Holy Trinity to guide us through this process and beyond the moment to all that God holds in store for us. God willing, may this process prove to be a means of responding to the call for New Evangelization in our *Year of Faith* and for many years to come. May God fill up what is lacking in us and bring to completion the good work begun in our Diocese.