

STATEMENT FROM FATHER JUSTIN PINO ON PASTORAL PLANNING

22 June 2025

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body & Blood of Christ

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

Ten years ago, the Diocese of Erie embarked on a transformative journey called pastoral planning. In the past decade, some of our parish communities throughout the 13 counties of Northwest Pennsylvania have experienced change, challenges, and, I firmly believe, renewal through this process. Ever since the pandemic when the numbers of active, participating, contributing, and practicing Catholics have dwindled; with the ever apparent decrease in priestly vocations in our diocese and elsewhere; and the profound necessity for stronger and more united faith communities – a number of the pastors here in Elk and Cameron counties asked Bishop Persico if we can *begin* to discuss, discern, and develop a possible pastoral plan for this portion of our Diocesan Church, in which we are an inseparable part.

As a deacon, I was assigned to a parish in Baltimore with two worship sites. As a newly ordained priest, Msgr. Riccardo and I ministered to a community with four churches not far from here in the Punxsutawney area. My first pastorate in Oil City involved two distinct and unique parishes, but we worked together in 90% of our endeavors. Therefore, I am very accustomed to this reality of Church. I am very hopeful and excited to embark on this road not only with you, but for you, along with all the pastors and laity within our deanery. As your Dean, I am looking forward to this process; and please notice that I used the word *process* deliberately. Nothing has been predetermined. Let me repeat that: *nothing* has been predetermined. There have been no “back room dealings” in order to make any decision beforehand. The Holy Spirit is our guide and we all need to be intent on listening to His guidance, not just in planning, but every day.

The first phase of this process is being taken up by Msgr. Richard Siefer, who serves at the Episcopal Vicar (the Bishop’s representative) here in the Eastern Vicariate of our diocese. Monsignor (who approved this letter) will be meeting with all the pastors in our area to gauge what we as the shepherds, entrusted to care for the People of God, are expecting, recommending, hoping, and willing to work toward in this possible plan. There are always hopes, frustrations, challenges, and even disappointments when one starts off on a journey of faith such as this; yet, that is precisely what pastoral planning is for us – a prayerful walking together in faith. Therefore, this Jubilee Year as *pilgrims of hope* is a perfect time to begin. Pastoral Planning is not micromanaging or “bean counting.” It is not some sort of “stop gap measure” or pushing important matters to the back burner. Pastoral Planning is a profound experience of prayer and of coming to realize who we are as a local Church and how we can best serve Jesus Christ as His witnesses in this present hour. Moreover, it is not a new process. We have been doing some form of pastoral planning in our diocese since the 1860s! More often than not – “the way things have been” must transform through sacrifice and service into “*what we* – together, in communion with our pastors, bishop, pope and one another, *must be now for Christ.*”

After the pastors meet with our Vicar we will, literally, see how the Spirit guides us. What will the landscape of our parishes, programs, and ministries be in a year’s time? Simply: only God knows!

Nevertheless we must be willing to put aside, immediately, as the process begins, any form of prejudice and self-centeredness. Phrases like “them and us” or “those people at the Diocese” are not only dangerously divisive, but certainly improper for us as Catholic Christian witnesses of the Gospel to use. Our parishes with their rich histories, beautiful spaces of worship that have brought generations closer to Christ for over 175 years, our spiritual programs and service initiatives, yes, our faith communities as a whole – are not ours! They do not belong to you, me (or any priest), to Bishop Persico, or even to His Holiness Pope Leo XIV. They belong to Jesus Christ! We are *His* Church. That has always been the reality since the first Pentecost; and it will remain that way.

My friends, we are all called by virtue of our shared Baptism to be authentic witnesses to the truth found in Jesus Christ. The only way we can do this; to be effective in this call and by doing so encouraging others to join us, is to always keep before us that everything we do here in this local Church – everything we say and pray – every decision, as difficult as some might be, is because we love Jesus Christ and we want to bear witness and share His love with others. Jesus Christ – especially hidden within the beauty of the Eucharist that we share at Mass – is *truly present* in Ridgway, Johnsonburg, Wilcox, St. Marys, Kersey, Force, Driftwood, and Emporium. There living inside those ten tabernacles is the same Lord and Savior of us all, who continues to call us to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. *His* Church!

As we move forward into whatever future incarnation our communities may encounter, let us remember to work *together* – to be in *communion* with one another through prayerful discernment – and to walk side by side with our pastors, our bishop, and our God in cooperating to give His Church new life! If you have any respectful, constructive, and prayerful ideas, please let me know! We need to open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to whatever Jesus is asking us to do for Him at this time. That is what it means to be His disciples – His followers – His friends.

Let us pray as one family of believers that the Lord Jesus, whose love is the same yesterday, today, and forever, will give to every person of faith in our area, and indeed, to every person who potentially might become a member of our parish communities: *“the strength to be unafraid of what is new!”*

As the great Archbishop Fulton Sheen often said, “God love you!”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Father Justin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Very Reverend Justin P. Pino, VF
Vicar Forane (Dean), Elk & Cameron Counties
Pastor, Saint Leo Magnus Parish – Ridgway
Vice-President for Catholic Mission, Elk County Catholic School System
Archivist/Historian, Roman Catholic Diocese of Erie

“We are called to offer God’s love to everyone – to be a sign of unity and communion, which becomes a leaven for a reconciled world.”

Pope Leo XIV