

The Soul of the Parish: Being Led by the Holy Spirit Alive in our Midst

“The mission of Christ and the Holy Spirit is brought to completion in the Church, which is the body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit... (The Holy Spirit) makes present the mystery of Christ, supremely in the Eucharist, in order to reconcile (the faithful), to bring them into communion with God, that they may ‘bear much fruit’”(Jn15:8, 16)(Catechism of the Catholic Church 737).

My Dear Faithful of the Archdiocese of Louisville:

As I recall my installation as Archbishop of Louisville 11 years ago today, I rejoice in sharing my reflections on the parish discernment process that took place in so many parishes of the Archdiocese over the last year and a half. This process began with the promulgation of my first pastoral letter, *Your Parish: The Body of Christ Alive in Our Midst*, on December 30, 2016, the Feast of the Holy Family. I have long been convinced that if we want a healthy, holy, and vibrant Archdiocese, we need to build healthy, holy, and vibrant parishes. Unlike the construction tools used to erect structures, such building is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our efforts, empowered by grace, touch our very souls. Sacred Scripture and Tradition give us great insights into these movements of the Holy Spirit. After Jesus rose and ascended to the right hand of His Father, the promised Holy Spirit descended upon that early Church – 11 apostles and the Blessed Mother huddled in the upper room. The Acts of the Apostles relates this story of the growth of our church – including the Council of Jerusalem and other ways in which the church assembled and prayed for guidance and discernment and began the movement outward to the ends of the earth. Pope Francis reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the “soul of the Church called to proclaim the Gospel” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 261). Just as through Christ we come to know the Father (John 14:9), so through the Church do we come to know the Holy Spirit more fully. So to guide us, we call upon the Holy Spirit, the soul of each of our parishes.

I. DISCERNMENT

The parish discernment process relied strongly on a proper understanding of discernment, so let us dwell on that word, *discernment*. Rooted in the Latin, *discernere*, which means to separate, set apart, divide, or distribute, the dictionary meaning is “to perceive or recognize something – to detect with our eyes.” In a religious context, to discern is to seek the eyes of Christ so that we might see as He sees. Saint Francis of Assisi spoke of this process in terms of the Holy Eucharist and used the vivid imagery of us seeing the world with Christ’s eyes. Thus, it is in the Holy Eucharist that we become one in Christ and are given the gift of seeing with the eyes of Jesus. Long after the end of Mass, the action of being sent allows us to see Christ in our brothers and sisters – one at a time and together. Discernment is truly a challenge in our culture. We rarely slow down and prayerfully listen to the Word of God and to one another to seek what God desires of us in our lives and in our parishes. In fact, we exist in a secularism that would have us never think of God and His plan for us. Pope Francis calls ours a “throw-away” culture in which quickly and without thought, we discard what or whom we judge as useless. We also might say that we are an impatient and demanding people. We want results, and we want them quickly. To discern implies a reflective wisdom to detach and see, and then the courage and stamina to choose a path that is the fruit of this discernment. In the midst of suffering and struggle and disagreements, the early church discerned the correct paths to take through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Discernment is not simply clarifying what I want to do but rather uncovering God’s hope for me – what I must do to be true to God’s call. Discernment goes hand in hand with what Pope Francis has called a “culture of encounter.” Instead of simply seeking a tangible and immediate benefit, we seek an encounter with Christ and in Christ with each other, and so we enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ and His Church. Pope Francis repeated in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), the words of Pope Benedict from his 2005 encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, that being a Christian is not so much “...the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est* 1).

II. PARISH DISCERNMENT PROCESS

It has been a joy to hear of the process of discernment that took place in so many parishes over the last year and a half. Thank you for your participation as parishioners, pastors, parish staff, and parish leaders, and thanks to the generous archdiocesan facilitators who assisted parishes. Rooted in Sacred Scripture and Church Tradition, you prayed together, reflected, entered into dialogue, and developed strategies in the areas of Family Life, Education and Lifelong Formation, and Service and Outreach. I pray that my pastoral letter provided a welcome source of direction and support. I have heard with joy the way in which parishioners in prayer celebrated all that is already present and all that they could hope for – signs of the grace of the Holy Spirit alive. As they embraced the call to strengthen the Body of Christ, parishes established new efforts, such as youth and young adult ministries, new parish committees, outreach to those in need, and formation programs. They also renewed support and identified more effective ways to promote good efforts already in place. I also have witnessed the first fruits of the efforts in the announced plans. Please see www.archlou.org/parish-discernment for summaries of the fruits of discernment from individual parishes. These plans will require careful collaboration so that diocesan ministries might be of assistance, and parish leaders will emerge as we seek to support families, seek new and vibrant ways to announce and teach the Good News of Jesus Christ, and serve others in Christ’s name. I noted the keen concern about how we pass on the faith to people at all stages of life and the special care for those who have grown inactive, even some members of your families who deserve to be encouraged to come closer

