

The Time Has Come: The Closing of Mission Chapels

A Pastoral Letter Of

The Most Rev. Edward K. Braxton
Bishop of Lake Charles
February 13, 2005
The First Sunday of Lent

Dear People of God:

On Ash Wednesday we began our Lenten pilgrimage up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover of the Lord Jesus Christ. During these days each of us is called to renew our own baptismal commitments and to heed the call to conversion. We must faithfully accompany our catechumens to the Easter Vigil font, to the waters of Life, and the sacraments of Christian Initiation with our prayers and the example of our Christ-centered lives. We are also called to accompany our candidates for full communion with the Catholic Church to their Easter profession of faith.

If the days of Lent are truly to be days of personal spiritual renewal we must enter this time of prayer, repentance, fasting, alms-giving, and self-sacrifice with an energy and enthusiasm that surpasses the energy and enthusiasm of Twelfth Night, Carnival and Mardi Gras celebrations. As we mature in our faith we grasp more deeply the true meaning of our Lenten preparation for the celebration of Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and the Resurrection. These days are not primarily about striving to overcome bad habits by giving up alcohol, cigarettes, over-eating, or not exercising. Though these self-improvements efforts have merit, God is calling us to much more. We are called to give in to Christ by giving up pride, anger, self-righteousness, rash judgment, prejudice, infidelity to our Christian commitments, dishonesty, self-indulgence, and indifference to our responsibilities to ourselves, our families, our parish, and the larger Church. With these responsibilities comes the need to make sacrifices for the common good.

The time has come for us as a Diocese to be generous in spirit as we make such sacrifices. In my June 27, 2004 Pastoral Letter, *"The Shape Of The Church To Come: There Can Be No Church Without The Eucharist And No Eucharist Without Priests,"* I wrote,

"If we are to be truly supportive of our priests, we must also give serious consideration to pastoral situations which are more than one person can attend to. I am thinking particularly of some of the parishes that have one or more mission chapels serving a very small number of people. Some of our chapels are necessary and we will try to maintain them. Other chapels have actually become 'chapels of convenience.' They serve a very small number of people who regularly drive to the town where the primary parish church is located for shopping, to see their doctor, and for other personal needs."

"There has already been a great deal of discussion and consultation about the need for our chapels. I understand very well that those who worship there, no matter how few, would like to maintain them. But this is not possible in every case. The needs of the Church have changed considerably since the chapels were opened. My predecessor, Bishop Jude Speyrer closed chapels in the past and I will be forced to close chapels in the future. In the months ahead we will examine those chapels serving fewer than seventy-five people on a weekend in areas where the Christian Faithful can easily reach the main parish in a relatively short time and evaluate the situation. Numbers will not be the only determining factor. It is likely that some Chapels will close by January 1, 2005."

"I am very aware that these closures will bring sadness and disappointment to some of those who have come to think of the chapel as their parish. However, they are not parishes and we have come to the point where we must all think of the overall good of the larger Church and be generous in making sacrifices."

After extensive consultation, prayer, and reflection, the time has come to act for the good of our entire faith community. The decision has been made that as of March 20, 2005, Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, the Mission Chapels of the following parishes will be closed.

- St. Joan of Arc Parish, Oberlin: St. Joseph Chapel in Soileau
- St. Joseph Parish, De Ridder: St. Bridget Chapel in Merryville, St. Jude Chapel in Dry Creek
- St. Joseph Parish, Vinton: St. Michael Chapel in Starks
- St. Philip Neri Parish, Kinder: Sacred Heart of Jesus Chapel in Indian Village, St. Maurice Chapel in Reeves
- Our Lady of Prompt Succor Parish, Sulphur: St. Peter Claver Chapel in Sulphur

The Mission Chapels of the following parishes will remain open:

- Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Lake Charles: Our Lady of Fatima Chapel in Lake Charles
- Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish, Creole: St. Rose of Lima Chapel in Creole
- Sacred Heart Parish, Oakdale: St. Frances of Rome in Elizabeth
- St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Fenton: St. John the

Evangelist Chapel in Lacassine (It is being rebuilt after a fire.)

