

Comments by the
Most Reverend James V. Johnston, Jr., JCL, DD
at the Promulgation of the Deanery Plan
St. Munchin Church, Cameron, Missouri
Wednesday, June 28, 2023

I ... want to acknowledge all of you who are, through this process, unsettled. I want to acknowledge those of you who are hurting. I want to acknowledge those of you who are disappointed, and I want to acknowledge those of you who may be angry. I want actually to express my appreciation for those who have just shared your feelings with me, shared what's on your heart. I really appreciate that and I am honored that you would give that to me, as your bishop. And in reality, believe it or not, I would be surprised and disappointed if those feelings did not emerge. Those feelings just are signs you are not indifferent to your parishes, to your missions, to the communities that you are part of. It's a sign that you love your Church! And so if you do not feel those things going through this whole process, which is an emotional roller-coaster, there would be something wrong. So, I just want to just acknowledge those feelings and express that I understand them.

I never imagined, when I became a bishop that I would be closing parishes and missions, that's not the business that I'm in. The business that I'm in is to grow the Church, and to extend the Kingdom of God, the mission of the Church. So, this is ultimately not something that I relish, but I also never imagined, when I became a bishop, and certainly when I became a priest thirty-three years ago, that the landscape of America in general, would change as much as it has. America itself is shrinking, and religious life in America is shrinking. And Americans are getting older, I'm one of them. Americans don't have kids anymore, they take care of dogs now. There are exceptions, thank God! But America, religion, and the Church are really different, in ways that I never imagined they would be.

The thing that keeps me up, a lot, in my chapel, is just our future. I have a charge, not only to take care of the Catholics of today, the people of today, but to try to get ready to position us well for the future. And I'm always confident that the Church will be around, but the strength of the Church in some parts, depends on decisions that I make now, to get us ready to be potent in the future. And what I mean by "potent," means that we're not only viable but we're still making a powerful difference: first of all in the lives of our families and our kids, but also in the world and the communities that we're in.

Sometimes, when I look at where we are now, I realize that some of our potency is diluted. And I'm glad that at the beginning of this presentation, Father Charles went through some of the things that already happened in the first two iterations of this process that we've been in, and how we've already seen new fruit, new vitality, more conversions being had by some of these parish communities, because we've marshalled our energy, our resources, our people. We do more when we work together, more closely. We've already seen many, many amazing things happen that I did not predict: in terms of more people being



added, parishes growing, opening a new school, having more effective outreach in charity, and on and on.

And so I'm confident, I'm hopeful, that this process is going to be one that bears the same fruit. But also, I think, I try to prepare for the next generation, and preparing also for whoever my successor is going to be. As the Bishop, I also found it fascinating to look back at my predecessors, and what they did, the challenges they faced. Every generation faces different challenges.

But I'm especially fascinated by the first bishop, Bishop John J. Hogan, who first came to these parts, not as bishop, just as a priest. He didn't find much here, but he did find some Catholics, and there weren't any buildings, there weren't any priests, he was it. And through hard work, through sacrifices, the Catholic people did the best that they could with what they had. And over time, things changed, the population increased, in America, in the Nineteenth Century. And it's interesting that rural America, not just here, but throughout most of the Midwest, reached its population peak in about 1895, and it's been declining, a little bit, ever since. And as Mark said, it's continuing to decline today. And that's in part because of technology: it doesn't take too many people to farm, it used to take a lot of people to farm. So in many of these rural communities that you're part of, had big farm families, and you were part of big farm families, you grew up on the farms. But many people aren't farming anymore, many people aren't staying. And so, rural America has been going down in population generally.



So, the purpose of all this, ultimately, for me, is to do the best I can to try to follow the Holy Spirit, to listen, and to try to make decisions that will position the beauty of our Catholic faith, the beauty of our Catholic Church, in our diocese, so that it can be more effective in carrying out the mission, the mission of the Church. I also look back at the, really over a century, to see how many churches have closed, and it's right around eighty. That's a lot of churches that were built but are now closed. Churches are some-ways like people, they have a life-span, some live longer than others, because of circumstances, the environment they're in, is different. And we're all subject to the vagaries and changes in time. Ultimately, everything in this world is temporal, "the world as we know it is passing away," as we know in Scripture [cf. I Corinthians 7:31]. And yet, we're in it, and we have to adjust to how changes occur, and the changes are sometimes in the Church, and sometimes outside the Church.

So, I just want to say that this is a moment of truth. It's one of those moments of truth that we will look back on: I will look back on, all of us will look back on, and we will be able to judge it in time, as to whether or not it made a difference. It certainly for me, and I think for you too, kind of a sobering time, a sobering time, to realize that we can never take things for granted. And some of the forces that grew our Church in the past are no longer with us. We used to be pushed along by a tailwind of sorts, a cultural tailwind in America, in which everyone had church, everyone went to church. You grew up in church, your children grew up in church.

But that tailwind is now a headwind. And we have to adjust and realize that we cannot grow the Church by just letting it happen. We have to be more intentional. We have to be more intentional disciples of the Lord Jesus. We have to be more intentional about living our Catholic faith. We have to be more intentional with the one-on-one relationships that are involved in spreading the faith. You can't spread the faith by a nice sign in front that says "all are welcome." It only happens person-to-person, that's what we've discovered. That's the way it was in the New Testament. That's the way it is now.

So, this is a moment of truth, but it's also a sobering moment, and lastly, though, I think, for me it's also a moment of hope. I've already seen, as I said, the impact of marshalling ourselves, directing ourselves more intentionally, using our resources in a way that is more effective and focused, it does make a difference. And I am convinced that it will also make a difference here, because of all of you. You are here tonight because this is important for you. So I want to thank you your love for the Lord, your love for your Church. Again, I want to acknowledge that some of you here tonight are disappointed. And some of you may be angry, and you may be angry with me, and I acknowledge that.

But I want you to know that in making this decision, based on the end of this process: listening to your emails, your letters, and the other parts of this, that I really do believe that this is a decision that I have to make as your Bishop tonight, and signing off on this. And I want to know that I continue to support you in this new alignment, as I strive to support all our parishes, and the work of Jesus. Ultimately, this is not about me or the diocese, it's ultimately about the Kingdom of God that we've been entrusted with. We do the best we can, and I think that's all that the Lord expects. So, again, I want to express my gratitude to all of you, and I want you to know that I will continue to be engaged with these deaneries as we move forward, because this too is part of the Lord's vineyard in our diocese, and there is great fruit to be borne here: the fruit of the Spirit, as it were, and Church, and especially that comes forth through the lives of the Body of Christ, the lives of the Faithful.

So, I suspect that at this point I end with prayer, am I right? Let us pray