



The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington

Post Office Box 29260, Washington, DC 20017-0260

Office of the Archbishop

Thursday 22 June, 2023

Dear Brother Priests,

This letter is to share with you information on an upcoming parish project that I have decided to undertake after close consultation with archdiocesan leadership and the priest council. The project, studied for many years by the Archdiocese, would formally establish parishes as separate entities under civil law. Please let me assure you that, while the project concerns parish structuring, it in no way involves any parish closings or consolidations. Rather, we are implementing a civil law structure that should facilitate the efficient administration of our parishes, with minimal disruption on daily operations.

Since the establishment of the Archdiocese, parishes have functioned as unincorporated associations “under the auspices” of the Archbishop as the corporation sole. Historically, such an arrangement was often necessitated by the lack of suitable secular civil laws for forming Catholic parishes in the United States. That has changed over the years as civil law has developed.

The development of civil law has also posed an increasing number of administrative challenges for our parishes operating under the corporation sole model, such that it has become clear that a modified and more formalized corporate structure is needed to ensure ongoing good governance. I am therefore pleased to announce that we are now positioned to establish our parishes as non-profit corporations.

The corporation sole structure has long been disfavored by the Holy See, as it presents inconsistencies with canon law and civil law. Canon law recognizes each parish as a distinct entity with its own temporal goods administered by a pastor. Parishes have found it increasingly difficult to uphold this canonical understanding while navigating their administrative operations within the context of civil laws. For example, without a formalized civil structure for parishes, pastors have encountered difficulties in the areas of banking, contracting, tax exemption renewals, grant applications, real estate transactions, endowments, donations, and, in recent years, coronavirus disease-relief programs, just to name a few. In short, experience and good governance dictate that we implement a more formalized structure to more closely align with parishes’ rights under canon law and the expectations of civil laws in an increasingly digital world.

Thus, after much prayer and consultation, we have determined that establishing parishes under civil laws as non-profit corporations would be the most effective way to facilitate our parishes’ operations in today’s world. This type of legal structure is not new to Catholic dioceses and, in fact, the Holy See recommended in 1911 that United States

dioceses consider incorporating parishes to better reflect parishes' canonical status. Since then, many dioceses across the nation have taken this step. When serving as Archbishop in Atlanta, I oversaw the similar incorporation of individual parishes there. The effort met with great success and the gratitude of our parish priests.

This project will involve some technical steps behind the scenes. However, again, please rest assured that, while your parish will be assuming a modified structure under civil laws to better accommodate parish operations, parish operations themselves will largely continue as usual. Similarly, Archdiocesan offices will continue to provide parishes support as always.

To better familiarize you with the upcoming plan, our Office of General Counsel will be hosting an upcoming virtual meeting to explain the process, answer any questions you may have, and share with you the pertinent documents related to this project. There will be further communications from Archdiocesan offices as we progress with this project and our departments will of course be available to assist you with any questions or concerns now or in the future.

I look forward to working with you as we take this important step. With every good wish, I am

Fraternally yours in Christ,



✠ Wilton Cardinal Gregory,
Archbishop of Washington