GOD BUILDS A HOUSE

Pastoral Letter

To the Clergy, Religious, Lay Faithful, and all People of Good Will in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma
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DIOCESE of TULSA
and Eastern Oklahoma
TOGETHER, OUR FAITH GOES FURTHER.

On the cover: Salvator Mundi, Master of the Mansi Magdalen, ca. 1520
DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

“If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor.” Ps. 127:1

1. The Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma is the House of the Lord and our shared home. When I began parish visitations after my episcopal ordination, parishioners would often ask me, “What is your plan for the Diocese?” As a new bishop who was moving across the Red River for the first time, I knew that I could not yet answer your questions about future plans for the Diocese. I needed to meet you and listen to you. I needed to hear your stories of faith and life. I needed to hear about your successes and your challenges in helping God build His own house in your lives and in the reality of our parish communities. My ongoing process of visiting the parishes and people throughout the Diocese has helped me to know what is in the hearts and minds of our diocesan family. In addition to these visitations, last October we initiated a process of prayerful discernment and strategic planning to consider how we might further the mission of Christ in our shared home, the Church in Eastern Oklahoma.

2. When I listened to your hopes and dreams for evangelization, enlivened parishes, deeper marriages, and greater outreach to local communities, I grew increasingly excited at what I believe God is preparing to do through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It brought to mind the teachings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux about the three special moments in the history of our salvation: formation, deformation, and reformation. The moment of formation is the creation when we were made in the Image of God, which is realized in our personal freedom; the moment of deformation is the disease of sin that infected our original human dignity; and the moment of reformation is the possibility of healing and restoration of our humanity through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. These moments also take place in our personal lives. Our lives of faith are defined by a constant process of formation, deformation, and reformation. Through the sacramental life of the Church, we receive the grace needed for formation and the mercy needed for reformation after deformation. The sacraments teach us to embrace our role in life as a builder who cooperates in the construction of God’s house.

3. These three moments (formation, deformation, and reformation) are beautifully illustrated in the Scriptures with the construction, destruction, and reconstruction of the Temple. After the people of Israel gathered all the materials they needed to build God’s residence in the Holy City, Solomon came with all the priests to install the Ark of the Covenant. On that glorious day, a cloud came down and God took possession of His dwelling. In front of the congregation, Solomon said, “The Lord has said that He would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever.” (1 King 8:12-13) Through the labors of His people, the Lord had built His house.

4. Then came the Babylonian Captivity. In the year 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came to Jerusalem, burned down the House of the Lord, the Temple, and took the people to his kingdom. (2 King 25:8-9) This was one of the darkest periods in the history of Israel. Of course, the prophets had warned them through the Word of the Lord that their
sinful relationships with other kingdoms and their abandonment of the Law of the Lord would result in judgment and exile. The sin of the people led them into deformation. The Lord announced through the prophet Amos, however, the coming reformation: “One day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old.” (Amos 9:11) After the end of the captivity, the prophet Haggai tells us about the life of the Israelites who came back to Jerusalem. The prophet summons the people and asks, “Is it time for you yourselves to live in your pan-eled houses, while this house lies in ruins?” (Haggai 1:4) Haggai called the people to rebuild the House of the Lord, crying, “Go up to the hill and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord.” (Haggai 1:8) The Temple had been constructed by God, destroyed through the sin of the people, and then reconstructed by the grace of God.

5. The story of the Temple is also the story of our souls. Our personal relationship with Jesus Christ undergoes this same cycle of formation, deformation, and reformation. We are all made in the Image of God. He constructed us to be in a free and loving relationship with Him. St. Augustine teaches us that God made us for Himself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Him. (See Confessions, Lib. 1, 1-2) When we remember that God has created us and calls us to rest in Him, then we better understand our identity as His laborers and servants. We are His creation. We belong to Him. Whether it is the Church, the Diocese, the parish, or the soul, it is the Lord who dwells there and it is the Lord’s house. We, by the grace of God, are simply the co-laborers of His construction. Unfortunately, there is always the danger that we fall into the trap of believing we are somehow self-made, admiring ourselves and what we foolishly think we have accomplished for ourselves. The temptation to distance or separate ourselves from our Maker and our identity in Him inevitably leads us to sin, to destruction, to deformation. If the Lord does not build the house, we labor in vain.

