

A Time for Fortitude: Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church



A Pastoral Letter from
Bishop Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V.,
D.D., to the Clergy, Religious, and
Faithful of the Diocese of Fall River



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Roman Catholic Diocese of
Fall River
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**The Stronger Priests,
Stronger Parishes,
Stronger Church Initiative
2025-2027**



A Time for Fortitude

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you!

As the Universal Church celebrates the great Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary and we stand at the beginning of a new Liturgical Year, I want to take this opportunity to **share with you an important vision for the future of our Diocese**, which has been in my heart for some time. **A vision that focuses on moving the local Church forward in relationship to Christ by actively working towards bringing to our priests more stability, hope, holiness, and wellness.**

Thank you for spending time with this letter as I share how the unprecedented challenges facing our priests affect us all and highlight the actions needed to support our priests and fortify our Diocese. **This will serve as our guiding vision in the years to come.**

Reflections on the Past and Present

The past year has been a time of great blessing, gratitude, and joy in our Diocese.

The Diocese of Fall River celebrated 120 years of existence, bringing the truth and love of Christ and His Church to every corner of our region. We give thanks to Almighty God for the many bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity who have faithfully led and supported the Diocese of Fall River for so many decades. Their sacrifices, hard work, and holiness are both an occasion to gratefully recall God's abundant graces bestowed upon us and **a continual call to each one of us to take personal responsibility for our local Church and to live in a way that is worthy of the call that each of us has received** (cf. Eph 4:1).

Personally, it has been an occasion of immeasurable joy to celebrate my 10th anniversary as the Bishop of Fall River in concert with our 120th Diocesan commemoration. Prayerfully reflecting upon the last ten years together, I am filled with a **tremendous sense of awe that comes with the responsibility of being a Successor of the Apostles and your bishop despite my own unworthiness.** While I might not always "get it right," I thank my Father in Heaven for the last decade, helping me to serve, love, and lead faithfully in my role as your bishop.

By the grace of God, we have accomplished tremendous things together, and I want to thank you for your collaboration and generosity in our many undertakings toward building a vibrant Diocese. **I would especially like to thank my brothers, our priests, the often-unsung heroes of our Diocese, who pray and labor frequently in the quiet and without recognition.** I know you do not need recognition because you do everything for the Lord, but thank you, brothers, for serving our people every day with great joy.

To each of you—clergy and lay faithful alike—I echo Saint Augustine's words: **"For you, I am a bishop; with you, I am a Christian."** I look forward to continuing our pilgrimage of holiness together as brothers and sisters in Christ in the years ahead.

Another recent highlight for the Church and the Diocese of Fall River has been the conclusion of the National Eucharistic Revival. The National Eucharistic Revival was a three-year initiative (2022-2024) sponsored by the U.S. Bishops to inspire, educate, and unite the faithful more intimately with Jesus Christ truly present in the Eucharist. This three-year movement reached its summit when tens of thousands of Catholics and pilgrims joined together in Indianapolis for the five-day Eucharistic Congress last July, which Pope Francis called a "significant moment in the life of the American Church."

Likewise, our Diocese was blessed by our Diocesan Eucharistic Encounter in September, which drew more than 1,200 individuals to pray and worship together. In my homily that day, I echoed the words of Bishop Cozzens, Chairman of the Board of the Eucharistic Congress, that this must always be about **starting a "movement and not a program."** I urge each of us to make this principle a reality by going forth in our Diocese, spreading the truth about the Eucharist and how it transforms lives. **We will only have a Eucharistic Diocese if we (each person in their own capacity) make it so.** My heartfelt appreciation to all who have made and continue to make increased Eucharistic Devotion a reality in our Diocese.

Even as we have accomplished many great things together spurred on by love for Christ and those we serve, there has been a sense, through prayerful discernment and collaboration with many, that the Holy Spirit is calling our Diocese to an important vision in the years ahead. As we continue our journey of faith together, let us now consider that vision.

A vision that focuses on moving the local Church forward in relationship to Christ by actively working towards bringing to our priests more stability, hope, holiness, and wellness.

