



# QUINQUENNIAL REPORT SUMMARY

*1 January 2011 to 31 December 2018*

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**DIOCESE OF ERIE**  
**DIOECESIS ERIENSIS**

## Summary

This Quinquennial Report tracks the period from January 1, 2011 – December 31, 2018. The key events in the Diocese of Erie during this time were the ordination of Bishop Lawrence Persico as the 10<sup>th</sup> bishop of the Diocese of Erie on October 1, 2012; the initiation in 2014 of the ongoing comprehensive Pastoral Planning process; and the diocese's response to the sexual abuse crisis together with the release of the 2018 Pennsylvania Grand Jury report.

The overall population of the diocesan territory has declined by nearly four percent over the past four years. The Catholic population has decreased by 10 percent. This trend has been noticed in the decline in parish membership and Mass attendance throughout the diocese. The most significant factors in this decline are natural death, relocation to other areas of the country and departure from the practice of the faith. Several counties in the diocese, particularly the more urban areas, continue to face notable social and economic challenges. At the time of writing, economic conditions are more favorable in the diocese. However, regional employers are now unable to find enough qualified and willing workers.

The total number of presbyters in the diocese has decreased by 27 during this time period due to death and defections. Bishop Persico makes a concerted effort to maintain strong relationships with his clergy. He very deliberately supports vocations — particularly by appointing a full-time diocesan vocations director and personally attending several vocation-awareness events throughout the year. Even in the midst of the sexual abuse crisis, he still enjoys the esteem and respect of his clergy.

Bishop Persico maintains an active role in the pastoral care and administration of the diocese. He is personally involved in all issues regarding clergy personnel. He visits the people of the diocese frequently by traveling to parishes for the celebration of the sacrament of confirmation and for other diocesan anniversaries and events. The bishop is Chairman of the Board of Gannon University. He is an active participant in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and currently serves as the Region III representative on the USCCB Administrative Committee. Bishop Persico is a frequent contributor to the various diocesan media outlets; particularly the diocesan magazine and his own personal Twitter account. He has cultivated a positive working relationship with the local public media.

The liturgical life of the Diocese of Erie is strong. The majority of parishes have active liturgical ministries and pastors are largely attentive to liturgical law. The number of persons receiving the sacraments has declined during the past quinquennium. This decline closely parallels demographic and social changes and is similar to trends seen elsewhere in the United States. Even in the midst of pastoral planning and parish restructuring, liturgical formation for clergy and laity continues. A significant diocesan-level educational effort accompanied the release of the new marriage ritual.

The Diocese of Erie continues its strong commitment to Catholic education. The first phase of pastoral planning involved a major restructuring of the Catholic elementary and secondary schools. It saw the creation of a Catholic school system in the City of Erie. This planning effort has helped to stabilize the school network. The number of Catholic elementary schools in the diocese declined by seven to a total of 26 at the end of 2018. The number of Catholic secondary schools has remained constant at seven. The diocese hosts two Catholic institutes of higher education: Gannon University (diocesan) and Mercyhurst University (Sisters of Mercy). The diocese operates one minor seminary. Catechesis and liturgical preparation for students who do not attend Catholic schools is organized and available to all students in every parish.

The state of the clergy of the diocese (priests and permanent deacons) is overall strong. However, the effects of the 2018 Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report have taken their toll. Several retired and active priests have had to be removed from ministry in recent years. One is serving a jail sentence for child sex abuse. This has harmed the morale of the priests. Bishop Persico has stated his goal to support a renewal of priestly life and spirituality through the diocesan clergy “Continuing Formation” programs and retreats. The vast majority of clergy serving in the diocese are incardinated in the Diocese of Erie. The Eucharist is celebrated in every parish every weekend.

The primary institutes of consecrated life in the diocese are the Carmelite Sisters, Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of St. Joseph, Benedictine Sisters, Sisters of the Spiritual Family the Work, and the Benedictine Fathers. Although their numbers in general continue to decline, members of these institutes serve in diverse ministries such as education, health care, and service to the poor.

The laity of the diocese are involved in a variety of Christian service both in a parish setting and in the larger community. The diocese continues to have a firm

commitment to supporting the missionary activity of the Church — particularly through the diocesan mission in the Archdiocese of the Yucatán.

The Diocese of Erie remains committed to ecumenism and interreligious cooperation. Relations and collaboration with the region's growing Muslim population are very positive. The diocese remains committed to ministry to families and to the wider culture through new and innovative means of evangelization. The Diocesan Communications Office utilizes various modern means of social media. The diocese publishes the bi-monthly *Faith Magazine*, a new e-newsletter and maintains a vibrant presence on popular social media platforms.