6. Our moments or patterns of destruction through sin are painful for ourselves and those around us. Sometimes our sin can be public and embarrassing. It is also easy to become complacent, so that we reject any form of change and learn to live mediocre lives with little or no virtue. As faithful Catholics, we are called to regular self-examination to protect us from lives of sin and complacency. We are called daily to repentance and conversion to Christ. We are called to measure ourselves against the teaching of Christ and His Church, not our own imaginations or standards. We must receive the Jesus Christ who came two-thousand years ago, not create a “Jesus” who meets the fashions and fads of this age. As Christ taught us, “Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock. Rain poured down, rivers flooded, and winds beat against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on solid rock. Anyone who hears my teachings and doesn’t obey them is like a foolish person who built a house on sand. The rain poured down, the rivers flooded, and the winds blew and beat against that house. Finally, it fell with a crash.” (Matthew 7:24-27) We will not labor in vain nor will we set our work upon the sand, because we will be wise builders with a firm foundation, Jesus Christ.

7. Saint Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone upon which our entire lives are to be built. (cf. Ephesians 2:20) Any reconstruction in our lives demands that we have the proper design and blueprint, which is Christ Himself. (cf. Ephesians 4:13) Thankfully, Jesus Christ tells us that He is with us always through the Church that He established. There is only one
Church as there is only one Jesus, one Body with one Head, one Bride with one Groom. He promised to be with us through the very end of the age, and, in His Church, we are reconstructed and rebuilt through His grace in the sacraments. As people in relationship with Jesus Christ, we are each a sacred house, a temple, set apart for the worship of God and lives of faith. As members of the Church, the Body of Christ, we gather at Mass and are nourished by the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. We are God’s building both individually and corporately through the Church. Together, our faith goes further, as we come to understand ourselves as a member of the Body of Christ, the House of the Lord, in Eastern Oklahoma. God has built His house in each of us, reforming and reconstructing by His grace. We are also the repurposed and reformed materials that make up His building, the Church. We are a new creation, a new building, a new people called to proclaim the redemption and salvation of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth, specifically in the Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma. (cf. 1 Cor. 5:17; Matt. 28:19-20) This is the mission of Jesus Christ and His Church.

8. We know that the ultimate mission of any Diocese never really changes because it is the mission of the Church. We hear it beautifully during the Chrism Mass: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Luke 4:18) We are the ones anointed by the Spirit of the Lord to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world. We have been sent to find the poor, the oppressed, and the ones who walk blindly through life and who are losing hope in this world. Yet, even if we never formed a strategic plan, we would nonetheless be united in this work of evangelization, as we celebrate Mass in our parishes, catechize our children, seek to live the faith, and bring Christ to every part of our daily life. Still, we are all called to reflect on our faith and the work of our parishes and institutions, because we know that there are areas that need reconstruction and reformation. There are parts of the Lord’s House in the Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma that need to be rebuilt for our sake, for the sake of our parishes and communities, and for the sake of the poor and the vulnerable. Our responsibility to rebuild the Lord’s House, to seek Christ and be holy, is the “most attractive face of the Church,” according to Pope Francis. (cf. Gaudete et Exsultate, n.9)

9. In listening to you through pastoral visitations and our strategic planning process, I have discovered a deep desire among the faithful to be united as a Diocese in a more visible way. You have told me that you do not wish to be a collection of 77 parish communities working toward individual goals, but to be united as a family in the House of the Lord working through 77 different parishes to bring a strategic set of goals to bear on the lives of every person throughout the Diocese. You have also expressed a desire to bring the mercy and love of Christ both to those who are already in full communion with the Church and to every one of our neighbors, because God desires that all people would enjoy the fullness of faith realized in the Catholic faith.

