

Reflecting on **10** years

Bishop Lawrence Persico leads diocese through challenging decade



Bishop Lawrence Persico was ordained and installed as the head of the Diocese of Erie 10 years ago this October, only five months before Pope Francis was named pontiff of the universal Catholic Church.

The past decade has seen unprecedented challenges for the church, both internationally and locally. Among those challenges were a horrific sex abuse scandal and an unexpected pandemic; plummeting numbers of priests and active Catholics; a worldwide immigration crisis; and ongoing racial and political tensions.

Yet Bishop Persico journeys through it all with a sense of hopefulness — buoyed by his deep faith and the example of Pope Francis, whose compassion for others he considers a model for any church leader.

In the past 10 years, Bishop Persico has made headlines by shaking hands with abuse survivors and meeting face-to-face with families confronting the closures and mergers of their schools and parishes.

“I think Pope Francis is saying we need to listen to each other and recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the church,” Bishop Persico says. “The Holy Spirit does not just come to the pope and the bishops. The Holy Spirit comes to all people.”

Q&A

Faith magazine enjoyed the following conversation with Bishop Persico:

Faith:

Bishop, you seem to have a good temperament for your job.

Bishop:

I try to be patient; sometimes that takes a lot of work. And a sense of humor doesn't hurt either.

Faith:

Yes, but it does take a certain amount of skill to work through two major legal concerns of the diocese. One was the Pennsylvania grand jury case, in which you were the only bishop in the state to testify on the clergy abuse crisis, and the other was the U.S. Supreme Court decision preserving religious liberty. [The diocese influenced the legal battle over the so-called contraceptive mandate in the Affordable Care Act.]

Bishop:

I had the right people around me. I've been blessed with very good staff and close collaborators with whom I've been able to work on many issues. It wasn't me alone. It was the collaboration of people at St. Mark Catholic Center and people outside of our main offices, including priests, religious and lay people. All of that has helped me.

Faith:

What have you learned from both the religious liberty experience and the abuse crisis, in which you were the first bishop

in the country to include clergy and lay people on a list of credibly accused?

Bishop:

Both situations called us to vigilance, but in different ways. The abuse crisis showed that we need to protect the innocent, and religious liberty means protecting our rights as believers. Regarding the abuse situation, lay people are on our list because abuse is not just a clergy issue. Both are on this list because it was designed to protect the public as a whole. Regarding religious liberty, we fought hard for it because there are those in our culture who treat the church and believers as just another entity, not making an exception for genuine faith belief.

Faith:

The abuse crisis was a challenging time.

Bishop:

Absolutely. It was a challenging time for the church because it made us look at ourselves and say, “We've got to do things differently.” I saw it as challenging personally because people started to lump all clergy together as abusers, which is unfair. Unfortunately, however, some church leaders in the past thought they were protecting the church by keeping things quiet. In the end, all they did was harm it.

Faith:

Recent synod listening sessions held in the Diocese of Erie and in dioceses across the globe point to some people's distrust of the church.

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Bishop Persico confers the sacrament of holy orders on Father Tom Trocchio at St. Peter Cathedral, Erie, in 2015.



Despite the pandemic, Bishop Persico joined other community leaders in August 2020 at a community service project in Erie. Pictured, from left, are Bishop Dwane Brock of Victory Christian Center, Erie; Bishop Persico; Erie Mayor Joe Schember; and Bishop Michael Lozano of the Northwestern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Sharon.

Photo by Mary Solberg

Bishop:

Yes, the repercussions of the abuse crisis will be with us for some time. It does affect the faith of the faithful. And if a person was struggling with his or her faith, it was devastating.

Faith:

But the synod listening sessions in our diocese also showed how much people love the church and want to work with church leadership to make it better.

Bishop:

I was pleased with the involvement of the faithful of the diocese in the listening sessions. It has been particularly important because it has gotten people to start talking. That's one of Pope Francis' key messages, to have conversations, listen to each other and work in a more collaborative way.

Faith:

That collaboration seems to have been most apparent in the diocese through several parish mergers and partnering over the past 10 years. Yes?

Bishop:

Mergers and partnering of parishes have taught us to be more collaborative. We've tried to work through them by encouraging conversation among many people. The feedback diocesan administrators receive is helpful because there are things sometimes the diocese has not considered. Mergers also have taught us that when there are more people gathered in a church, it makes for better liturgy.

Faith:

Your first five years were devoted to initiating long-term and ongoing efforts, like pastoral planning in our parishes,

schools and ministries, and developing a culture of religious vocations. Do you feel that the diocese has made significant advances in these areas?

Bishop:

I think we've made strategic advances in pastoral planning, but we still need to do more. There are fewer people and fewer priests. What we have to do is adapt to that change. We can't continue functioning as a diocese the way we did 40 or 50 years ago. Life has moved on and we have to adapt so we can make the best use of our resources.

It's going to take time to develop a culture of vocations. Most people feel we've always had priests, so they assume priests will always be there. I'd like to see parishes encourage more young men and women to religious life. The parish is the seed bed for vocations.

Faith:

A couple of years ago, you were a part of an interdenominational racial justice initiative among religious leaders in the Erie area. Do you intend to keep nurturing that effort?

Bishop:

I think it's important to keep it going because look at what's happening in our country with issues of racism and so many other related situations. I think it's all about having conversations and encounters. The only way we get to know people is to have an encounter with them.

Faith:

Has the COVID-19 pandemic one of the greater challenges of your episcopate?

Bishop:

Yes. Absolutely no one, including the church, had experienced anything like a pandemic in 100 years. There was so much death and cause for concern in our churches and in

Encountering the homeless and hungry is one of Bishop Persico's top priorities. He is pictured in this undated photo at the former Bishop's Breakfast in downtown Erie.



Photo by Mary Solberg

our schools. Probably one of the hardest decisions I've had to make in the past 10 years was temporarily closing down our churches, with no public celebration of the sacraments. To say to people, "You can't come to church," was very difficult. The Eucharist is the reason we gather each week. A positive outcome was that people came to appreciate the Mass. Additionally, the U.S. Catholic bishops decided to hold a three-year Eucharistic Revival, which is now underway.

Faith:

What have you learned as bishop?

Bishop:

I've gotten to know and appreciate a whole different group of people, hearing their hopes and dreams, the things that make them sad or happy. Also, I think this diocese is blessed with a very good group of clergy who are hard-working, who take seriously their responsibility as pastors of the church, and who try to do the best they can in walking with their people. I've also come to understand fully how important it is to depend upon God.

Faith:

It seems you've had to dig deep spiritually these past 10 years.

Photo courtesy of L'Osservatore Romano



+ Bishop Lawrence Persico has now served 10 of the 14 years he is expected to be bishop of the Diocese of Erie. He is required, at age 75, to send his letter of resignation to the Holy Father. He is pictured with Pope Francis in Rome in 2015.

Photo by Mary Solberg

The sex abuse scandal facing the Catholic Church drew unprecedented media coverage. Here, Bishop Persico discusses the topic with local media.



Bishop:

Without prayer, it might be easy to shut down or to become despondent. But I am very grateful that, with God's grace, I have taken one day at a time to handle what we've had to deal with in the diocese. You can't spend a lot of time worrying about changing the past; that's impossible. You look toward the future, but always with the hope that what you do today will make the future better. †