

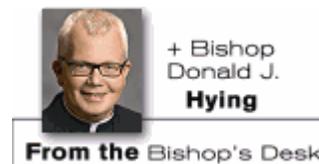
Call to a whole new way of life



Bishop Hying's Column

Thursday, Jul. 02, 2020 -- 12:00 AM

Note: Bishop Donald J. Hying is serializing his Pastoral Letter on the new Evangelization Initiative being launched in the Diocese of Madison. This is the fourth and last part of that letter. For the complete letter, go to the [Diocese of Madison](#) and [Catholic Herald](#) websites.



I know that many people in our diocese are already working so hard in these efforts. Some have devoted their entire lives to the Lord and to evangelization, and for that, I am very grateful. But the Lord is challenging all of us, especially me, in this crucial moment of history, to consider what we are doing and to set out afresh.

Sharing our faith has always been an essential component of Catholicism. This is not something terribly novel. What is new is the cultural context in which we find ourselves. Many people are indifferent to religion, view it as fiction, or even see it as detrimental. This evangelizing initiative is not simply a project that will capture our attention for several years and then disappear. It is, rather, a call to a whole way of life as a disciple of the Lord Jesus.

Concrete initiative

That being said, it's my hope that we can attempt to undertake this initiative in a concrete way to renew continually our consideration of what it means to be evangelizing disciples ourselves. Focusing on some of the deep and fundamental realities of Christ's call to us is very good, but sometimes we need a practical framework and some more concrete ideas to carry us forward.

To that end, with some tremendous input from our priests and lay leaders, my team and I have put together some resources that can be found online, creating a webpage for this "Go Make Disciples Initiative" (www.madisondiocese.org/gmd). One of the key documents there is "A Common Vision for Evangelization." Therein we define and flesh out some of the key terms I've used here, so that we can attempt to begin with a shared understanding. The documents there also lay out four phases that I am proposing by which to frame our efforts.

Laying out phases could tempt us to think only in a linear way. However, the phases are designed to build, more like concentric circles, such that Phase II does not mean an end to Phase I, and so on.

Phase I

In the first phase, I am asking each pastor to form and renew his own parish leaders. I'd like the priests themselves, along with staff members and volunteers, to wrestle with the realities I've laid out here and to deepen their own prayer lives.

The goal, of this phase, as written in our timeline document, is that priests and parish leaders will "grow in their understanding of and zeal for the work of evangelization, embracing this as the primary mission of the parish: to preach the Gospel with courage and confidence, with fidelity to the teachings of Christ and his Church, with Spirit-inspired creativity, with generosity and self-sacrifice, being continually transformed and renewed in heart and mind."¹²

Key to this first phase really is a focus on the basics: keeping the Commandments, prayer and the Sacraments, repentance, and, by way of self-denial, attempting to shed ourselves of the attachments that keep us from "giving up everything" to follow Christ,¹³ and to renew our efforts in doing good works for the sake of building up the Kingdom of God.

Phase II

Phase II is essentially expanding the circle of Phase I to all of our believing, practicing Catholics in the parish. In this phase, the priests and the other leaders he has identified will call on every person in the parish to undertake the very same renewal of prayer and relationship with the Lord in their lives, and to embrace their call to be both fervent disciples of the Lord and missionaries to family and friends.

Phase III

Phase III consists of taking time to create a deliberate parish plan for evangelization. This planning process, drawing from our renewed prayer, is an effort to get each parish community to ask, in the context of their own communities: "How do we live out our mission in a new and bold way? How do we engage those who are not involved in the life of the Church?"

These efforts need to be grounded fundamentally in a simple and clear proclamation of the Gospel message and posing to our friends, family, and neighbors some of the key questions with which I hope we've wrestled in this letter.

It may be the case that we're already doing much of this in our particular parishes, but even if so, the common temptation is to forget the "why?" Here it might be helpful to look at each and every thing done in at the parish -- from religious education, to the parish fish fry (and everything in between) -- and ask, "How does this help us fulfill our mission? Has doing this become simply about keeping a program going? Can we reset that mentality . . . or do certain things need to be left behind for the sake of focusing our energies on following Jesus anew?"

In pondering this whole initiative, our priests and other leaders have asked for concrete ideas from me in this regard. In part, I want each parish really to focus on their own situation, but with the key understanding that the treasure we have been given through Christ and His Body, the Church, contains the truth of the Scriptures, the efficacy of the Mass, the saving grace of the Sacraments, the beauty of the Catechism, and the heroic witness of the Saints.

A central component of our life in Christ, which each parish and even the whole diocese can live more profoundly, is the reclaiming of the treasure that is the Sabbath -- the day of the Lord's Resurrection. We should consider again the meaning of Sunday. After Peter preaches to the crowds and after they were "cut to the heart," the Scriptures tell how all those Baptized lived out their faith. We hear that, "they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers."