10. The parishes in our shared home are remarkably diverse. We have parishes that are large and small, rural and urban. We have some with schools and some without. We have parishes with more resources than others. And through all the parishes in our family, we celebrate Mass in five different languages every weekend. I believe this
diversity, united as it is in Christ, is a gift and strength to our Diocese, our shared house. In fact, we really look like the Church in its earliest stages of development and construction, as we are a diverse people seeking Christ in an increasingly anti-Christian climate. Recognizing our unity in Christ, we know that our strategic plan will be lived out in different ways in different places according to local needs, but it should be unified through one vision with shared priorities. After consulting with people throughout the Diocese and completing a process of discernment and strategic planning, I am now happy to share the following vision and three priorities around which we can unite over the next three years. Together, let us allow the Lord to build His House in all of us and through all of us, so that we do not labor in vain.

VISION

Our vision for the next three years is to build a culture of Catholic discipleship and community, inviting all who live in Eastern Oklahoma to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We will work to equip all the faithful in our parishes and institutions to evangelize the surrounding culture and to build the next generation of strong families who seek the call of God in their lives.

PURPOSE

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma proclaims in word and deed the saving message of Jesus Christ and His Church that all may know, love, and serve Him.

CORE VIRTUES

**Encountering Christ:** We are forgiven, healed, and renewed by an ongoing and fruitful encounter with Jesus, who is present in the Church and sanctifies through Word and Sacraments.

1. We renew our commitment to keeping the Eucharistic Lord at the center of our lives and faith communities, and prepare ourselves for Holy Communion by regular Confession and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament;

2. Our celebration of all the Sacraments will be marked by a faith-filled awareness of Christ's presence and action, as well as, an understanding of how we are to cooperate with the sacramental graces;

3. We call ceaselessly upon the Mother of God, especially through cultivation of Marian consecration and recitation of the Rosary, that she might guide us to an ever-deeper relationship with her Son.

**Transformed in Christ:** Jesus Christ remains at the center of the daily lives of the Christian faithful and the mission of Catholic institutions, so that in whatever we say or do, Christ might make Himself known through us.

1. We acknowledge that every Catholic and every Catholic institution in our Diocese bears the supreme duty of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so that Our Lord may penetrate both our hearts and the hearts of every person in Eastern Oklahoma;
2. We acknowledge that every Catholic in Eastern Oklahoma is called to grow deeper in their Catholic faith, so that, through authentic catechesis in our parishes and schools, all persons may grow in communion and intimacy with Jesus Christ;
3. We acknowledge that, through the fruits of evangelization and catechesis, all Catholics are called to be intentional, missionary disciples of Our Lord, who, trusting in His grace, seek to know, love, and serve Christ and His Church in all they do.

United in Christ: Enriched by the cultures, races, and generations represented in the Church in Eastern Oklahoma, we seek to build up the body of Christ by loving others with His generous and sacrificial love.
1. We celebrate a variety of gifts bestowed on our faithful in diocesan councils and events;
2. We cultivate fraternal and pastoral ties between our parishes.

PRIORITYs

First Priority: Strengthen the Family and the Domestic Church
The family is the foundation of all human society and is currently threatened by forces that could destroy or deform its nature and mission. While assisted by schools and parish programs, parents are irreplaceable as the primary educators of their children. Over the next three years, the Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma will seek to strengthen marriage as a vocation to holiness, so that married couples may reflect the love of God and parents may lead their children to know the Lord. Throughout the Diocese, we will equip families to grow together in a deeper relationship with Jesus. We want to build our homes and the Church through strong marriages and families.

Second Priority: Formation of Catholic Leaders
All persons within the Church in Eastern Oklahoma are called to an ongoing conversion. This conversion includes understanding who Christ is in order that we may draw ever closer to Him. Catholic leaders, by cooperating in the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, help guide the faithful into a deeper understanding of our Lord and His Church. Over the next three years, the Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma will revitalize the formation of our catechists, Catholic school teachers, and other Catholic leaders. Through solid studies and the cultivation of mentoring relationships, the Diocese will help our leaders become bridges to the love and wisdom of Christ’s Church. We want to build our parishes, schools, and institutions on the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

Third Priority: Parishes Making Missionary Disciples
Missionary disciples embrace the grace of the sacraments they have received and live in a committed relationship with Jesus Christ seeking to make Him known to all. The parish is the primary context in which the faithful receive the sacraments and develop this relationship. Pastors and parish leaders are responsible for forming disciples who evangelize the greater community. Over the next three years, the parishes of the Diocese of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma will foster a culture of mission, identifying ways to build up disciples who will go out to the entire community. We want to reconstruct lives to be faithful members of Jesus Christ and His Church so that others might be drawn into a relationship with our Lord.
GOALS