A Hopeful Vision for the Future

In *Journeying Together: With Jesus on the Path of Faith & Hope*, my Pastoral Letter to the Diocese in 2021, there was an envisioning of our Diocese having a **focus on Sacramental Living, especially through personal encounter with Christ in the Eucharist.** One excerpt in that letter says, **"There is no more extraordinary way to encounter Jesus than the Eucharist, where we believe him to be truly present—Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity."**





Why does the Eucharist lead to a personal relationship with Christ? Saint John Paul II explained it best when he said, **“Love cannot tolerate distance or bear separation,”** and for this reason, our Lord **“invented the Eucharist where His closeness to us exceeds anything we could possibly imagine”** (*Letter to the Eucharistic Congress at the Diocese of Setubal, Portugal, 2002*).

So, while we continue to emphasize a renewal of Eucharistic Devotion as a means to a personal encounter with the living God, **such an emphasis brings with it another deeply connected reality, which I believe the Holy Spirit desires in our Diocese to make the center of its attention – the Priesthood.**

Theologians discuss the fact that there is an **indissoluble connection** between the Eucharist and the Priesthood. When Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, saying to His Apostles, **“Do this in remembrance of me”** (1 Cor 11:24), **He was simultaneously instituting the Priesthood.** In 2008, Jorge Mario Cardinal Bergoglio (Pope Francis) identified this reality when saying the following:

“In the Last Supper, we [priests] have been born as priests. There isn’t the Eucharist without the Priesthood. And the Priesthood doesn’t exist without the Eucharist. Only the Priest who has received the Sacrament of Orders can validly celebrate the Eucharist because there is something mysterious. The Eucharist isn’t a reunion of friends who come to pray and eat bread and wine. The Eucharist is fundamentally priestly. Because the first Eucharist was celebrated in a priestly way by the unique High Priest in whose Priesthood we ourselves participate. Jesus Christ. He was the Priest and was the Victim of this Sacrifice” (Episode 9 of “El Sacerdocio Y La Eucaristia,” EWTN Spanish Television Series, 2008).

Yes, without the Priesthood, there would be no Eucharist, and without the Eucharist, there would be no Church. **By God’s design, our very existence as a Church is permanently tied to the Priesthood.**

This intrinsic link between the Eucharist and the Priesthood offers the ideal and clear theological foundation for **our Diocese’s continued Eucharistic focus with the new and added focus on our priests.**

In addition to this theological foundation, we might ask why this vision is essential for our Diocese at this specific time.

There are two reasons for this evolution of our vision:

1. Thriving priests lead to vibrant parishes and apostolates.
2. New unprecedented challenges and realities are being imposed on our priests, making it more difficult, perhaps at any time in our Diocesan history, for them to thrive.

Thriving Priests Lead to Vibrant Parishes and Apostolates

It is important to acknowledge the consistent research showing that thriving parishes and Church apostolates are typically led by happy and flourishing priests. **Let’s emphasize this truth once more: flourishing priests are key to flourishing parishes.** There is a clear link between a priest’s personal well-being (both natural and spiritual) and the success of his ministries. This is a fundamental reality that must take deeper root within our Diocese.

Let’s emphasize this truth once more: **flourishing priests are key to flourishing parishes.**

There is a spiritual foundation for this reality as well. The *Spiritual Law of Causality* points out that there is a **causal relationship between the priest’s holiness and the laity’s holiness.** As the Congregation for Clergy puts it in *The Priest, Pastor, and Leader of the Parish Community*, “a certain osmosis exists between the faith of the priest and that of the other faithful” (#16).

