Dear Friends in Our Lord,

I am writing these words after several months in my role and calling as the Bishop of the Diocese of Fort Worth, and my first reflections are of gratitude and thankfulness to the Lord, just as I mentioned the day of my Ordination: “What can I give to the Lord for all that He has done for me?” (Psalm 116).

Even though my life changed dramatically when the Holy Father appointed me to serve as Coadjutor Bishop to Bishop Delaney, and it changed dramatically again upon Bishop Delaney’s sudden death, nonetheless, the call of the Lord to come and follow Him is clear and steadfast, as it must be for all of us.

I have been praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit ever since my appointment, to guide my steps and serve Christ and his people faithfully here. There have been, and continue to be, for me, and for all of us, signs of the Lord’s providential care, even as I became Bishop Delaney’s successor instead of his collaborator. Much of it is the warm welcome and enthusiastic support I have received from the priests, religious, deacons, and all members of Christ’s faithful here. It has been very encouraging and comforting.

In these past months, I have been able to visit a number of our parishes and institutions, and plan to continue upon the same path. I have been welcomed by, and listened to hundreds of dedicated and talented people in many of our parishes. As I mentioned the day of my Ordination, my plan in the year ahead is to celebrate the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, with you, and to get to know the Diocese.

Along with this, I have been studying the pastoral plan which Bishop Delaney prepared in the final months of his life here among us. There is a need to emphasize continuity as we continue to live our Faith, and especially as we come to the end of this year of the Eucharist, to live as Disciples of the Lord as we continue the movement for renewal which was generated by the Diocesan Synod.

Before he died, Bishop Delaney approved a new pastoral plan for ongoing implementation of the Synod’s goals and vision. The plan continues the work of the Synod in its call for emphasis on pro-life activities, promotion of religious vocations, and social justice, for example. At the same time, the pastoral plan offers a new focus on evangelization, catechetical renewal, and intentional communication.

All of these, Bishop Delaney stated, needed to be viewed through the lens of discipleship. It seems to me that as we study and reflect, as we seek to implement the priorities of the plan, we must first do this as a response of the call of the Lord to come and follow Him as his disciples. We can now go forward with this plan and the very important priorities that it lays out for us.

You will see as you read it, that Bishop Delaney was thinking about the future, even as he was acknowledging his mortality. It was as if he had a sense of what was in store for him, at the same time he was reflecting on what was still to come for all of you, the community of Faith whom he loved with a Shepherd’s care, and of whom he was justly proud. Implementing this plan will be a fitting way to honor his memory and to faithfully fulfill our mission as disciples of the Lord.

Early in the month of September we celebrate the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This feast of the Mother of God is one of the most ancient in the liturgical calendar. Thus, like Mary, we trust in the goodness of God and his care as we move forward to seek the will of God for us. The diocesan staff at The Catholic Center will be developing resources and strategies to help parishes implement and live out this plan. I ask for your prayers and support as we move ahead together into this new era of the life of our Diocese. I am truly grateful to the Lord to be part of it!

Gratefully yours in our Lord,

Most Reverend Kevin W. Vann, J.C.D.
Bishop of Fort Worth

Just over three years ago, I published a pastoral plan entitled “The Mission of Our Local Church Beyond the Synod.” It outlined, in some detail, the priorities and values by which we were called, as a diocesan Church, to live out the insights and challenges of our Synod.

Now it is time for us to review our progress in implementing that plan. It is time to see where we have been during these last three years and to look forward to where we need to go next.

As always, such a consideration needs to begin with the reaffirmation of our fundamental mission of evangelization. From the mandate of Jesus in the Gospels, through the teachings of John Paul II and now, Pope Benedict XVI, the mission of the Church is clear: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28: 19-20).

In everything we do, then, from celebrating the sacraments, to caring for the poor and troubled, to passing on doctrine, to the administration of temporal goods, our task is to do everything in a way that makes visible and real God’s saving, merciful love.

At this point in our journey of faith together, it seems fitting to look back briefly at how we have fulfilled the promise of the pastoral plan, at where we have succeeded, through the grace of God and the hard work of faithful stewards, and where we have fallen short, through human limitations.

Having reviewed the past, we need then to look forward, to see where our synod vision needs to be reaffirmed and where, perhaps, we see new priorities arising, or different approaches to the priorities of the past.

Finally, I want to reflect on the changing circumstances of my own ministry and how that may affect the future of our Diocese and the implementation of this plan.