The diocese remains committed to Catholic social teaching and to the promotion of life. The diocese continues to support the poor locally and nationally. The diocesan Mission Office supports mission awareness and outreach. The Diocese of Erie's mission in the Yucatán, Mexico has been restructured according to current Mexican law in order to ensure its continued operation into the future.

By means of careful planning and administration, the diocese is financially sound. However, the high costs of the current independent victim's compensation fund puts future financial stability into question. Even in the midst of the current crisis, the people of the territory contribute generously to their parishes and to the annual Catholic Services Appeal which supports diocesan administrative functioning and the many diocesan and parish-based ministries.

## IDENTIFICATION AND GENERAL RELIGIOUS SITUATION OF THE DIOCESE

### 1. General statistical overview of the diocese

	<u>01 January 2011</u>	<u>31 December 2018</u>
Area of the Diocese	10,167 square miles (26,434 square km.)	10,167 square miles (26,434 square km.)
Total Population	860,340	826,036
Catholic Population	221,958	198,249
Number of Diocesan Priests	193	166
Number of Religious Priests	6	4
Number of Major Seminarians	4	7
Number of Minor Seminarians	12	7
Number of Non-Priest Men Religious	0	0
Number of Women Religious	326	237
Number of Parishes	117	97
Number of Catholic Educational Institutions	42	35
Number of Catholic Charitable Institutions	34	41

## **2. Principal Characteristics of the Diocese**

The Diocese of Erie is made up of the thirteen counties of Northwestern Pennsylvania and covers 10,167 square miles (26,434 square kilometers). Outside of the See City of Erie, the area is largely rural. The topography of the diocese can be divided into several sectors. The See City lies on the shore of Lake Erie, one of the five Great Lakes. The area is urban and coastal in nature. The western third of the diocese is largely agricultural with a small to moderate urban center in the Shenango Valley area. That area is marked by a generally depressed economy, formerly supported by many steel mills and other manufacturing facilities. The eastern two-thirds of the diocese is mostly forested with sparse populations in scattered communities. These areas are very hilly to mountainous and are supported by the oil, natural gas, lumber and mining industries as well as by seasonal tourism. Erie County, where the See City is located, has a population of more than one quarter million inhabitants and one half of the diocese's Catholics. The remaining Catholics are spread throughout the other twelve counties. In every one of those twelve counties, Catholics are a minority of the overall population. The prevailing culture ranges anywhere from a courteous respect for Catholics to outright disregard. The latter has been exacerbated by the clergy sexual abuse crisis of 2018. Throughout the diocese, the Methodist and Lutheran congregations are the stronger denominations among mainline Protestants. Fundamentalist and evangelical denominations, as well as non-denominational Christian churches are growing in number and are present in some form in most areas of the diocese.

The oil, coal, lumber, and steel industries which once brought prosperity and attracted immigrants to the diocese are now greatly diminished. The near-term economic outlook of many of our communities is poor. This continues to be a concern. Because of this, many of our small communities are unable to retain their young people. Following graduation from high school, many young adults leave the region to seek employment elsewhere. This has resulted in a steadily aging and declining population, a reality facing every diocese in Pennsylvania. In the past seven years, the population of the diocese has continued to decrease. The City of Erie's population went below 100,000 people in 2014 for the first time since 1920. The city is, however, one of the most immigrant and refugee friendly cities in the United States and the influx of a great number of immigrants and refugees helps stabilize the population. Erie currently has 18,000-20,000 immigrants and refugees calling the city home.

There are nonetheless many hopeful signs for the City of Erie and a real effort is being made to make the city more attractive and a long-range plan is being drafted. Higher education, healthcare, and small technology companies are key

areas of growth in Erie County. Presque Isle State Park continues to be a major attraction for the area, as well as a source of free and healthy recreation for everyone.

According to the United States 2010 census, most of the counties of the diocese have a Hispanic population that varies in number from 100 to 500. In Erie County, the Hispanic population is estimated at over 6,000. Until recently, the city of Erie was a major recipient of refugees, with many coming from Bhutan, Kosovo and Syria. There are also small clusters of immigrants such as Vietnamese, Bosnians, Russians and Poles in various sectors of the diocese. Many Catholics in the urban areas of the diocese, especially in the city of Erie, retain their ethnic and cultural heritage, especially with regard to parish life. For example, in Erie alone, there are predominantly Irish, Polish, German and Italian parishes. Each of these parishes puts on a cultural festival each year.

