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**Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service  
Committee on Catholic Education**

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December 18, 2020

Dear Co-Workers in the Vineyard,

As we move through this Advent and Christmas season each year, it can be a time to consider the year past and turn toward the coming year in hope as light re-enters our dark skies and Christ is born anew in our hearts. This year, in the face of so much loss and physical and mental suffering caused by the pandemic, racial injustice, and painful economic realities, we need the light of the Christmas star more than ever before.

There is no way to downplay that this has also been a tremendously difficult year for our Church, and for many dioceses, parishes, schools, college, universities, hospitals and our other Catholic institutions and organizations. It has also been extremely hard for ministers in our church, especially lay ecclesial ministers. Some have had to adapt to a rapidly changing context for ministry, and have had to learn new skills and communications tools, or to use them in ways and for events they never imagined. Others have seen their positions change radically. Many have had their jobs cut. Those of you leading national organizations or diocesan programs have likewise struggled with how to provide programming in this new context, learning how best to support your members dealing with these challenges, and addressing many organizational challenges. These realities will likely continue to have impacts for all of us well into the new year. We don't yet fully grasp what the "new normal" will be.

However, I have also seen your dedication and creativity. The conversations our subcommittee has had with you over this past year, and the feedback you have offered, have created a space for us to hear from one another and to consider together how our subcommittee and other committees of the USCCB

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always present, invitation of the Holy Spirit, which echoes the Christmas angels' encouragement to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10). Emmanuel is always present and beckons us to come to him and see that God's "new normal" is always more than we could hope for or imagine.

In all the work you do, especially this year, God has been glorified by your witness, and the Good News of Jesus Christ has been heard. I pray that this holy season offers you a chance to rest and to safely be with those you love. I will especially remember in prayer those who have been touched by loss because of the pandemic. On behalf of all the members and consultants of the Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service, I thank you for all you do in support of lay ministry and of lay ministers in our Church. Please find below some additional updates from Dr. Marc DelMonico and our office as we prepare for our collaboration with you in the coming year.

May you have a blessed Christmas!

