**RESPONSE TO DRAFT MODEL 2 – GROUP 4 SOUTH**

Draft Model 2 for Group 4 South proposes to “group” the parishes of St. Ann, St. Mary, St. Nicholas, and St. Thomas Aquinas. It further proposes to assign two (2) priests for the “group” and recommends one (1) building north of I-70 and one (1) building south of I-70.

The proposals to “group” these parishes as well as reduce the number of clergy within these parishes recognizes the realities of a declining clergy, declining Catholic population in Muskingum County, and declining population of practicing parishioners among these parishes (as well as the reduced financial support associated with factors two and three).

The recommendation for one (1) building north of I-70 and one (1) building south of I-70, however, misses the mark for a number of reasons and poses an existential risk to the Catholic Schools of Zanesville.

1. **The designation of one (1) building north of I-70 and one (1) building south of I-70 is geographically arbitrary and fails to recognize (or perhaps misunderstands) the travel-activity patterns of Muskingum County residents.**

There are approximately 84,500 residents of Muskingum County, with approximately one-third of the population living within the corporate limits of the City of Zanesville (home to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Nicholas) and the remaining two-thirds living within the villages and unincorporated communities located throughout the county.

While I-70 bisects Muskingum County—running East-West through the approximate geographic middle of the county, the City of Zanesville is the county seat. Located in the geographic center of the county, Zanesville is accessible by vehicle from any point in Muskingum County within 25 minutes. The City of Zanesville serves as the political and commercial anchor of Muskingum County.

Evidenced by the considerable concentration of governmental agencies, service businesses, retail businesses, and restaurants located within the City of Zanesville, residents of Muskingum County travel to Zanesville for work, services, shopping, and entertainment on a daily basis—sometimes multiple times per day.

By contrast, the Village of Dresden (home to St. Ann’s) has an approximate population of 1,500, is principally residential in character, and is located in the extreme north-central portion of Muskingum County.

Mattingly Settlement (home of St. Mary’s) is an even smaller unincorporated rural community in Muskingum County, located only nine (9) miles north of downtown Zanesville.

Draft Model 2’s proposal to leave one (1) building north of I-70 is not essential to promoting a comprehensive Catholic presence in Muskingum County or providing for mass/sacramental availability. Given the travel-activity patterns of Muskingum County residents, it only arguably provides a relatively insignificant convenience for a very small portion of Muskingum County’s Catholic population. A “convenience” that is far outweighed by the associated potential consequences described below.

While anecdotal, it should also be noted that a number of families and individuals currently attending either St. Mary or St. Ann are registered parishioners of St. Thomas Aquinas and residents of Zanesville. Many of whom began attending mass at St. Mary or St. Ann due to their dissatisfaction with the leadership of the Dominican Friars.

1. **Closing either St. Thomas Aquinas’s building or St. Nicholas’s building in favor of retaining either St. Ann’s building or St. Mary’s building, disaffects at least one of Muskingum County’s largest parishes.**

St. Thomas Aquinas has approximately 577 families registered and reported mass attendance in 2021 at 508. This is despite that fact that St. Thomas church has a damaged roof and is currently closed, holding mass in the St. Thomas Activity Center.

St. Nicholas has approximately 600 families registered and reported mass attendance in 2021 at 435.

By contrast, both St. Ann and St. Mary each have less than 100 families registered and reported mass attendance in 2021 at 118 and 114, respectively.

Parishioner feedback was consistent in placing great emphasis on keeping existing buildings open, even if priests had to be shared or mass times change. This response reflects the reality that many parishioners’ devotion to their parish is inextricably tied to their physical place of worship—the church building being the physical embodiment of their parish community and history. Therefore, closing any church building will unavoidably risk disaffecting a number of its parishioners. With that follows a number of unknown and currently incalculable consequences for parishioner population and participation; financial support through offertory gifting, capital campaigns, and estate gifting; and support of local Catholic education.

When faced with the unfortunate reality that changing demographics and declining parish populations necessitate the closure of church buildings, reason would suggest disaffecting the lowest possible number of existing parishioners and, thereby, limiting the potential ripple of consequence. Yet, Draft Model 2 disregards this risk and proposes closing the building of one of Muskingum County’s two largest parishes—disaffecting the highest possible number of existing parishioners and exposing the Catholic Community of Muskingum County to the most potential risk.