“‘It is time to see where we have been during these three years and to look forward to where we need to go next.'
PART 1: STEWARDSHIP OF OUR GIFTS — LOOKING BACK

When the Synod's findings were published over three years ago, I spent a great deal of time reflecting prayerfully on them. I had many lengthy and heartfelt conversations with other diocesan leaders—the priests who serve as my consultors on the Presbyteral Council, members of the Diocesan Pastoral Advisory Council, leaders of the Synod Core Committee, and diocesan staff.

Part of what I pondered was the lavish abundance of gifts with which our Diocese has been blessed over its short lifetime. Our people are talented and dedicated to Christ and his Gospel. We have a rich array of cultures, languages, and history. We are blessed with institutions and structures and local traditions which promote effective service and a strong sense of “investment” in the life and work of the Church. Our clergy are holy and forward-thinking leaders with strong pastoral skills. We have enjoyed the financial generosity of people from every social and economic level.

The demands of stewardship required me to sift, in light of these blessings, the many significant insights and desires expressed in the goals endorsed by Synod delegates, and to find there a sharper focus for our efforts.

In the end, the resulting pastoral plan named five priorities which I believe reflected the wisdom of the Synod:

- Encouraging vocations to priesthood and religious life,
- Addressing the concerns of youth and young adults,
- Enhancing ministry with those in prison and with their families,
- Strengthening our commitment to pro-life action,
- Enriching the liturgical preaching in our parishes.

In looking back over the last three years, I am gratified to report that much progress has been made on all of these priorities. A fuller report on this progress is available on the diocesan Web site (www.fwtdioc.org; click on “About the Diocese” and then on “Living the Synod”), but for now, some highlights need to be mentioned.

**Priestly & Religious Vocations**

In parishes and schools throughout the Diocese, the issue of priestly and religious vocations has become significantly more visible. Many have begun the Chalice Program or other similar efforts to make explicit the link between family life and the fostering of priestly and religious vocations. There are well-functioning, active vocations committees in more parishes, and diocesan vocation programs to encourage people to consider God’s call in their lives have grown stronger and more accessible, especially for the Spanish-speaking. Young priests in the Diocese and other priests new to the area are receiving more formal support and training in order to help them fulfill their ministry more effectively. I have been blessed to ordain three men as priests since the pastoral plan was issued, and our seminarians now in training show great promise for generous and skilled leadership.

**Youth & Young Adult Concerns**

Ministry in this vital arena of diocesan life has continued to flourish. Especially noteworthy are developments in ministry with Spanish-speaking young people, both teenagers and young adults. The Diocese is now embarked on an extensive project of dialogue and consultation as part of the national Encuentro for Hispanic Youth. In both Spanish- and English-speaking parishes, more adults are being trained and certified as youth ministers. Special youth ministry resources are now available on the diocesan Web site, dramatically increasing their accessibility to parishes and schools. Ministry possibilities have been enriched through new training programs for teen catechists and expanded mission opportunities with our sister diocese in Juticalpa, Honduras.

Catholic college students and other young adults have become more active in serving the mission of evangelization and worship. Mass is now more available at public colleges than ever before, and a new center for campus ministry at UT Arlington opened last fall. Young adult retreat ministry has seen increasing levels of participation and ownership. The recently completed Presbyteral Assembly devoted a sizable portion of its agenda to a fuller understanding of young adult ministry as essential to the future of the Church.

**Ministry with the Imprisoned and Their Families**

In the last three years, joint ventures between parishes and diocesan offices have led to the establishment of regular weekly Communion services in the Tarrant County jail system. Volunteer training programs have been developed to prepare individuals from a growing number of parishes for service in jails and prisons throughout the Diocese. I am greatly encouraged to see the upsurge of interest in this very challenging and very important ministry.

**Pro-Life Activities**

Parish and diocesan efforts have increased significantly in seeking to make more visible the Catholic teaching on the value and dignity of every human life, from conception to natural death. In the last three years the prominence of this teaching has been highlighted in catechetical efforts in our parishes and schools. The North Texas Catholic has expanded its already strong coverage of pro-life issues, through analysis, news reporting, and commentary, and four of the awards it received from the Catholic Press Association last year were for pieces dealing with the pro-life message. Diocesan and parish support have assisted in the development of the Rachel’s Vineyard ministry for healing after abortion. Support of the U.S. Bishops’ lobbying efforts on issues of abortion and capital punishment has expanded.

