



March 4, 2026

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The peace of Christ our Redeemer be with you.

As we reflect on our mission as disciples of Jesus, I am reminded of the words of Pope Leo XIV in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexi Te* (On Love for the Poor), issued on October 4, 2025, the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. He wrote that “Christian love breaks down every barrier, brings close those who were distant, unites strangers, and reconciles enemies...It makes what was apparently impossible happen.” His words remind us that the heart of our faith is love—love that knows no limits, seeks no enemies, and calls us to reach beyond what we may think is possible.

I hope you will agree with me that this reflection provides all of us with a powerful incentive to reexamine who we are as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ called to know, love, and serve him in parish communities throughout northern New Jersey. Are we a Church that “sets no limits to love”? Are we open to making the “apparently impossible happen”? Or do we insist on limiting ourselves to the way we have always done things?

Over the past months, the Archdiocese of Newark has undertaken the initiative ***We Are His Witnesses*** as a prayerful and thoughtful response to the realities before us, so that God might renew our Church for mission. I want to share where we are and how we must move forward together, asking ourselves with renewed urgency: **What does it mean to be a missionary Church in northern New Jersey today? How can we truly be “a Church that sets no limits to love?”**

The leadership of the Archdiocese has listened to you. **In the conversation that occurred in almost every parish**, many of you spoke with conviction and hope about becoming more missionary parishes: communities ready to share responsibility for forming disciples, eager to reach beyond parish walls and live lives that invite people to Christ. Others



expressed fear, uncertainty and resistance, especially about the possibility of parish mergers or closures. Some saw no need for any change at all.

It is important to say clearly that some parishes and parishioners came to believe—incorrectly—that the overall goal of *We Are His Witnesses* is to close churches. That has never been the purpose. This work is not driven by downsizing, but by mission: by the call to strengthen parish life so that it can truly form disciples and reach those who are not yet engaged in the life of the Church.

Both hope and fear deserve to be taken seriously. They tell us that while there is a genuine desire for renewal, there is also anxiety about what this moment asks of us. Doing nothing, however, is not an option. The challenges we face are real: fewer priests, fewer people in the pews, communities that look very different than they did even a generation ago, and financial strain. Ignoring the changed landscape does not preserve parish life; it weakens it.

The Church is not a museum to preserve what it once was. She is the living Body of Christ, called to grow, to be pruned when necessary, and to bear fruit. We should ask ourselves honestly: are we curators of a museum or gardeners called to plunge our hands into the rich soil of the Garden State and sow seeds? Faithfulness to Jesus and the Gospel sometimes requires difficult decisions and the courage to move outward for the sake of mission.

Because I have heard you, we are adjusting our path—but not our purpose. From all that we have heard across the archdiocese through listening sessions, parish reports, surveys, and consultations, as well as the many letters you wrote to me, it is clear that the communities of the Archdiocese need more time for honest discernment. We are extending this phase of our work to allow for deeper reflection and broader consultation throughout our local Church.

This is not a pause in mission. It is a call to take the mission seriously and to ask ourselves, with renewed honesty, what it means to be a missionary Church today. I will still have something to say on June 12, 2026, but there is no need to fear that an immediate and wholesale closure of parishes will be announced.

During the weeks and months to come, every parish must engage directly with the three questions that matter deeply for our future:

- **Where are we now—truly and realistically?**
- **Where is God calling us to go?**
- **How will we get there together?**



This discernment must be concrete. Parishes should look carefully at their sacramental life and their effectiveness in forming disciples. They should examine how they reach those who are absent, the young, marginalized, or disconnected, remembering that a parish is responsible for all the souls in its territory, not simply the ones who show up. This is also a time to examine our communities on lifelong faith formation, vocation promotion, effective leadership, and collaboration with neighboring communities to advance the Gospel.

As part of this deeper reflection and discernment, the leadership of *We Are His Witnesses* met with Deans and representatives from the Council of Priests for more than 30 hours in recent weeks to discuss the collected feedback and the needs and opportunities for evangelization and ongoing pastoral conversion in each parish. These conversations were incredibly fruitful and will be instrumental in guiding our process. Your pastors and Key Parish Leaders will receive the resources necessary to lead your parish in the process of discernment.

At its heart, *We Are His Witnesses* seeks to renew our identity as missionary disciples, strengthen parish vitality, and ensure that our local Church can fulfill its mission for generations to come. Evangelization and outreach, pastoral care, and long-term sustainability are not competing priorities; they belong together if parish life is to remain faithful and fruitful.

From the outset, this work has been about pastoral conversion. Structural changes – including parish alignments, mergers, or closures – will be necessary over time to build a Church that is ready for the future. These decisions will not be rushed or imposed arbitrarily. Rather, the choices to be made will emerge from prayerful discernment, listening, and dialogue, and accompanied by pastoral support for those affected. However, we need to recognize honestly that maintaining structures that no longer serve the mission ultimately harms the Church’s ability to evangelize.

This moment invites us to ask ourselves whether we have truly heard what the Church has been teaching us. Have we listened to the call of recent Popes to pastoral conversion, synodality and a renewed confidence in the faithfulness of God as well as the unused potential of parishes? The Church has consistently called us to move beyond self-preservation and embrace a missionary way of being Church, rooted in listening to the Word of God and the signs of the times, in shared responsibility, and a communal openness to the Holy Spirit. Can we joyfully embrace Pope Leo’s invitation to “make the apparently impossible happen” and to truly be a Church that “sets no limits to love”?

As Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “the parish is not an outdated institution. It can be highly flexible, depending on the pastor's and community's openness and missionary creativity, but it must be capable of renewal and adaptation to remain a true center of missionary outreach” (§28). This vision challenges us to see the parish not as



something to be preserved at all costs, but as a living community called to grow, respond to new challenges, and reach outward.

The success of *We Are His Witnesses* will not depend solely on documents or committees. Each of us has a gift to offer: our willingness to pray, listen, engage honestly with others, and, in doing so, place the mission of God and the Gospel ahead of comfort or fear.

Please remain engaged, open, and courageous. Trust that the Holy Spirit is at work among us. May our Archdiocese be continually converted by the Gospel and sent forth to proclaim Christ, serve our communities, and invite all to abundant life.

With gratitude for your faith as well as hope for what lies ahead, may God bless you and your loved ones.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