1. **Closing either St. Thomas Aquinas’s building or St. Nicholas’s building in favor of retaining either St. Ann’s building or St. Mary’s building, rejects past, consistent proposals.**

In 1999, the Diocese of Columbus engaged in strategic planning to “make the very best use of all our resources, buildings and personnel, especially our priests and deacons, as we move into the new millennium.” This proposal considered the closure of St. Ann’s in Dresden, along with its mission St. Mary, as well as the closure of St. Ann in Philo (which has since been closed).

In 2021, at the request of Bishop Robert J. Brennen, a Long-Range Strategic Plan for the Catholic Community of Muskingum County was jointly reviewed and unanimously approved by the parish priests as well as key parishioners and staff members. Aimed at addressing the declining number of clergy, the changing local demographics, the continuation of Catholic education in the county, and establishing a stronger financial foundation for the Muskingum County Catholic Community, this strategic plan proposed consolidating four (4) parishes into two (2) parishes—St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Nicholas. St. Ann church was proposed to either be designated as a place for special masses or closed. St. Mary church was proposed to be designated as a place for special masses. Parishioners of St. Ann and St. Mary were proposed to be re-registered at either St. Thomas Aquinas or St. Nicholas.

Each of the above proposals set out to address the same challenges as Draft Model 2. And, each of the above proposals came to nearly identical conclusions in consultation with those most familiar with the Muskingum County Catholic Community. Yet, Draft Model 2 now rejects these past, consistent conclusions.

If diocesan leaders take parish recommendations seriously, it can lead to significant growth in faith for parishioners. The opposite, however, is true. If diocesan leaders reject parish recommendations, it risks estrangement of the very parishioners they seek garner, thereby intensifying the challenges this process aims to remedy.

1. **Closing either St. Thomas Aquinas’s building or St. Nicholas’s building in favor of retaining either St. Ann’s building or St. Mary’s building, poses an existential risk to the Catholic Schools of Zanesville.**

According to survey feedback, parish priests recognize that Catholic Schools are key to evangelizing our youth and parishioners identify Catholic Schools as critical for the future of our parishes. Any plan must solidify and expand the future of Catholic schools.

The Catholic Community of Muskingum County has one option for Catholic education—The Catholic Schools of Zanesville. Comprised of Bishop Fenwick Preschool, Bishop Fenwick Elementary, and Rosecrans High School, the Catholic Schools of Zanesville has historically provided Catholic education at the highest standards and ranks consistently number one in Muskingum County for standardized test scores and college admissions. And, as Catholic schools in adjacent counties continue to close, The Catholic Schools of Zanesville has become increasingly important for Catholic families residing outside of Muskingum County.

The parishes of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Nicholas financially support The Catholic Schools of Zanesville through parish subsidies on a 50/50 basis. Furthermore, the Catholic student population is comprised almost exclusively of children from families registered as parishioners of either St.Thomas Aquinas or St. Nicholas.

By contrast, St. Ann and St. Mary do not financially support The Catholic Schools of Zanesville in any way. Furthermore, families registered as parishioners at St. Ann and St. Mary enroll few, if any, students in The Catholic Schools of Zanesville.

Yet, by closing either St. Thomas Aquinas’s building or St. Nicholas’s building, Draft Model 2 risks disaffecting the very parishioners who not only financially support the Catholic Schools of Zanesville but also voluntarily enroll their children and pay tuition. Furthermore, by closing either St. Thomas Aquinas’s building or St. Nicholas’s building, Draft Model 2 rejects the past, consistent conclusions of those most familiar with the Muskingum County Catholic Community, risking further estrangement from the Diocese, their parish, and the school.

Taking action that exposes The Catholic Schools of Zanesville to any risk can only be justified by a clearly articulable reward of similar importance. Not only is it difficult to articulate why retaining either St. Ann’s building or St. Mary’s building is essential to maintaining a comprehensive Catholic presence is Muskingum County, but any arguable significance pales in comparison to the vital importance of maintaining the support of the parishioners of both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Nicholas for the Catholic Schools of Zanesville.