Sincerely in Christ,

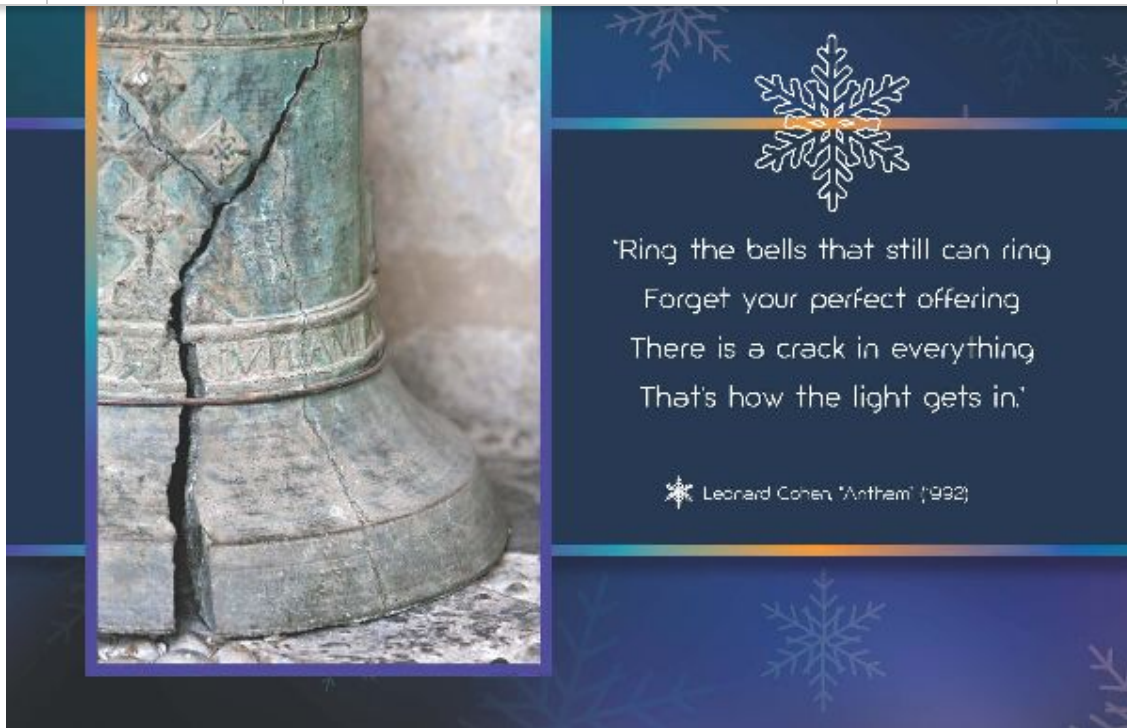
*Bishop Gerald R. Kicanas*

Chairman

USCCB Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry and Service

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## **A Christmas Reflection & Update from the USCCB Office of Certification**

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*"Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." - Leonard Cohen "Anthem" (1992)*

## Sin, Grace & Leonard Cohen

When I was an adjunct professor of theology at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia, I taught an introductory course on Catholic theology to undergraduate students.

One of the modules of the course was dedicated to the realities of sin, grace and salvation. Sin: the Catholic view being that all of us bear the wounds and effects of sin in our lives all the time. We are forced to confront the truth that even when we do good, we are not able to overcome those effects on our own. Thus, we need the presence of God (grace) in our lives to transform us and liberate us (salvation) from the ways we entrap ourselves in evil.

These concepts can seem elusive to many Catholics, so it is not surprising that they would be for students from various intellectual, cultural and religious backgrounds in my introductory course. So I would begin this module – as I would all the modules in the course – with a cultural referent, even if it wasn't one with which they were immediately familiar. It would invariably prove helpful to return to this cultural “landmark” during the subsequent presentations.

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are in the image above. I find his image of the 'crack in everything' striking as we conclude this extraordinarily challenging and difficult year.

As we move through Advent toward Christmas - the celebration of God with us – always, everywhere ... *gracefully* with us, in Christ – we have a built-in opportunity in our liturgical year to gain perspective on the pains, the isolations, the angers, the disappointments, the illnesses, and deaths – collectively, the *traumas* – of 2020. It can also be a time to summon the awareness of our blessings, even if they have felt, at times, lost in the undertow of negativity.

That is why I am grateful to write to you about some of our accomplishments during this exceptional year, and the ways in which we have contributed together to blessings in the life of our Church.

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## Summary of Our Office Activities

As with all parishes, ministries, and organizations, the pandemic required unexpected transitions and creative adaptation in 2020 on our part. As we have always sought to be responsive to the needs of the national organizations and diocesan programs, and have made use of online technologies to stay in touch and conduct meetings, our office was able to quickly pivot to "remote" collaboration and so listen and work with you to resource those in ministry responding to the unprecedented needs of this year. The importance of creative thinking on the part of lay ministers and others to respond to these new needs highlights the importance of the type of ministry formation our office seeks to resource through the promotion of certification pathways. Wholistic formation enables the development of the critical analysis and visioning needed during such challenging times.

With your support and collaboration, the Subcommittee on Certification and our office were able to achieve many important things, even in this most difficult year. We:

- Provided access to **vettted COVID-19 resources** during the initial months of the pandemic and also linked to all the national organizations' COVID-19 resource pages from the [USCCB website](#)

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have faced responding to the pandemic, addressing systemic realities of racism, and adapting to the economic impacts in dioceses and parishes