to Christ. I applaud efforts to reach out beyond our parishes to our communities and to specific populations in need, such as the homeless, seniors, those with addictions, and hurting families. To discern well, we should continue to grow in holiness and continue to pray and share together. It would be a mistake to turn this graced time of discernment simply into a task list to complete. Equally mistaken would be to reject the changes that such discernment might bring to the parish. We often speak about how individuals grow in holiness and virtue. This process of growth in holiness, however, also applies to the culture that a parish community cultivates. Thus, your efforts to dialogue and to prayerfully come together to seek God’s hope for your parish, not merely your own hopes or agenda, is a lifelong journey. I have been told by so many that they found new life in addressing God’s hope for the parish rather than their individual hopes. Asking and together answering this question is itself part of the path of holiness, and parishes are at their best when they are communities dedicated to the growth in holiness together.

III. NEXT STEPS

- Let us take stock. This fall, our archdiocesan staff will meet to review your summaries and to consult with your facilitators on the best way for us to reach out and assist. This is also a time for you to seek next steps. Parishes that have not yet taken these actions should consider the following:
- 1) It is important that you announce and incorporate the results of the discernment process into already existing leadership structures and planning processes. Thus, a discussion of your parish’s discernment process results with your Parish Council, Finance Council, and major committees is a great way to start.
 - 2) Please be sure that all parishioners see the results of the discernment process. The importance of good communication was a theme that emerged strongly across all areas of discernment. I have heard about diverse approaches to this communication, including inserts to the bulletin, mailings, and the parish web page. A variety of methods is probably the best approach to reach everyone. In addition, some parishes shared both their summaries of the listening session and the final discernment plan as they sought to encourage a spirit of listening. Here is what one facilitator shared:
“We want to assure our parishioners that their time of praying to hear God’s hope for our parish, their effort of coming to the listening session, and their experience of sharing their ideas was important and was heard. We told them that while we cannot do everything they shared at the listening session, their suggestions would be on file for future reference.”
 - 3) Each parish will have its own approach to the best implementation of the results of this discernment process. As we “implement,” however, it is important to continue to pray and discern. Some of the ideas that you generated will blossom and bear fruit; others may not. That’s OK. The process itself is valuable and will yield greater insights and wisdom as we seek to listen to the Holy Spirit alive in our midst. This passage from *The Joy of the Gospel* is helpful as we seek to carry out our parish discernment results:
“We can know quite well that our lives will be fruitful, without our claiming to know how, or when, or where. We may be sure that none of our acts of love will be lost, nor any of our acts of sincere concern for one another. No single act of love for God is lost, no generous effort is meaningless, no painful endurance is wasted” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 279).
 - 4) Do not hesitate to reach out for assistance. As I mentioned, our archdiocesan agencies will discuss ways in which to assist in response to the fruits of the process. It is likely that some of the training requested will be addressed with group efforts as well as individual consultation. In the meantime, if you have pressing questions, call my office.

Finally, I invite you to join in a Day of Prayer in gratitude for the process of discernment. I will celebrate the Saturday evening Mass – the first Mass of the new Church year – on December 1 at the Cathedral. I invite every pastor to collaborate with parishioners in making that first Sunday of Advent a time of prayer of gratitude in each parish of the Archdiocese. A prayer will be made available to assist in this act of gratitude.

IV. COME HOLY SPIRIT

As we continue to build parishes focused on the person of Jesus Christ, we call upon the Holy Spirit, who “knows well what is needed in every time and place.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 280) As the soul of each our parishes, the Holy Spirit will provide us with abundant sources of wisdom, inspiration, discernment, and guidance as we journey together.
Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created, and you will renew the face of the earth.
Lord, by the light of the Holy Spirit you have taught the hearts of your faithful. In the same Spirit help us to relish what is right and always rejoice in your consolation. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, D.D.

Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
15 August 2018