- St. Eugene Parish, Grand Chenier: Immaculate Conception Chapel in Grand Chenier
- St. Joseph Parish, Welsh: St. Peter Claver Chapel in Iowa
- St. Mary of the Lake Parish, Big Lake: St. Patrick Chapel in Sweetlake
- St. Peter the Apostle Parish, Hackberry: Holy Trinity Chapel in Holly Beach, Our Lady of the Assumption Chapel in Johnson Bayou
- St. Raphael Parish, Iowa: St. Joseph Chapel in LeBleu Settlement
- St. Theodore Parish, Moss Bluff: St. Pius X Chapel in Ragley

In prior years my predecessor, Bishop Jude Speyrer had already closed the following chapels:

- Our Lady of Seven Dolours, Welsh: St. Mary Chapel in Roanoke
- Our Lady of the Lake, Lake Arthur: St. Francis of Assisi Chapel in Thornwell, St. Gertrude Chapel in Andrus Cove
- St. John Vianney, Bell City: St. Daniel Chapel in Hayes
- St. Joseph, Vinton: St. John the Evangelist Chapel in Ederly

The difficult decisions to close these Mission Chapels were not made lightly or arbitrarily. Many complex factors had to be taken into consideration. These included: the suggestions of other Bishops, the potential for the growth of the Catholic population in a given area, the size of the congregation, the Mass schedule at the Parish and the Chapel, the distance between the Chapel and the Parish Church, the difference between the pastoral needs that led to the establishing of the Chapel and the pastoral needs today, the seating capacity of the parish Church, the age and condition of the Chapel, the income of the Chapel, the age, health, and relatively small number of priests serving our Local Church, and the need to assign them wisely to meet the present and future needs of the Diocese, and the wishes of the people who worship at the Chapels. I personally read every letter concerning the Chapels that was sent to me, to the Vicar General, and to Archbishop Alfred Hughes. The Vicar General, the Chancellor, the Deans, the Presbyteral Council, the Pastors, and other appropriate persons were also consulted. Their opinions and suggestions were carefully weighed and guided the decision process.

The final decision falls to the Bishop because it is to him that the Holy Father has entrusted the pastoral care of this Local Church. I have been well aware that whatever decisions I made would deeply disappoint some of the People of God whose Chapel is being closed. Some may even look for someone to blame. Others may think the decisions seem unfair. How can you close this Chapel and leave that Chapel open? The Bishop has listened too much to one group and not enough to our group. The priests cannot be that overextended. They should be willing to come to the Chapel no matter how small the congregation may be and no matter how many other responsibilities they may have. Others may raise new arguments as to why the decision about a particular Chapel should be revisited.

I understand and appreciate all of this because I am acutely aware that the pastoral and administrative decisions of any Bishop are limited and imperfect no matter how much prayer, reflection, and consultation precedes those decisions. It is my hope that all of our Catholic people understand this as well. As parents, employers, managers, farmers, community leaders, business men and women, as workers in whatever walk of life you find yourself, you are well aware that you must do the same thing that I must do in your own unique circumstances. When difficult and challenging issues come before you that require a decision that affects your family, your employees, or your co-workers, you must gather all of the relevant information you can, evaluate the possibilities carefully, and make the most informed decision that you can make. You know in advance that all will not agree with your decision. But those called to leadership know well that not to decide is really to decide. We must all be content to know that when we make difficult decisions, we have made the best and most informed decision that we could make, given the circumstances.

The necessity to close some of our Chapels requires us to make further decisions. In the near future a determination must be made about the future use or disposition of the Chapel facility. Perhaps some of the Chapel furnishings and liturgical materials and resources can be used in the Parish Church or would be useful for one of the remaining Chapels. All sacred vessels should be cared for appropriately. I am asking each Pastor to meet with his Parish Pastoral Council and, if appropriate, with representatives of those who used the Chapel, and explore possible alternative uses for the facility. A Youth Center? A Catechetical Center? An adoration chapel? If it cannot be used by the parish, can the Chapel be sold? Has interest been expressed by other faith communities or business leaders in possibly buying the property? In this process please consult with the Vicar General and the Chancellor for suggestions. After this process is completed, I would like the Pastor to share useful recommendations with me. This will assist me in making a final decision about the property.

Once a Chapel is closed there may be a need for the Pastor to consult the parish community about the Mass sched-

ule. It may be that in a particular parish an adjustment in the mass schedule may make the uniting of the Chapel community with the larger parish easier. Special attention should be given to the needs of older people, who might, in a few circumstances, need special assistance or consideration. In this context, I ask that all of our parishes examine their Mass schedules with the assistance of the Dean and the Vicar General. Study the information collected in the "October Count." How many Masses do you have on weekdays and on the weekend? What is the seating capacity of your church? How many people participate in each liturgy? It may be that neighboring parishes would find it helpful to adjust their Mass schedules in a way that would benefit the people and improve the quality of the celebration of the Eucharist. All of this should be discussed with the Parish Pastoral Council and the Parish Liturgy Committee.

