

D I O C E S E
of NEW ULM

Office of the Bishop

February 15, 2018

Dear Parishioners of the Our Lady of the Prairie Area Faith Community:

I want to thank so many of you for meeting with Fr. Mraz, Tom Keaveny, and me to discuss the joining of St. Paul's Parish in Walnut Grove with St. Mary in Tracy. I am grateful that 65 parishioners were willing to come and participate, representative of all three of the parishes in the AFC. I especially appreciated your openness to the challenges we face as a Catholic people in this rural diocese. Your sincere commitment to the future of the Church and your awareness of the realities around us and the options that will be unfolding are exemplary. You have considered these issues over time with respectful discussion and with your on-going support of Fr. Mraz.

I know that you understand my sadness and concern as we deal with these changes. Your gracious and sincere approach with our visit on Monday was very encouraging to me as your bishop. I am also encouraged that the parishioners from St. Paul's are willing to join with the parishioners at St. Mary's in Tracy as there will no longer be a priest available to celebrate a weekend Mass in Walnut Grove. Fr. Mraz best described it as a "marriage" dedicated to strengthening the two groups of faithful parishioners coming together as one.

As I shared at our meeting, many changes are taking place throughout the diocese because of the shortage of priests and with the decline of the practicing Catholic population. In Region 3, the diocese is anticipating the retirement of Fr. Mraz and other reassignments this June. As we discussed the demographics, St. Paul's has fewer than 85 parishioners and only six children under the age of 18. It was recognized that there were very few young adults at the gathering. Similarly, the average length of parish involvement was over 40 years among those participating. Many parishioners are well over the age of 70.

At the same time, I was especially encouraged to learn that there is an increase in students in the pre-school and kindergarten classes at St. Mary's School and that 10 students are attending with support from Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Currie. It is my hope that St. Mary's School is supported by all the parishes in the AFC and any other parishes in the region whose children attend St. Mary's. As I indicated, we do work with the neighboring Dioceses of Winona and St. Cloud and we try to collaborate whenever possible. It was also good to clarify that our deacons serve in their parishes and local area faith communities and are not expected to be assigned elsewhere.



As we implement these changes, I am not discouraged. As long as we pray and work together to seek to do God's will, God will take care of us. I ask that you continue to assess the future of Our Lady of the Prairie Area Faith Community as these and other transitions in the region occur. Thank you for working with Fr. Mraz and Tom Keaveny as you enroll and welcome each other at St. Mary's in Tracy and as we celebrate a last regularly scheduled weekend Mass at St. Paul's in Walnut Grove on Sunday, June 10. As you begin with a new Mass schedule and a changing AFC configuration, I would also ask that you do what Pope Francis is asking us to do. He is asking that we invite back home those Catholics who have fallen away from the practice of their Catholic faith. This is called the New Evangelization and this will help to build up our parishes.

Please continue to pray that more young men answer God's call to the priesthood and that more of our brothers and sisters will again be fully active in the Catholic Church. Please know that you are in my daily prayers. I ask that you also continue to pray for the Diocese of New Ulm during these challenging times.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John M. LeVoir". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and 'L'.

Most Rev. John M. LeVoir
Bishop of New Ulm

cc: Fr. Robert Mraz
Tom Keaveny

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