



An Invitation from Archbishop Pérez

January 5, 2025

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Peace be with you on this feast of St. John Neumann, the Fourth Bishop of Philadelphia!

I am writing to you because I need your help. Please join me for a conversation about our future. Your voices and presence are essential as we navigate our way forward together as the Church of Philadelphia.

Thank you.

I am deeply grateful for all of you. One of my greatest joys as Archbishop comes from the interactions I have with you as I travel around the Archdiocese. Coming to know you personally and to see how you serve our community is awesome!

Your resilience is a testament to God's work in our lives. The Church of Philadelphia has experienced more than two decades of crisis; everyone has suffered here in one way or another. When I received the call to come home to Philly as Archbishop five years ago, the biggest priority on my heart was to help our Church move from crisis to hope. That remains my top priority, but I cannot do it alone. I need your help.

Our hope rests in the Lord, in whom we trust. God relentlessly pursues all of us, His beloved children. As your brother, I yearn for a deeper encounter with Him. As your Archbishop, I want you to know that God continues to reach out to encounter you. He loves you. You have a home in the Church. The light is on, and the door is open. In Pope Francis's own words:

“I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting Him encounter them...No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord’...Whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that He is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”

(Joy of the Gospel 3)

We need everyone in our lives and across our local Church to know this. Where do we start?

Where are we today?

To get anywhere, you need to know where you are starting from. We are living in times more like the earliest Christians—times when many are living without Christ. Many Catholics have drifted away or been driven away from the practice of the faith, creating a challenging landscape.

Connected more than ever by technology, people, especially the young, experience an epidemic of loneliness, anxiety, and despair. We have faced crises that have tested our faith and diminished our numbers. Yet, even amidst this suffering, hope persists.

Our hope is in the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ, who is always calling us home. Our current task is to carry that hope to those who feel distant from the Church—those who may have slipped away or feel pushed away, angered and impacted by the abuse scandals, and those still seeking connection.

Today, 83% of our fellow baptized Catholics don't come to church. That fact needs to make us uncomfortable. We need to have urgency around this.

A pastoral change of heart

When determining how to respond to such a pressing need, discussion in dioceses around the world typically starts with 'pastoral planning.' This term usually describes a process that starts with the question, "Where can the Church no longer afford to be due to finances or the number of priests?" We know the answer to this question often leads to parish closures. In Philadelphia, the answer to this question has resulted in numerous closures in places like North Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, and Chester.



I do not want to perpetuate this cycle. I want to embark on a new form of pastoral planning by asking a new question, "Where does the Church need to be and how?" We need to inspire a pastoral change of heart that focuses on those who are absent and that aligns our collective efforts across parishes, schools, and charitable ministries to listen, rebuild trust, and invite people home.

This change of heart starts with me, and it requires your help. As I have been out and about during these past five years, I've heard stories of interactions with the Archdiocese that have caused a strained and deteriorating relationship. These stories are from your friends, coworkers, neighbors, parents, or your children, and grandchildren. We can do better. I can do better.

I want to begin to close this distance between many of our loved ones and the Church. I want people to know that the Lord is still calling them, that they are of great worth, have a divine purpose, and an eternal home.

The Church describes a person that goes forth encountering people in this way as a “Missionary Disciple.” While that language may feel foreign, I encourage you to embrace it. When you boil it down as Pope Francis states in *Joy of the Gospel* it becomes clear it is something we all naturally strive to be:

“The Church which ‘goes forth’ is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast”

(Joy of the Gospel 24)



Many times, you may be the only person in a loved one’s life who can reach them when they are feeling lost or disconnected. Your encounters can mark the beginning of their return. This is our shared mission: to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ’s love, mercy, and resurrection to a world that desperately needs it.

We must be a community of Missionary Disciples focused on renewal, rebuilding trust, and inviting people to a relationship with Jesus Christ!

Where does the Church need to be?

Historically, Philadelphia has taken an on/off approach to parish life—with parishes either open or closed. When I became Archbishop, the second question at my introductory press conference was, “Will you close parishes?” My answer then, and now, is the same: I didn’t come here to close parishes; I came here to build up the Church of Philadelphia.

Pope Francis encourages us to think of parishes as flexible entities that can adapt to the surrounding world:

“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.”

(Joy of the Gospel 28)

Not all parishes need to be the same. They should be ‘flexible centers for ongoing missionary outreach.’ A pastor and his community are responsible for the wellbeing of all souls in the parish, not just those who attend Mass or parish events. Too often, we think of our parish only as those who enter the church doors.

Many parishes that experienced decline in past decades are now flourishing with different communities or cultures filling the pews. In other places, small communities of faith have persevered amid challenging circumstances and have been a beacon of hope for their communities.