Only five parishes, St. Philip Neri in Kinder, St. Joseph in DeRidder, St. Joan of Arc in Oberlin, St. Joseph in Vinton, and Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Sulphur, are directly affected by these Chapel closures. It is possible that some of the Christian Faithful in parishes whose Chapels are remaining open, and those in parishes that do not have Chapels are thinking that these difficult decisions and this announcement does not concern them. How is this letter relevant to us?

The time has come for all of us to leave behind such thinking. As members of the Catholic Church our individual parish faith communities do not stand alone as separate churches. They are all a part of the whole. This is why the Second Vatican Council does not refer to parish communities as "Local Churches." From our Catholic perspective a "Local Church" consists of all of the parishes in a diocese governed by a Bishop as Successor of the Apostles. All of our parishes are interconnected in an intimate way to form a portion of the Mystical Body of Christ.

This unity of the Church is expressed well by a great English spiritual writer, John Donne in *Devotions*. "The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions. All that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. (In the Church) No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, we are all the less for it."

The closing of our Mission Chapels will ultimately have an impact on every parish in our Diocese. This is true not only because many of the Faithful have relatives, friends, and co-workers who worship in these Chapels but also because of the very nature of the Church as the Body of Christ. More than that, these closings foreshadow other changes which will need to be made in our Diocese in the years to come as the number of Catholics increases and the number of priests declines. For this reason I ask all of you to pray about these developments and commit yourselves to greater participation in the life of your parishes.

At Lent's end we will celebrate the glorious and impenetrable mystery of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. His complete obedience to the Father led to His great victory over death. This great paschal mystery is the source of profound hope in the face of the transitory nature of our brief pilgrimage on earth. Perhaps we feel this most acutely this Lent as we continue to ponder in awe and unspeakable sadness the incomprehensible and catastrophic suffering that our sisters and brothers in the world family have endured. The devastating tsunami that roared through the Indian Ocean after an earthquake of the greatest magnitude swallowing up human lives by the tens of thousands has reminded us all of how fragile we are.

The risen Christ is our Light and our Hope! The celebration of His Resurrection on Easter Sunday will be the first time that those who regularly worship in the Chapels that are being closed will return to the mother parish. I hope and pray that the Good Friday sorrow that accompanies the "death" of these Chapels will be gradually overcome by the Easter of participating in a renewed and revitalized parish life.

Scripture paints an ideal picture of the Resurrection community of the early Church. It should be our goal. **St. Luke in Acts of the Apostles, 2, 42-47** tells us, "And they continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and in the communion of the breaking of the bread and in prayers...And all who believed were together and held all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute them among all according to anyone's need. They continued daily and with one accord in the temple and the breaking of the bread in their houses. They took their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and enjoying the favor of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their company those who were to be saved."

May God guide each one of you on your personal Lenten journey with Christ. May you be generous in supporting the members of your community of faith who are preparing for the Easter Sacraments. May the Holy Spirit whose presence we will celebrate at Pentecost open your minds and hearts so that you may see that the time really has come.

Gratefully and Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Edward K. Braxton

The Most Rev. Edward K. Braxton
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USCCB distributes 2005 Source Book

WASHINGTON — The United States' Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has distributed to media the 2005 Source Book, a media research tool produced annually by the USCCB media relations staff.

The Source Book includes a listing of USCCB staff able to provide expertise to media covering the Church. It also includes an explanation of the USCCB structure and data on church personnel and activities.

The 2005 Source Book notes, for example, that in the United States there are

- 67,259,769 Catholics (23% of the U.S. population)
- 44,212 priests
- 4,330 seminarians
- 14,693 permanent deacons

- 71,486 religious sisters
 - 5,504 religious brothers.
- The 2005 Source Book also notes that in the last year of most recent statistics available, there were
- 985,141 Infant Baptisms
 - 76,829 Adult Baptisms
 - 75,429 persons received into Full Communion through conversion from another Christian Church
 - 3,319,454 students educated in Catholic schools and colleges
 - 83,898,575 patients treated in Catholic hospitals
 - 4,251,107 patients treated in other Catholic health-care institutions
 - 7,134,551 individuals in need of help who were assisted by Catholic Charities.



The First Sunday of Lent

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." He said in reply, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'" Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." At this, Jesus said to him, "Get away, Satan! It is written: 'The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.'" Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Matthew 4:1-11