Many of us intuitively understand this reality when we reflect on the priests who have significantly impacted our lives. Last year, we launched a campaign called *Our Priests Make a Difference*, inviting our parishioners to submit stories about how our priests have impacted them. **Catholics and non-Catholics alike submitted hundreds of heartwarming stories.**

How Our Priests Are Making a Difference – Stories of Impact

** While we received hundreds of positive stories about our priests, due to limited space, only a few can be shared here.**

- **Fr. Fred Babiczuk**
“Fr. Fred shows us by example how to live our Faith... He spends all his energy on the flock.”
– Parishioner, Taunton Catholic North, Taunton
- **Fr. David Frederici**
“Fr. David Frederici is one of the main reasons I came back to the faith permanently. There’s not enough ‘thank you’s’ in the world for saving my soul. Fr. David Frederici being nice/positive/welcoming gave me that hope and something to look forward to I needed to hear. Meant a lot to me. Still does. He’s the best...Do priests make a difference? MORE THAN WE KNOW! Love this man! Thank you.”
– Parishioner, Our Lady of Fall River Catholic Community, Fall River
- **Fr. Matt Gill**
“In the heart of Taunton, Massachusetts, there is a beacon of spiritual guidance and warmth at Our Lady of Lourdes School, and his name is Father Matt Gill. Serving as the chaplain of our close-knit community, Father Matt has become more than just a spiritual advisor; he is a genuine friend and

an inspirational figure to students, faculty, and parents alike.”
— Parishioner, Holy Family Parish, Taunton

• **Fr. John Kelleher**

“Our parish of St. Pius the Tenth in South Yarmouth is blessed to have Fr. John Kelleher as our pastor for the past 3 years. The parish continues to thrive as we journey to build the Body of Christ under Fr. John’s leadership and example.

Being pastor is no easy task. Fr. John Kelleher is a wonderful pastor, priest and friend. We try to emulate his example as a person who models his life after Christ.”

— Parishioner, St. Pius X Parish, S. Yarmouth

• **Fr. Chris Peschel**

“Father Chris Peschel deserves my deepest thanks and prayers... I am deeply thankful for Fr. Chris and for all priests who so generously say yes when someone comes to them in need.”

— Parishioner, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, New Bedford

• **Fr. Craig Pregana**

“Fr. Craig has been our pastor for the past 4 years and has brought so much joy back into the parish during some pretty tough times, with the pandemic, etc. He has raised up our parish to a level of full capacity at all the masses, has brought so much positivity and prayer to each and every one of us as a parish family. He has embraced the youth, who is our future in the Church. For that we are very grateful for all the programs Fr. Craig has initiated since becoming our pastor. The evangelization we share is endless!”

— Parishioner, St. John the Evangelist, Attleboro

• **Fr. Mike Racine**

“No matter what time of the day, Fr. Mike is always available for his parishioners. He covers three parishes and serves all three well...He is full of life and energy and brings that to his ministry. Our once nearly empty church is once again filled. We have activities again and Fr. Mike always shows up for whatever is going on in any of the three parishes. He is kind and caring and very involved with his parishioners. Many people come once to a service and register for the parish as a result. I cannot say enough good things about Fr. Mike.”

— Parishioner, St. Lawrence Martyr, New Bedford

In my own life, I remember with gratitude the example of Father Nicola Carandente, SDV, who was my novice master in the Society Divine Vocations. He was a missionary from Italy who spent many years in Brazil and served as master of novice to many who are now priests throughout the congregation. Subsequently, he became a missionary in Argentina, Nigeria, and Colombia, where he also served as master of Novices and contributed to the formation of many future priests. Once, I went to ordain a group of priests in Nigeria who had been his novices, and they all remembered him with gratitude and respect. His life of simplicity, prayerfulness, and generosity remains with me to this day as an example of a dedicated and faithful priest.

As we see, the impact of a single priest can hardly be overstated. Consequently, focusing on our priests and their ability to flourish will subsequently ensure the vibrancy of our parishes and apostolates.

New Challenges Facing Our Priests

Another critical reason to work towards a vision of strengthening our presbyterate is due to the **new and unparalleled challenges our priests face.**

Before addressing some of these new and challenging realities, it is important to remember that every vocation comes with its own joys and struggles. Those of you who are married certainly understand this truth. As we reflect on the challenges facing the Priesthood, we should not imply that it is any different from other vocations in that each state of life has its own unique joys and struggles.



We also know that we have many devoted, holy, and happy priests who work extremely hard for those entrusted to their care. Despite unprecedented challenges, they have responded heroically. It has been and continues to be one of the great joys of my life to be able to minister alongside my brothers, and I am extremely grateful to the priests of the Diocese of Fall River.