**Richer Liturgical Preaching**

Enrichment and advanced training for priests and deacons to strengthen the ministry of preaching was evident in several ways. A three-day presbyteral assembly was devoted to preaching education for priests, and subsequently a homily preparation and evaluation program has been begun for newly ordained and newly reordained priests. Homiletic training of permanent deacons was significantly enhanced during the last round of formation. For those exceptional occasions when lay persons must lead services of the Word with Communion or Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest, new diocesan guidelines have been developed for giving pastoral reflections. Days of study on the lectionary continue to be offered in multiple locations to enrich all liturgical ministries of the Word, including preaching.

These advances represent, in almost every case, not only the labors of individual ministers, but collaborative efforts between parishes and schools and diocesan offices. Improvements in the diocesan Web site, for example, have made resources and information more accessible for virtually every area of ministry in the Diocese. Ministries which typically play a more supportive role in the work of the Church—financial and administrative efforts primarily—have played vital roles in securing the funds and providing logistical and administrative support that make everything else possible. Such collaboration is an important sign that the value of stewardship is being taken seriously.

The same stewardship which calls us to enumerate what we’ve done well with the gifts given us, calls us to name our shortcomings as well. Of course, in all of these priority areas, there is more work to be done. Because of continuing population growth, the need for more priests and religious is perhaps even more acute now than it was three years ago. There are still many young people whose faith is at risk in a culture full of challenges. An expanding prison population continues to outstrip our efforts to recruit and train volunteers. We still have a long way to go before our Catholic tradition of respect for life is fully integrated into our own lives, much less in the dominant culture of our society. Liturgical preaching always has room for a fuller and more vibrant proclamation of the Gospel.

The fact that we are not yet finished with this important work makes it all the more urgent that we continue these efforts, as well as the many other aspects of ministry not expressly named here, to which we have dedicated so much time and talent and treasure for almost four decades.
The wisdom gained from the process of the Synod continues to inform my thinking as I consider where our mission calls us to move from here. At the same time, the Diocese does not exist in a vacuum. New circumstances arise, added challenges emerge, and fresh insights continue to develop. If the important initiatives launched during these last three years are to continue — if our stewardship of gifts is to prosper — we must focus our attention and energy on the conscious, explicit development of mature discipleship.

I am not suggesting that we simply replace one of the current priorities with discipleship, nor am I suggesting that we add to the list. We know from experience that having too many priorities reduces our focus and effectiveness. Instead, I am proposing that, during the next three years, we commit ourselves to viewing the work we do through the lens of discipleship. For our effectiveness in doing the work of the Church is directly related to the degree that we are intimately connected to Jesus, following him in our hearts and minds and actions — in short, mature disciples. In order to avoid speaking only in generalities, I want to frame our focus on mature discipleship in the context of three overarching goals: explicit evangelization, catechetical renewal, and intentional communication. I believe that paying serious, focused attention to these three goals will help us address, at least in part, most of the thirty-six goals originally named in the Synod.

Explicit Evangelization

At the heart of the Church’s mission, evangelization means “bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence, transforming humanity from within and making it new” (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 18). In a very real sense, everything the Church does is in service to its core identity as an evangelizing community. Still, because it is so much a “given” of Church life, it is a reality we can all too easily take for granted. Recognition of this danger was an important factor in Pope John Paul II’s passionate interest in what he called “the new evangelization.”

By this he meant not proclaiming a new message, but proclaiming the perennial message of God’s love with a new intensity, for a new age, in new circumstances. Explicit evangelization means renewing our personal connection to the Lord Jesus and rekindling a sense of being personally connected to the Lord Jesus in the light of the overarching message. This is the task of catechesis.

Our Diocese has been blessed from its beginnings with a strong commitment to providing effective catechesis for “the next generation,” our children and youth. In parish religious education programs and in Catholic schools, young people have been lovingly and faithfully instructed in their faith. As valuable as that ministry continues to be, it is clearly no longer enough. In a world which is increasingly pluralistic, with competing visions of reality and virtue, Catholics need more than ever to have an adult understanding of their faith. Too, the growing need for lay Catholics to assume more responsibility for the work of the Church, both in the parish and in the world, makes it urgent that we provide more thorough, systematic, and effective catechesis for all.

Mature discipleship requires mature faith. I am asking, therefore, that all parishes, schools, movements, and diocesan ministries support “catechetical renewal” in the following ways:

- Providing concrete programs and strategies to help initiate and/or renew in their members a personal sense of communion with God in Christ.
- Integrating into the life of the parishes and schools opportunities for members to share their personal stories of faith with one another, in small Christian communities, retreat programs, and other settings.
- Developing specific plans for reaching out to people in special need of hearing the Good News, in particular, Catholics no longer actively participating in parish life and the unchurched.
- Establishing, at the end of three years, a pastoral plan for catechesis which reflects the values and vision of the NDC.
- Providing resources for families and households of faith which will assist them in making explicit the link between the teaching of Christ in the Church and daily life.