Over the next three years, we will develop these priorities through the following goals:

First Goal: Strengthen the Family and the Domestic Church
It has always been the case that those who are evangelized, who come to know and love Jesus Christ and his Church, become evangelizers. To this end, we will pursue these goals:
• Couple mentors will be certified in each parish by May 23, 2021. The number will be determined by the parish.
• Two thirds of the parishes will offer a family based catechetical model by May 23, 2021.
• 8-10 (NFP) natural family planning leaders (4 bilingual) will be certified in the different regions of the diocese by May 23, 2021.

Second Goal: Formation of Catholic Leaders
Parents remain the primary catechists for their children (cf. Catechesi Tradendae, n.68), but the aid given in schools and catechetical programs and youth groups is vital to the formation of children and young adults in Christ. To this end, we will pursue these goals:
• To establish local and ongoing formation for Catholic leaders in every profession and vocation by which they grow in the habit of integrating the Faith into all aspects of professional and personal life.
• To establish local and ongoing formation opportunities for every catechist by which they grow in the craft of catechesis through greater appropriation of the Faith, as communicated in theology, philosophy, and the arts.
• To establish local and ongoing formation opportunities for every Catholic-school teacher by which they grow in the art of teaching through a deeper appropriation of the fundamental compatibility between faith and reason, the holistic integration of knowledge across all disciplines, and the unique qualities of a specifically Catholic content and method of education.

Third Goal: Parishes Making Missionary Disciples
The diversity that strengthens our diocese requires that these priorities be adapted to each location. To this end, our goal is that by May 23, 2021, all parishes will have begun the implementation of an individual strategic plan for missionary discipleship aligned to the diocesan vision.

As we begin this work together, which will help unify us as a family, I offer these words from Cardinal John Dearden for our reflection and prayer. May the Holy Spirit, the fire of Pentecost, enliven our zeal for the mission of Jesus Christ in our world today.

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church’s mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities. We
cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.”

“Pray for us that we may be a sign of the love of Christ for our people.” — Blessed Stanley Rother

May we dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of our lives,

Most Rev. David A. Konderla, Bishop of Tulsa and Eastern Oklahoma
May 20, 2018, Solemnity of Pentecost

Below are study questions intended to facilitate family or small group discussion as well as personal reflection on our Shared Vision of the Diocese.

1. How does the story of the Temple reflect our own walk with Christ? When have you fallen into deformation? How did you experience the loving reformation of God? What does it mean, “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor”? How are our Diocese, our parishes, our families, and our souls the House of the Lord? What happens if we chose to labor on the House without the Lord? (n. 1-5)

2. What does it mean that “We must receive the Jesus Christ who came two-thousand years ago, not create a ‘Jesus’ who meets the fashions and fads of this age”? Why is it easier to follow a “Jesus” of our making? How does the culture tempt us to follow a false Christ? How does the Church, through her sacraments, help us build our house upon the “solid rock” of the authentic Jesus Christ? (n. 6-7)

3. How do you serve the poor and vulnerable in your community? What stops us from evangelizing those around us for Christ? What ministries in your parish could you rebuild for the sake of the poor and those without Jesus? What areas of your own walk with Christ need to be rebuilt for the sake of your own salvation? (n. 8)

4. As members of our shared house, the Church in Eastern Oklahoma, what do you think of our shared Vision and Purpose? How could you advance them in your own life and at your parish? Over the next three years, how could the Core Virtues help you deepen your relationship with Christ and His Church? What personal goals could you set over the next three years?

5. As fellow co-laborers of the Lord, what do you think of the three Priorities? What is the Domestic Church (CCC n. 1655-8)? Do our own families resemble the Domestic Church? How can we better support the families of our parish? What does it mean to be formed in the faith? Is your walk with Christ an “ongoing conversion”? How can we better form our leaders and all the Christian Faithful of the Diocese? If your parish underwent a strategic plan, what would you prioritize? How can your parish participate in the shared Vision of the Diocese?