However, these realities do not mean we shouldn’t look clearly and courageously at some of the severe struggles and trials many priests face. It is naïve to view priests as individuals alone without reference to the broader context of priest morale, ecclesial relationships, and the community. Not only are humans social by nature, but, more importantly, we are connected as the Mystical Body of Christ – the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-31).

In 2023, the USCCB Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations released a new document entitled *Guide to Ongoing Formation of Priests*. The document identifies the following obstacles to priestly flourishing:

Obstacles from Within the Priesthood

- **Repercussions from the priest’s own unhealthy family dynamics.** We all need to realize that priests are, first and foremost, human beings. As human beings, they enter the Priesthood with their own life experiences, family of origin woundedness, and struggles. As the American male population continues to struggle according to many metrics, these same human issues affect our priests, who, at times, are tempted to focus on serving others to the detriment of attentiveness to their own inner world. **This may be one of the reasons why our priests suffer from the same high rates of depression, anxiety, trauma, and addiction as the general population.**
- **Priest shortages and aging presbyterates contributing to a higher workload and greater stress.** Our priests are being forced to cover multiple assignments because of our massive

priest shortage and aging presbyterate. 50% of our pastors are pastoring multiple large-scale parishes or have multiple full-time assignments. Without intervention, this issue will continue to trend in a negative direction. In the next five years, we project twice as many retiring pastors as priests available to replace them. In very short order, we will simply be unable to replace retiring pastors.

- **Feeling trapped by expectations of work that can never be accomplished.** Due to the declining number of priests, which has significantly outpaced the needed closure of churches (and the subsequent need for priests to cover multiple assignments), many priests feel the weight of impossible tasks. It seems like an untenable expectation of superhuman performance just to meet the basic needs of our parishes with multiple worship sites. This is exacerbated by the increasing complexity of pastoring and administering parishes in the modern world, requiring an in-depth understanding of Human Resources, Finances, Facilities, and Law, for example. Likewise, our young priests are being asked to become pastors within a few years of ordination, whereas, not so long ago, priests would typically be ordained 10-20 years before being asked to become pastors.

...we know that about **50% of priests report at least one symptom of ministry burnout.**

As one of this situation's many adverse outcomes, we know that about 50% of priests report at least one symptom of ministry burnout. Likewise, our priests are also contract-

ing chronic illnesses in middle age at twice the rate of the general population.

- **Personal isolation.** While our priests are being asked to do more than ever before, priests have fewer social supports. Again, due to the priest shortage, our priests often live alone in large rectories initially built for 4-6 priests. Likewise, because priests are already overextended, finding time for fraternity and social support can be a real challenge.

Obstacles from Within the Church

- **Demoralization caused by various trends in the Church.** It's important to understand that despite their best efforts, many priests face the often-discouraging reality of **declining trends in the Church**, such as decreases in Mass attendance and the closing of schools and parishes.
- **The lingering impact of sexual abuse scandals that seems to never go away.** Our faithful priests are yet another victim in the scourge of the abuse crisis. **Given a certain climate of suspicion the abuse crisis has caused, priests have, at times, learned to fear their pastoral situations as never before.** Some priests keep their distance from important moments in people's lives for fear of a false accusation. This reality has also led to tension between priests and their bishops, as some priests do not trust that they will be supported should an abuse or misconduct allegation be made against them.
- **A divisive atmosphere inflamed by the erosion of ecclesial and fraternal communion, including deep theological and liturgical differences within presbyterates.** As we experience division in the wider community, there likewise exists deeply held (and often generational) theological differences within the Church itself, which can lead to ecclesial disharmony and weakened morale.

Obstacles From the Wider Culture

- **A highly secularized culture.** From the broader societal context, our priests are trying to live and minister in a world that seems increasingly antagonistic to Catholic values and doctrine. Likewise, the Church remains at a disadvantage because of the credibility lost due to the abuse crisis. For these reasons, proposing the truth and love of our Faith has become increasingly difficult for our priests, who are already being pulled in a multitude of directions.