- Facilitated **refunds** of our usual annual fees to the national ministry organizations and diocesan programs to help with the challenges caused by the pandemic, with a number of the dioceses generously donating their fees back in support of our work with the national organizations
- Consulted with strategic partner organizations and groups developing **new pathways to promote national and diocesan ministry formation and certification** in young adult leadership, specialized pastoral care of the sick, and prison ministries including :
  - the [V Encuentro Young Adult Hispanic Leadership Initiative](#) (VEYAHLI)
  - the National Young Adult Ministry Initiative supported by the [USCCB Working Group on Youth & Young Adults](#)
  - [Journeying Together](#), a virtual national Catholic intercultural encounter for ministries with youth and young adults
  - the [Partners in Pastoral Care](#) and
  - [The Catholic Prison Ministries Coalition](#)
- Discussed with several diocesan, regional and national programs and groups **initiatives aimed at enhancing ministry formation and certification offerings** among various roles in ministry and among leaders from many Catholic cultural families, including among African Catholics, Asia / Pacific Islander Catholic, and Catholic campus ministers at Historically Black Colleges and Universities
- Presented at, participated in, and shared with other groups about, a number of the **virtual events** held by the national ministry organizations and related groups, and the February in-person gathering of the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry (AGPIM), where they discussed, with Bishop Kicanas, building on the accomplishments of *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*.
- Worked with colleagues in the USCCB Secretariat of the Laity to support and promote a **survey of lay ecclesial ministers and lay leaders** responding to the experiences of the pandemic and social traumas of the

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Catholic educational and other institutions, dioceses, and nationally

- Developed **promotional and operational plans**, in coordination with the USCCB's Strategic Plan for 2021-24, focused on:
  - enhancing ministry formation standards
  - comprehensively communicating with the body of bishops about updates in this area and in lay ecclesial ministry generally, and
  - fostering collaborative dialogue across ministry organizations, diocesan lay ministry programs, lay movements and other groups supportive of the work of laity and lay ministry
- Added **resource videos and updated information** on our section of the [new USCCB website](#), including conversations about the value of ministry formation and certification from Bishop Kicanas and other national organization and diocesan representatives, like the one below.

As the year comes to a close, I add my gratitude to that of the Bishop for all you have done and all you have helped us to do, as I look forward to collaborating with you in 2021.



The chair of our subcommittee, Bishop Gerald Kicanas, speaks about the special role of lay ecclesial ministers in today's Church, and his experience working with them as bishop.

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In the midst of the deeply painful early months of the pandemic, when the "cracks in everything" were keenly felt, the month of July brought a previously undiscovered comet to our late night and early morning skies. As it rounded our Sun in an enormously elliptical orbit that scientists later discovered meant that it would not be this close to our planet again for another 6,800 years, Comet NEOWISE lit up the night skies with beautiful radiant light, as its frozen ice melted when it neared the Sun. The comet, named for the [WISE space telescope program](#) based in California, dazzled stargazers throughout late July, who produced [beautiful time-exposures of it all across the world](#), like the one in the image below.

Certain moments in our lives can renew our capacity to embrace the beautiful and sacred, if we are ready to receive it. As we move towards the end of this very difficult year, let us all take time to consider who or what was like Comet NEOWISE for us? Who stirred hopefulness in us in the midst of suffering? What opened us up to newness in the midst of unrelenting bad news? What streaked across the night sky of our souls and enlightened our worlds anew?

Let's all take time to reflect on those persons or influences in our lives, to see how those experiences may have been God opening up a pathway of light through the cracks in our lives and our world.

As the Magi were guided to the Christ by the light of a star, let us seek the star that is shining before us in this moment. Let us look upward to find that which revives our vision of hope and our faith that God remains at work in our cracked history, as persons, and as a people. Let us hear again the story of how angels spoke to frightened shepherds on a hillside in a nearly forgotten backwater of an Empire that glorified war and naked power and said, "**Good news! You don't need to be afraid anymore!**" As we give thanks for the hard work of scientists and medical experts that produced the vaccines that are coming to hopefully end this terrible pandemic, let us also remain aware of the spiritual pandemics which have ravaged us as well, some for a very long time. The vaccine for our spiritual illnesses is the grace of Emmanuel, always and everywhere with us, which gives us proper perspective, centers us, rescues us, and transforms us, and all we do, into glory.

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"Throughout our cracked universe - without and within - may the unexpected light of the Christmas Christ shine."

On behalf of my colleagues in the Secretariat of Catholic Education, I wish you a Merry and Blessed Christmas Season!

Peace and good,

*Dr. Marc DelMonico*

USCCB Director of Certification for Ecclesial Ministry

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