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Bishop approves, publishes pastoral plan

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LA CROSSE – Following a special May 8 prayer service in Christ the King Chapel at Holy Cross Diocesan Center, Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI officially released the approved pastoral plan for the Diocese of La Crosse to priests, diocesan curia members and lay parish representatives from throughout the diocese, as well as to members of the media.

The bishop's approval marks the completion of Phase One of the plan. The plan's second phase will include establishing protocols for the plan's possible implementation, while its third and final phase would be its actual implementation – if that is needed, and only when and where it is needed.

"This is a historic time," Bishop ListECKI said as he called forward the pastoral planning committee's priest-members, who collaborated with deacons, laity and other priests throughout the diocese during the past two and a half years to come up with a way to minister to a shifting Catholic population with a diminishing number of priests.

"When you get married, you make sure to put money aside for your child's education, and you make sure you have the proper medical insurance," the bishop said later that afternoon at a news conference for the media. "You make sure those things are available in the fu-



Bishop Jerome E. ListECKI of the Diocese of La Crosse shows off the four binders containing the diocese's completed pastoral plan May 8 in Christ the King Chapel of Holy Cross Diocesan Center in La Crosse. The plan's actual implementation – if it is needed, and only when and where it is needed – will take place only after procedures and protocols have been developed in the second phase of the plan.

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ture so that you can provide properly for those who are entrusted to you.” The Church “is our family, and we’re looking to the future of our family,” he said.

Specifically, this includes having a contingency plan in place that could reduce the number of parishes in the diocese from 165 to 75 without closing any church buildings. These 75 parishes could become “parish centers,” where the priest would live and from which the parish would be governed. Other parishes would become “liturgical satellites,” where Sunday Mass, other sacraments and catechesis would occur, while others would become “church buildings” or “oratories” without a regular Sunday Mass.

A parish consisting of a parish center, with a liturgical satellite and/or other church properties, would have a single pastoral and finance council. The entire parish – consisting

of all its buildings – would be represented on these councils.

In a May 8 letter to pastors, priests, religious, deacons and diocesan lay faithful, Bishop Listecki publicly thanked Father David Kunz, pastor of Mary Mother of the Church Parish in La Crosse, for chairing the first-phase planning committee. He also announced the appointment of diocesan vicar general Monsignor Richard Gilles to chair the second phase’s steering committee, which will establish the protocols needed to implement the plan. After these protocols have been established, parts of the plan could be implemented by request, by necessity or at the express direction of the bishop.

“We needed to do this now, before we would be forced to make these decisions out of a crisis mentality,” Bishop Listecki said in the chapel after the prayer service about having the contingency plan in place.

The bishop cited the situations several other dioceses are currently facing because they did not plan ahead. “Because they failed to think ahead, they were confronted with many drastic changes upsetting the landscape that many before them worked to establish,” he said.

He acknowledged “sporadic” attempts at pastoral planning that have already taken place in the diocese. “But there was a lack of a consistent approach, which left many participating” in these attempts “with a view of futility,” he said.

In his response to the bishop on behalf of the diocese’s priests, Presbyteral Council chair Father Mark Pierce, pastor of Roncalli Newman Parish, La Crosse, said the plan’s consistency comes as a “relief” to most priests. “Every year there has been data collecting, hand wringing and calls for someone somewhere to do something,” he said.

Father Pierce also expressed gratitude and appreciation that priests and laity played such a major role in planning for the future of the diocese. “It is a model for how the Church at all levels needs to deliberate,” he said. “As one of my staff members commented, ‘This is the first time in my life that the Church beyond my parish asked my opinion. It is very good to be asked.’”

Father Pierce also expressed hope that the plan would help priests to collaborate with laity in running their parishes.

In his response to the bishop on behalf of the diocese’s laity, La Crosse-area businessman and diocesan Finance Council member John Hansen seconded Father Pierce’s hope. “I think it really makes the laity stronger, and makes us more sharing and caring,” he said.

“Bishop, we thank you for taking the bull by the horns, so to speak, and making it happen,” he added.