As these new and untenable realities unfold, the increasingly difficult ecclesial and secular landscape in which our priests live and minister becomes ever more evident. We can recall the prophetic words of Servant of God Fr. John Hardon, S.J., the holy and brilliant Jesuit priest who died about 20 years ago, who said, *"Having taught priests over 30 years, having lived with priests, and having labored for them, loving them and suffering with them - no words I can use would be too strong to state that the Catholic Priesthood needs prayer and sacrifice as never before since Calvary. One saint after another has declared that the devil's principal target on earth is the Catholic Priest. Priests need, Lord how they need, special graces from God."*



If that was true a few decades ago, it appears even more so today. With over 42 years of priestly experience, including vocations and seminarian formation with the Vocationist Fathers, and 21 years as a bishop, I can confirm that, despite its many joys, the Priesthood is in great need of healing and renewal.

Given these complex and challenging realities, **doing nothing is not an option.** The time has come for our Diocese to be more single-minded in strengthening and renewing our presbyterate. **A Diocese with a Priesthood living their best lives in wellness and holiness will be a Diocese that is set aflame for the love of the Lord and the Eucharist.** Was this not the model handed down by our Lord Himself, Who started with 12 Apostle-Priests and changed the world? If it worked for Him, it will work for us.



Introducing the “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church” Initiative

Although our Diocese is blessed with many devoted, holy, and effective priests, it is imperative that we take **decisive action to strengthen our priests and create a healthier environment that is more conducive to priestly thriving, holiness, and an impactful ministry.** Our parishes and apostolates’ long-term health and vibrancy depend on such an outcome.

I am happy to announce the next steps toward this aim through the “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church” initiative.

...set a new norm not based on an expectation of “superhuman performance” but on **priestly flourishing and holiness.**

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As lasting and foundational improvements require changes at the **environmental and individual levels**, we will accomplish this goal via three Diocesan-centric priorities combined with three Priest-centric priorities strategically implemented from 2025 to 2027.

The “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church” initiative is a three-year enterprise (2025-2027) focused on achieving the foundational changes necessary to adapt our Priesthood to the current realities of life and ministry (which are much different than in times past), and, as much as possible, to set up our priests for success. The goal is to comprehensively address the systemic personal and organizational obstacles that are hindering these outcomes and to **set a new norm not**

Diocesan-Centric Priorities

1. **Pastoral Planning:** We will commit to accelerating pastoral planning efforts to bring relief to our priests who are over-extended by too many assignments. This will include the closure of some churches based on a substantial review of information, including Mass attendance, Sacraments, church utilization, population growth/decline, and more. I ask for your prayerful support as we make these decisions to help our priests and act as better stewards of our resources.
2. **Parish Ministry:** Parish Ministry will be invigorated to allow our priests to focus on what they love to do most and what is at the heart of priestly ministry – evangelization, spiritual life, pastoral care, and Sacramental ministry.
3. **Presbyteral Culture:** Knowing the importance of positive culture in any organization, our priests’ culture will be strengthened to promote fraternity and stability.

Priest-Centric Priorities

1. **Priestly Well-being & Holiness:** Human wellness and spiritual holiness are the single most important factors in priestly thriving and pastoral effectiveness. Consequently, our priests have committed to taking the time to deepen these realities in their lives. We will provide them with both the resources and time to do so.
2. **Personal & Ministerial Training and Standards:** We will focus on enhanced training of our priests to help them thrive and successfully minister in an increasingly challenging world. These efforts will also extend to those who support and collaborate with our priests (such as Diocesan/parish staff and the lay faithful). In the months ahead, our lay faithful will be asked to do their part in supporting our priests.
3. **Vocations & Seminarian Formation:** We must beseech God for an increase in vocations to our Diocesan Priesthood. As many may know, we have already announced that our Vocations Office has launched the Called By Name initiative as a practical means to do so. We’ll also enact improvements to the current Seminarian Formation, ensuring that our young priests are confidently prepared to thrive on day one of priestly ministry.

