

Camden parishes to be reduced from 124 to 66

CAMDEN, N.J. – Bishop Joseph A. Galante of Camden announced a reconfiguration plan April 3 that will reduce the number of parishes in the diocese from the current 124 to 66 over the next two years.

Citing the need to bring new vitality to parish life, Bishop Galante said parishes in the six southern counties of New Jersey would be reconfigured into 38 merged parishes; three parish clusters, involving a total of six parishes; and 22 stand-alone parishes.

“I recognize that these changes will require sacrifice,” he said in a video message posted to the diocesan Web site, www.camdendiocese.org. “The giving up of the familiar and the comfortable is never easy for any one of us. ... My prayer is that all of us will have the patience and courage that is necessary to bring about this renewal and new life in our church.”

Bishop Galante said the reconfiguration came in response to population changes, a decline in religious practice, fewer priests available for ministry, and the need to advance key pastoral priorities identified by Catholics at more than 140 “Speak Up” sessions held in 2005 and 2006.

These priorities include lifelong faith formation, vocations to priesthood and religious life, lay ministry, compassionate outreach, liturgy, and youths and young adults.

The bishop said the diocese has seen its total population grow, but it is now more diverse, with significant Latino, Filipino, Korean and Vietnamese populations that require the church’s pastoral care. According to the diocese, there are now more than 100,000 Hispanic Catholics among the 500,000 Catholics served by the diocese.

Bishop Galante said the Catholic population has shifted, as Catholics have moved out of areas that were population centers in decades past, leaving underutilized, aging facilities – sometimes located very close to each other – to serve greatly diminished

Catholic populations. This has been coupled with a decline in religious observance, he said, as Mass attendance has declined from its peak of 74 percent five decades ago to less than 24 percent now.

Bishop Galante said an anticipated reduction in the number of diocesan priests available for ministry in the years ahead also requires that there be new parish configurations. There are currently 162 diocesan priests serving 124 parishes. The diocese expects that there will be fewer than 85 diocesan priests available for ministry by 2015, as new ordinations are not keeping pace with priest retirements.

"I know that these are serious challenges," he said. "But I believe that far greater are the opportunities for our parishes to become dynamic, life-giving centers for the practice of our faith if we take bold action together, confident that the Spirit is guiding us on our way.

"What is not an option is inaction," he added. "What is not an option at this time is leaving things alone and hoping for the best. We've tried that for too many years and it doesn't work."

The bishop's announcement followed an extensive consultation over a 15-month period with representatives from each of the diocese's 124 parishes. Almost 500 parish planners reviewed parish data, sacramental trends, facilities, financial reports and other information to provide input on ways to strengthen parish life in each area of the diocese.

The bishop also consulted with the 18-member Diocesan Planning Commission and the diocesan priests' council, an advisory council of 31 priests. He is required under church law to consult with the priests' council and to obtain its members' advice in instances where a parish may be "altered notably" through merger, boundary change or some other configuration.

Bishop Galante thanked parish planners and said their input was essential as he considered various approaches for parish configuration in the diocese. "While planning decisions ultimately are mine, the in-depth input provided ... has helped form, shape and refine the decisions that are before me," he said.

He said the merging and clustering of parishes would help in the goal of parish revitalization by “combining human and financial resources in a way that will allow the newly configured parishes, under the direction of good pastoral leadership and staffing, to better serve the needs of the people.”

As part of the planning initiative, Bishop Galante said it would be essential to add paid, professional staff at each parish to carry out key ministries and to improve service to the people of the diocese. As currently configured, many parishes do not have the means to do this, he said.