

**SUNDAY, JANUARY 22, 2012**

**HOMILY AND LETTER FROM THE BISHOP TO THE PARISHIONERS OF THE DIOCESE OF DULUTH**

*“Teach me your ways, O Lord.”* Those are the words of our psalmist today, and the refrain that we echoed back. We are to lift our voices in praise and supplication to the God who has created and saved us, and to follow Him at all times. In fact, all our readings point to acknowledging the power of God, and that we are to be a faithful, holy people, ready to listen to all God asks of us, and to drop everything to follow Him. For us as Catholics, that always means that we pay attention to the voice of our Bishop, who is the direct successor of the Apostles in our midst.

Over the last year and a half, our Diocese has been engaged in a Strategic Planning Process. The Plan was announced last Thursday afternoon, and we received a letter from our Bishop, which is to be read at all Masses throughout the diocese this weekend. The following is that letter:

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

*One year ago I asked for your prayers as we embarked on a strategic planning process to help guide decisions that will shape the next five years of our life as a local church. Facing a continuing decline in the number of priests, shifting demographic trends and critical infrastructure needs, I asked you to join me in a diocese-wide conversation about how best to provide for the needs of the Church in Northeastern Minnesota.*

*Our Lord tells us in St. John’s gospel (Jn 15:1-5): “I am the vine, you are the branches...if you remain in me you will bear much fruit.” Our strategic planning has been undertaken with a deep desire that we remain firmly rooted in Jesus Christ as we face the challenges that lie ahead. If we trust in God and continue to work together, I am convinced that a bright future of renewed faith and vitality lies ahead for us.*

*When we reflect on our lives we cannot help but see that they are full of challenges and change. This is true for us as individuals, and it is true for us as a Church. The Church is constantly on the move during her earthly pilgrimage to our lasting home in heaven. That movement, guided by the Holy Spirit, calls upon each of us to reach beyond the familiar and the comfortable so that we are always ready to do God’s will, whatever that may be.*

*I am grateful to the more than 250 laity and clergy who took up the challenge of making plans for the deaneries of our diocese for the next five years. Their good work corrected, refined and improved an initial set of proposals by the Diocesan Planning Committee. I would also like to thank the Presbyteral Council for its advice and recommendations. Together we produced the Diocesan Strategic Plan that I am now releasing. To read the final version of the Strategic Plan, please go to [www.dioceseduluth.org](http://www.dioceseduluth.org) and click on Strategic Plan. It will also be published in the February issue of The Northern Cross.*

*Our attention will now turn to the implementation of our strategic plan. It will be implemented as needed over the next five years. There are no dates attached to the various parts of this plan. Instead, the Strategic Plan offers many options that can be used in meeting the challenges we face. Some parts of*

*the plan could be implemented as soon as this summer; other parts may be implemented at some other time in the next five years or later. We plan to approach all of the transitions with as much deliberation and as much sensitivity to those affected as possible.*

*The effort that has gone into developing this plan, and the effort that will be needed for its implementation, will only bear fruit if we keep our attention firmly fixed on the Lord. Our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, and his predecessor, Blessed John Paul II, have called us to engage in a “New Evangelization,” leaving aside the temptation to maintain the status quo and instead stepping out boldly to proclaim the great truth that the Church has been commissioned to announce to the world: that Jesus Christ is the answer to the deepest questions and yearnings of the human heart. Please join me in continuing to pray for our diocese as we reorganize ourselves to answer this call, finding new ways to bring Jesus Christ to the people of this beautiful corner of the world.*

*Sincerely in Christ, Most Reverend Paul D. Sirba, Bishop of Duluth*

I am sure that if you have not yet seen the plan, you may be wondering what that means for our parishes here in Brainerd/Baxter. Well, for us, the plan is basically what was previously adopted at the Deanery Level phase of Planning. We will become two customers: one will be a combination of St. Mathias and St. Andrew’s, and one will be St. Francis with All Saints and St. Thomas. (And please realize a story in the newspaper inadvertently left out cluster 8: St. Andrews and St. Mathias.) There are still many questions that remain to be answered, such as: “When will this happen?” and “How will it all be implemented?” A task force has been assembled here in our 5 churches to begin addressing many of these questions. Also, please realize this doesn’t at all address clergy assignments. That is the last phase in all of this. We will be looking for direction as well from an Implementation Committee that the Bishop has assembled.

At the start of this process, we asked for your prayers, your openness, your ideas and your support. We continue to ask for them as together, we embark on this next phase. We all now know the plan. Together let’s continue to build Christ’s Church in our beautiful Lakes Area!