However, I am not naïve about the number of parishes we have and how we are spreading our priests thin. While I want to avoid widespread parish closures, we will inevitably face some changes and closures over time. My hope is that, through flexibility and an open heart, we can work creatively to meet the needs of our parishes and create more time for the Holy Spirit to inspire them.

How does the Church need to be?

To build up the Church, we must form our people to be Missionary Disciples. Pastoral planning focusing solely on changing our current parish footprint will not cultivate that culture. We need to try something new. The goal of this initiative is a pastoral change of heart over the next twenty years. It begins today by planting seeds and tending the garden as the fruits of our efforts begin to grow.

Over the next decade, I want to establish “Missionary Hubs” across the entire Archdiocese, aiming for at least ten per county, planted at parishes and other locations. The goal is to reach out to Catholics who don’t participate and non-Catholics, using our resources and talents to ignite a spirit of Missionary Discipleship. This will create a supportive network of missionary life across the whole Archdiocese, animating our communities everywhere, especially in underserved areas.

We need to plan for these Missionary Hubs in a spirit of synodal discernment and collaboration. I want communities and leaders to express interest in having a Missionary Hub planted at their parish. The seeds planted today will be the evangelical fruit of tomorrow.



These Missionary Hubs will fulfill several roles.

- They will turn the Church outward, focusing on those not currently engaged in the life of the Church and working to reconnect them. Community provides a connection point that many crave in today's world.
- They will connect various Catholic ministries within a community—high schools, elementary schools, Catholic Human Services, religious communities, and parishes—ensuring that we work together and maximize the use of our resources where they will have the most impact.
- They will work to bring people to Jesus—through the Eucharist and through service to the poor. Some of our brothers and sisters may not be ready to return to Mass immediately but could encounter Jesus through acts of service, a steppingstone to returning to church. As Jesus exhorts his disciples, “whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will find it.” (Mark 8:35).
- If and when parishes need to adapt, change, or close, the hubs will be a local community with resources and talent prepared and formed to welcome and care for new people.



Parish renewal and reimagining ministry

Missionary Hubs would help to support parish life, reopen in our Church deserts, and inspire our people to be Missionary Disciples.

- Missionary Hubs will have full-time staff working under a pastor committed to outward engagement. The staff may include service coordinators, communications experts, event specialists and missionaries all focused on facilitating an encounter with Christ and his Church.
- We would plant Missionary Hubs throughout the Archdiocese and allocate resources where they are needed most, especially the poorest areas of our community.
- A Missionary Hub would anchor hope and ensure a vibrant future of the Church for your children and grandchildren with an impact for generations.

All of our institutions and communities must embrace flexibility to welcome new members while preserving their traditions and sharing the authentic faith. We are called to care for everyone, including our elder parishioners who've called the same parish home for a lifetime and the young adults who tend to move across parish lines to find a welcoming community.



To support our parishes as long as possible as we face the reality of having fewer priests available for pastoral assignments, we may introduce Parish Life Directors: deacons, men and women in consecrated life, or lay individuals to manage operations without a resident priest and under the guidance of the Regional Bishop. This will allow retired and senior priests to continue to care for souls in these communities and to offer the sacraments without bearing the responsibilities of administration.

We must prioritize resources and support for evangelization. Investing in growth is critical, and harnessing the wisdom and energy of our retired priests in this way will be a gift to the Church of Philadelphia during this time of renewal.

I am so grateful for the generosity of spirit of our amazing priests, deacons, religious, and dedicated lay leaders and ministers that make Church happen every day because of their loving and passionate hearts. A growth mindset cultivates fruitfulness, leading to many more vocations to the priesthood, religious life, and marriage.

An invitation

I invite you to join me this coming spring for discussions about the future of the Church of Philadelphia. I see our local Church as a hub of evangelization, vibrant with hope and grace. But to move forward, I need to listen to your hopes, dreams, concerns, and desires for renewal. Please join me.

Let us not underestimate the power of the Spirit of God working in us, through us, and despite us. As Saint Paul says, we believe in a God “who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). Our hope remains in the Lord. Let us rely on God’s love for each one of us and be conduits of grace.

You are resilient. You are loved. Your steadfastness despite social and spiritual challenges doesn’t go unnoticed. Thank you for walking this journey with me and for embodying the heart and soul of our Church. Just as Saint John Neumann and Saint Katharine Drexel led with love and resilience, may they intercede for us as we move forward in faith.

Please pray for me and be assured of my prayers for you each day.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Nelson J. Pérez, D.D.
Archbishop of Philadelphia

Scan the code to sign up
for a discussion near you



www.TrustAndHope.org