Intentional Communication

The Synod conversations made clear that there were significant gaps in the way the Diocese and its parishes communicated their message. A surprisingly large number of Synod delegates — active, committed parishioners — were unaware of many of the ways that needs were being met throughout the local Church. It was a wake up call to many of us, and I am happy to note significant improvements across the board.

An excellent diocesan Web page has grown from a few dozen to over 600 pages, accessible any time of day or night to anyone with access to the Internet. Many parishes have also developed excellent Web sites which do an excellent job of telling their story. Our diocesan newspaper continues to enjoy wide readership and has won numerous awards for excellence.

Still, I am aware as we look forward that there is much more to be done on this front. Much of what and how we communicate remains outside of our awareness. And those kinds of communication — what we say with the way our parishes and diocesan offices are organized, with the signage on our property, by our degree of visibility in our neighborhoods and civic forums, through our administrative procedures and practices — often tell people things about us that are not what we want to be saying. That is why I am lifting up a more intentional approach to communication as an important value.

Specifically, I am asking all parishes, schools, movements, and diocesan ministries to commit to “intentional communication” in the following ways:

- Undertaking a comprehensive review of all formal communication, both internal and external, including Web, print, telephone, signage, etc.
- Conducting what has been called a “hospitality audit,” in order to discover how we can make people feel more welcome and “at home” in the Church.
- Providing opportunities for understanding and evaluating the informal, “unspoken” messages communicated in the way we go about our ministry, in the light of the overarching message it is our privilege and sacred calling to share.
As you may recall, the theme of our Synod was “United in Faith.” It was both a description of how we would enter into the dialogue of the process and a goal for where we hoped the Synod would lead us. I am grateful to God that this phrase has proven so accurate, in both ways. That is why I use it here. Doing the daily work of parish and school and diocesan life is demanding enough. To enrich our way of doing it, by considering it all through the lens of mature discipleship, we will need to collaborate. We can implement this pastoral plan only if we are “united in faith.”

To that end, I am committing myself to support these efforts in three specific ways.

• I am including all diocesan ministries in the challenges of the plan in order to make sure that I am not asking parishes and schools to do what I am not willing to do myself. In consultation with the Presbyteral Council and the Diocesan Pastoral Council, I will see to it that the central office of the Diocese is committed to explicit evangelization, catechetical renewal, and intentional communication.

• I am directing my staff in the diocesan office to make it a priority to develop concrete strategies for supporting parishes, schools, and movements in the pursuit of these goals over the next three years. They will begin immediately preparing resources, options, and training opportunities in all three arenas so that those at the parish and school level will not have to start from scratch.

• I am committing myself to report periodically on the progress being made on these plans. I will use the North Texas Catholic and the diocesan Web site to keep the people of the diocese informed as we move ahead.

I want to conclude with a few remarks about where the future is leading us. As you know, my health has been very uncertain for a while now, and though my spirits remain hopeful, I cannot predict as clearly as I would like what my personal future holds.

I am aware that my ill health, and the resulting inconsistency of my presence and energy, has slowed the resolution of some projects and studies from the last pastoral plan. Largely because of my illness, proposals regarding a diocesan retreat center and alternative parish staffing options have yet to be resolved. I hope that in the days to come, if my health improves, I may be able to tackle some of these questions.

I realize, however, that some of the efforts outlined in this plan for the next three years may be affected by the same difficulties. That thought may have inclined some to worry that developing another pastoral plan would be, at best, inopportune; at worst, a waste of time.

While I understand how such a conclusion could be reached, I myself have reached a different one, for several reasons.

Most importantly, the Holy Father’s recent decision to appoint Monsignor Kevin Vann of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois as my coadjutor bishop will ensure a valuable continuity of leadership and vision. Bishop-elect Vann will bring great energy and skill to the work of our diocese. His pastoral experience and his many personal gifts will bring a fresh perspective to our shared ministry of leadership.

In addition, too much work and prayer and dialogue and insight have been invested in the Synod to let its momentum stall. I am convinced that the Spirit was moving in and through the Synod, and continues to be at work among the People of God here in the Diocese of Fort Worth.

The Church, no more than the world to whom it offers hope, does not stand still. Holding fast to the eternal truth of God’s redeeming love made flesh in Jesus Christ, we must look to the future with confidence.

What happens tomorrow, none of us knows for sure. What happens in the end, though, we know through the promise of Christ. Tears will be wiped away, mourning will turn to gladness, and death itself shall give way to eternal life.