Catholics here as elsewhere live in a culture that is increasingly hostile toward organized religion. The prevailing culture in the United States largely chooses to distinguish between being *spiritual* and *religious*. Being *religious* implies membership in churches where one swears allegiance to what are seen as man-made rules and regulations. Being *spiritual* is the pursuit of a life of faith that is open-ended and separate and apart from any institutional affiliation.

Still, many see the Church as a credible and articulate voice of faith and morals. For this reason, the revelations of clergy sexual abuse have been scandalous and disillusioning also for non-Catholics. A growing number of people see the Church as outdated and out of touch with the tempo of the secular world. The Church continues to endure harsh and unrelenting criticism for its refusal to yield on matters of faith and morals particularly as they touch on the issues of life and sexuality, including abortion and euthanasia, homosexuality and same sex marriages, contraception, and other politically and socially charged topics. There is no foreseeable end to this situation.

## **GENERAL ASSESSMENT AND OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE**

### **1. General Assessment of the Situation of the Diocese**

The overall state of the Diocese of Erie and her faithful is positive. However, the diocese as an institution is facing enormous challenges as a result of the clergy abuse crisis and the demographic changes in our territory. Additionally, cultural and legal pressures on the faithful, contrary to the Gospel, are increasing. The release of the 2018 Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, and its surrounding publicity, has greatly damaged trust and confidence in the Diocese of Erie. This has been an extremely difficult experience for the employees of the diocese and for her faithful. The Diocese of Erie is now administering an independent victims' compensation fund which will have financial implications for the diocese for many years to come. However, over this past year there has not been a significant decrease in Mass attendance, school enrollment or financial contributions to the diocese — beyond the expected demographics-driven declines. This indicates that the core faith of the people remains strong in spite of the very public nature of the clergy abuse scandal. The faith continues to be battered by cultural pressures — but our diocesan pastoral plan continues to unfold with new and bold initiatives to evangelize and reinvigorate the faith of our region. In the midst of these dark days, there is much reason for hope.

### **2. Diocesan Pastoral Plan**

Promoting and safeguarding the Faith has been the driving force behind the pastoral planning initiative for the diocese which I began in 2014. The three major facets of the plan: the restructuring of parishes and schools and the implementation of cradle-to-grave faith formation, in conjunction with the building up of a culture of vocations, have, as their core, the great concern for the spread of the faith and catechesis.

The restructuring of parishes resulted in a better alignment of faithful with pastors and has removed some of the administrative burden from pastors through the merging and partnering of parishes. This means that there is more time and energy being spent with the people, rather than with the goods, of a parish.

The restructuring of schools has relieved parishes in the Erie area from some of the administrative and financial burden by making the schools in the area a part of the newly formed Erie Catholic School System. At the same time, the emphasis on both high-quality education and Catholic identity has helped the schools maintain their unique character and be competitive with both public and other private schools. This is a structure already followed elsewhere in the diocese. An effort is made throughout the

diocese to help those Catholic families who cannot afford the tuition of a Catholic school so that their children may nonetheless attend Catholic school through scholarships and other financial assistance. Also, as a result of the pastoral plan, a Catholic school for inner-city children, Mother Theresa Academy, was founded and is flourishing.

I see the lifelong faith formation initiative as the most important part of the pastoral plan because it focuses on growing as disciples of Christ in the Catholic Church and reaching out to others in charity. With lifelong formation in the faith, families are equipped to hand on the faith from generation to generation and a culture of the faith can be fostered in families, in parishes and in the diocese as a whole.

One of the first actions in the pastoral planning process was the appointment of a full-time vocations director. I am deeply concerned with the need for priestly vocations and see the answer in building up a “culture of vocations” within the diocese. I participate in the various initiatives of the vocations director, especially the St. Andrew Dinners (for young men interested in the priesthood) and the Miriam Dinners (for young women interested in religious life). Even in the current toxic environment for priests, I am convinced that for the faith to be handed on, the priesthood must be both promoted and renewed.

### **3. Pastoral Goals**

The pastoral goals of greatest importance for the future are:

- Fostering strong, dynamic and welcoming parishes where the liturgical life and faith formation for all ages is well provided.
- Maintaining a physically and morally safe environment at all church places and events. Continuing a zero-tolerance policy for any type of abuse toward any person — especially minors.
- Continuing to provide support to victims (and families) affected by abuse inflicted by clergy or others associated with the Church.
- Continuing to actively promote and foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life.
- Supporting strong Catholic schools and faith formation programs.
- Evangelizing non-Catholics and inactive Catholics in our territory.

The above goals are being pursued by the diocesan Pastoral Planning process (which has been underway since 2014). They are additionally being pursued by a comprehensive enforcement of the *Policy for the Protection of Children and Youth*, and continued outreach to past victims.