regular celebration of a Sunday Mass (the details of having already been discussed and presented). For many, if not all, this is a real grief. The Bishop speaks to that grief directly in his homily. He also reminds us that the Church is first a people, not a building, and that we are never more united than when we gather around the Lord's table.

As you read his words, I join you in continuing to pray for our diocese, for our parishes, and for one another.

Mary, Queen of Apostles, pray for us.

In Christ,

Father Mitchell Bechtold

Homily for the Diocesan Mass for Unity
November 14–15, 2026

My brothers and sisters, it has been my privilege as your bishop. I love the opportunities that I have to encounter you in person, for I see Christ in each one of you. I take seriously what Pope Francis once preached at a Chrism Mass, urging us priests to be "shepherds who smell of their sheep." Years ago, when families without running water only bathed once a week on Saturday night to prepare for Sunday Mass, maybe the sheep didn't always smell so good. Regardless, St. Paul said that we are to God the sweet aroma of Christ!

Once I got to know the lay of the land in our Diocese, I learned that the priest-to-parish ratio in our diocese represented one of the more severe priest shortages in our country, with 54 active priests for 131 parishes. I saw the heavy burden that our priests were

carrying. When I was a pastor in Portland, Oregon, I was responsible for one church and one school and was incredibly busy. Here our pastors can have anywhere from three to eight parishes, along with numerous schools, under their pastoral care.

When we began the All Things New planning process, it was not just about easing the burdens of our priests, as important as that is. I saw the statistics on declining Mass attendance over the past 15 years in our parishes and a pronounced decrease in the number of people receiving the Sacraments. I felt the Holy Spirit calling us as a Diocese to a genuine spiritual renewal and to a greater sense of oneness and unity as the people of God that transcends towns, cities, and even church buildings.

As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Brothers and sisters, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male or female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ."

We must awaken to the fact that the person sitting next to us in the pew, whether we know them or not, is Christ himself. And if you see any new face in your parish church, I invite you to go up and welcome that person as you would Christ himself. For Christ himself said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me." In the Rule of St. Benedict, it is written that "All guests are to be received as Christ himself."

As we go through the All Things New process together, I want to acknowledge the grief of those who may be asked to let go of a particular church that has been their spiritual home for generations. May the Lord comfort in a special way those whose church will come to a sacred ending, but whose legacy of faith will live on in the hearts of its people.

When St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was asked, "What is the Church?," she did not speak of buildings but of people. In her words, "But who is the Church? You and I…The Church are those who follow Jesus. Following him is something that I try to do every day. We live surrounded by people who are hungry for love. That is what we need to give them."

You and I are the Church. And we are never more united than when we gather around the Lord's table to celebrate the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the source and the summit of our lives as Catholics. When we hear the word of God and receive the body and blood of Christ, we experience our oneness and our unity as brothers and sisters in the Lord. We begin to perceive Christ in one another.

St. Carlo Acutis said that "The Eucharist is the highway to heaven." If someone were to ask us how long a distance we would be willing to drive on a highway or on a country road to receive the Eucharist, I hope that our answer would be, "As long as it takes." May every church of our diocese be a spiritual home to all who enter, where all are welcome, and all are received as Christ himself.

The words of Jesus in today's reading from the Gospel of John put it best: "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." My deepest hope is that we can realize that we are one family in the Diocese of Saint Cloud and brothers and sisters in the Lord from now until the end of time.

St. Cloud, pray for us!

Bishop Patrick M. Neary, C.S.C.

EDITION - XXV

FATHER MITCHELL'S PASTORAL BULLETIN

Sunday, November 15, 2026

To the parishioners of Saint Andrew's, Greenwald, Saint John the Baptist's, Meire Grove, Saint Mary's, Melrose & Saint Michael's, Spring Hill, of the One In Faith Area Catholic Community

The Holy Father's prayer intention for November: "Let us pray for the proper use of wealth, that not succumbing to the temptation of selfishness, it may always be put at the service of the common good and solidarity of those who have less."

Greetings.

This weekend, Saturday November 14 and Sunday November 15, every Catholic church across the Diocese of Saint Cloud is celebrating a Mass for Unity. Bishop Patrick Neary has written a homily for the occasion, and he has asked that it be read from every pulpit in the diocese at all of this weekend's Masses. The full text is printed in this bulletin so that you can take it home, read it again and pray with it.

The Mass for Unity comes in the middle of *All Things New*, the pastoral planning process our diocese has been working through together. *All Things New* began with some hard facts. Our diocese has far more parishes than priests to serve them. Fewer people are coming to Mass than just 15 years ago, and fewer are receiving the Sacraments. Bishop Patrick saw in this a call from the Holy Spirit to spiritual renewal. He also saw a call to a deeper sense that we are one people of God, beyond the lines of our towns and our church buildings.

We know this process well in our own communities. A plan has been presented and approved for our four parishes of Saint Andrew's, Saint John the Baptist's, Saint Mary's and Saint Michael's to be brought together as one parish, with the church buildings of Saint Andrew's in Greenwald and Saint Michael's in Spring Hill no longer having the