The “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church” initiative is, in effect, the whole Diocese working together to help our priests be as holy, thriving, and successful as possible. **In our Diocese’s history, there has never been a comprehensive and innovative plan ordered singularly toward a thriving Priesthood.** I hope and believe that, **by the grace of God, such an effort will result in our priests and our Diocese as a whole unleashing its full evangelical potential, resulting in more thriving parishes, apostolates, and happy and holy priests.**

I encourage you to visit www.fallriverdiocese.org to review the full initiative in greater detail.



Call to Action

Given the many unprecedented challenges that our Diocese and priests are facing, we can be tempted to think, “*What could I possibly do?*” To that question, we must call to mind the great insight from Saint Teresa of Calcutta, who said, “*We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more than a drop in the ocean. But if the drop were not there, the ocean would be missing something.*”

Each one of us can do something! I strongly encourage you to consider supporting this endeavor in the following three ways:

- 1. Embrace Fortitude:** This time in our Diocese, our Church, and our world requires fortitude. **As a cardinal virtue and a gift of the Holy Spirit, fortitude strengthens us to joyfully and confidently do God’s holy will despite fear, risk, and rejection.** Each of us – clergy and laity alike – must focus on this virtue and pray for its increase to accomplish this initiative, strengthen our Diocese, and live our faith boldly in everyday life.
- 2. Increase Prayer:** While our organizational efforts to strengthen our priests are informed by natural wisdom and secular sciences (*cf. Gaudium et Spes, #62*), it should remain clear that **this is primarily a spiritual undertaking requiring spiritual foundations such as faith in God, fervent prayer, and constant attention to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.** Without these spiritual foundations, this plan will be unable to bear fruit. Please include the “Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church” initiative and the strengthening of our priests in your regular prayers and sacrifices. At www.fallriverdiocese.org, I encourage you to **participate in a Spiritual Banquet** by anonymously submitting the spiritual practices you will undertake towards this intention.
- 3. Take Action:** Saint Augustine reminds us to “pray as though everything depends on God and work as though everything depends on you.” In addition to your prayerful support, please visit our diocesan website to learn more about the concrete ways you can support this mission and our priests. In the next three years, everyone will be asked to participate in ways fitting to their state of life.

Conclusion

At this critical juncture, it is clear that both the Diocese and the Priesthood require a “paradigm shift” towards newer and more effective ways of operating so that our priests are more able to uninhibitedly exercise the sacred ministry of the Priesthood. **Such a process will result in a Priesthood set up for success for years to come and a new positive ministerial environment where Christ can more readily reach every soul in our Diocese through the mediation of His priests.**

As the Universal Church prepares to celebrate a Jubilee Year (The Jubilee of Hope) in 2025, may we move forward with this important Diocesan vision in **hope, joy, and fortitude** to boldly and innovatively focus on strengthening the Priesthood, thereby impacting every person, parish, and apostolate in our Diocese.

Finally, let us call upon the Holy Spirit, without **Whom no undertaking in the Church can bear fruit.** We pray both that the Holy Spirit will lead us through this process and that the hearts of our priests and people will be purified from sin, strengthened in virtue, and inflamed with divine charity on an even deeper level.

May the intercessions of Our Lady of Fall River and Saint John Vianney lead us into this new era of priestly holiness, stability, and joy in ministry.

Gratefully yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Edgar M. da Cunha, S.D.V., D.D.
Bishop of Fall River

Given on December 8, 2024, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary



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A Time for Fortitude

A Prayer for Our Priests & the Stronger Priests, Stronger Parishes, Stronger Church Initiative

Heavenly Father,
we your children, a community of believers called to form
the Church of the Diocese of Fall River,
ask you to rekindle in us the grace of the Holy Spirit
that, inspired by your gifts of wisdom, fortitude, and love,
we may work together to give glory to your Holy Name
and thereby make you known to all who seek you.
Joining our prayers to those of Mary our Mother,
and Saint John Vianney,
we beg you to build up among us Stronger Priests,
Stronger Parishes and so a Stronger Church.
Hear us and answer our prayer through Jesus Christ,
your Son and our Lord. Amen

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Diocese of Fall River