I believe that all of us should be challenged to make Sunday, and in particular, the communal celebration of the Mass, the center of our week. In the Mass we hear the "teaching of the apostles," we experience our lives of faith in communion with one another, and what else is "the breaking of the bread . . . and the prayers," but the Mass?

As I write this, so many of us have been reminded of the gift that we have in simply being allowed to attend Mass together on Sunday. It has been difficult not to gather for Mass, and I hope we never have to go through this again. Yet on the flip side, I've heard from a number of people regarding the chance they've had to put aside so many outside distractions to focus on their families, and actually to rest during this time of quarantine. Let us not forget the good of that.

The Lord desires for each Sunday to be a mini retreat for us, not turned in on ourselves, but turned to Him. The Lord desires for us on Sunday not to be "socially distanced," but intensely communal. Let's take the good parts of the quarantine experience and refocus our Sundays, so that we never forget to take the time for worship, family, holy leisure, rest, study, and prayer together, recognizing that each day of our lives should be centered on the life we have in Him.

Phase IV

Phase IV of our plan is the implementation of the concrete plans each parish has put together. When you think about it, all of these phases are ongoing and are very basically that to which we have already been called. I'm simply asking that we refocus our energies and set out to embrace our calling and our mission anew.

Imagine if every baptized Catholic in our diocese went to Mass every Sunday, prayed every day, went to confession once a month, embraced some form of sacrifice, loved and served the poor and needy, and got involved in their parish! Look at the great good accomplished by a minority of our Catholic people! Imagine if we had everyone on board the Barque of Peter!

Through us the Lord continues to draw people to Him. He wants us -- both through our words and the way we live our lives -- to speak the good news of His life, death, and resurrection. With our help, He will continue to "cut to the heart" of those around us, so that they might ask the same question, "What must we do to be saved?" Through our witness, those around us will meet Him and hear the call to follow, to repent, and be saved.

Challenge of 'post-Christian' age

As a Church and as a world, we face a challenge that is both unique and yet much the same as the challenge always faced by the Church, even from its very first days. The challenge is unique in that we are, in many ways, in an age which can be labeled "post-Christian." In our day, the impact of the coming of God to dwell with us in the person of Jesus Christ is often ignored, overlooked, and forgotten because it has become at one and the same both comfortable and inconvenient.

For nearly 2,000 years, most of the Western world has taken the reality of the Incarnation as a given. And in that time, the once earth-shattering teachings of the God-man have become watered down. The portions which are still palatable have been incorporated into the general niceties of our society, and the more challenging pieces have been marginalized. The pivotal notion of God becoming man and dying for us, however, is often overlooked and unknown. Does the Christ event actually stand as a radical grounding of most human lives?

What can and will make a difference is our witness to that reality -- our values, words, and actions, how we spend our time and money, how we forgive and love one another. The witness of a Christian disciple, fervent in his or her belief, and living out the greatest of commandments -- to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself -- is the most compelling force in the universe.

When you consider times in your life in which you have encountered a true act of love or a deep, fundamental truth, you realize how impactful and, oftentimes, life-changing that was. Now consider that we profess Jesus Christ to be the embodiment both of love and of truth. The spread of the Gospel to every corner of the world continues because passionate disciples of the Lord gave their lives to the great task of evangelization.

World needs to hear Good News

Our world is in deep pain and is aching for Jesus Christ -- even if they don't know it! It may seem intimidating to preach Jesus Christ in our culture. It may seem like everything is working against that message as we face the headwinds of a culture that blow directly against what the Lord has to offer. But, that challenge is precisely our opportunity. We have to set sail in a new way, harnessing the current headwinds and turning them to our advantage. Yes, so much in the world runs contrary to God's plan, and that's precisely why the world needs all the more to hear the Good News.

It may seem a daunting task, but it always has been. Even for the first disciples and Apostles it was so. But each of those first women and men reached out, gave witness, and drew new disciples. And those new disciples, in turn, did the same . . . and they did the same, and so on and so on, until the precise individuals who were effective in preaching the Good News to us.

In the Church, it is always about an hour after sunrise. Mary Magdalene is running to the Apostles to tell them the tomb is empty and Jesus Christ has been raised! The Church is young! What is 2000 years in light of eternity? Jesus is Lord and we have work to do! Remember the kerygma and our mission received. Jesus died for us and this love story must be told until the end of time.

We have been given everything we need -- the message of our Lord is clear and is ultimately simple: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."¹⁴

Reflection question: If you could do or say one thing to witness to Jesus Christ, what would it be?

¹² cf. Rom 12:2; From Phase I "Go Make Disciples Initiative" Timeline

¹³ Mt 19:27

¹⁴ Mt 28:18-20
