

Ecclesia Semper Reformanda
(The Church is Always in Need of Renewal)

**A Pastoral Letter on the Future of the Church in the
Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa**

***To the Priests, Deacons, Consecrated persons and
all the Lay Faithful
of the Diocese of Sioux City***

15 October 2009
Memorial of Saint Teresa of Jesus
Virgin and Doctor of the Church

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Greetings of peace and joy to you and all your families. By God's providence we are privileged to live in northwest Iowa and practice our faith in the Diocese of Sioux City. I am honored to serve you as your Bishop.

I take great joy in sharing with you my first pastoral letter for our Diocese. It is my hope that this document be a source of instruction and direction for all of us: priests, deacons, consecrated persons, and faithful laity. The points shared in this pastoral letter are basic to the celebration and faithful living of our Catholic faith. They are the foundation of all that we are called to do for the Lord in our Diocese and beyond.

As I publish this pastoral letter, I do so on the Memorial of Saint Teresa of Jesus. On this day, the Church prays: "O God, you raised up Saint Teresa by your Spirit so that she could manifest to the Church the way to perfection. Nourish us with the food of her heavenly teaching and fire us with a desire for holiness." May Saint Teresa be an inspiration to all of us in our desire to grow in holiness.

This is the Year for Priests promulgated by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. I express to each of the priests in our Diocese my profound gratitude for their faithful witness of holiness and dedication to you, the People of God and to me, their Bishop. Priests are co-workers with the Bishop in the mission given to us by Christ. Please pray for us.

May all of us, united in love, continue to grow in the same holiness of Saint Teresa and Saint John Vianney as we continue to live our faith in hope and love.

Your brother in Christ,



Most Reverend R. Walker Nickless
Bishop of Sioux City

I. Introduction

Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever! It has now been almost four joyful years of being your bishop. It has been a time of learning and growth for me as a priest, called beyond my desires and talents, not without God's grace making up for all that is lacking in me, to be the shepherd for the flock in northwest Iowa. As shepherd, I am called to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15), the truth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, inseparable from His Church, "at the same time holy and always in need of renewal and reformation."¹ In order to do this, I have traveled to meet the priests and people of the diocese, always listening, asking questions, studying and, of course, praying about the current state of the Church. Now I offer my understanding of the state and direction of the Church, both universal and particular, at this juncture in her history. I propose this pastoral plan—a vision, so to speak—for the future of our diocese, and some practical guidance for achieving our goals.

My understanding begins with these personal reflections. I studied and was ordained a deacon and priest during the exciting, almost intoxicating, time of the Second Vatican Council. I am thoroughly a product of that momentous time, the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in centuries. It has formed the context and culture of my entire ministerial life. Like Pope John Paul the Great, I have no other desire for my ministry than seeing the hopes and reforms of the Second Vatican Council fully implemented and brought to fruition.² Like Pope Benedict XVI, I know that, while we have worked hard, there is still much work to do.³ My understanding of this work has grown and deepened over the past forty years. So it must be for all of us. The Church is always in need of renewal because it is made up of us, imperfect human beings. This is the deepest reason: as individuals and as a Church, we are always called to grow, change, deepen, repent, convert, improve, and learn from our successes and failures in the pursuit of holiness and fidelity to Jesus Christ and the mission He has given us. Moreover, we need to do this in the midst of an ever changing world, culture and society.

I have experienced this as a priest and now, through the biggest change of all for me, as a bishop. Despite my own unworthiness, I have been blessed abundantly by the Lord Jesus Christ in his call to me, in the graces of my episcopal ordination, and in your support and cooperation. I am happy and blessed to be your bishop. Having been called by God and the Church, I want to do my part to fulfill His mission among you. Thus, we need serious reflection and evaluation of the current state and direction, challenges and opportunities, for faith and ministry in our Lord Jesus Christ in our Diocese.

II. The Second Vatican Council and the New Evangelization

As is well known, Blessed Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council to be the moment of renewal for the Church in the modern world. The world had changed a great deal since the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the so-called Enlightenment, and the secular revolutions of the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. The Church now found herself beset on all sides by a world that could no longer understand her, and from within by an unfortunate tendency to isolation, fearing engagement with the rapidly changing world.

In opening the Council, Blessed John stated that the “greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council” was twofold: “that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be [both] guarded and taught more efficaciously.”⁴ Later in the speech, he elaborated on this: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”⁵ The teachings of the Church, our identity and culture as Catholics, must be loved and guarded, yet brought forth and taught in a way understandable to the modern world.

Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul the Great constantly preached the same thing in calling for a “New Evangelization” of the faithful, our separated brothers and sisters in Christ, and all those who do not know Jesus Christ or the Church. This New Evangelization was to be “new not in content but in ardor, methods, and expression.”⁶ It is readily apparent from his teaching and ministry that for Pope John Paul the Great, the New Evangelization was the true fruit of the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, the Council was the beginning and blueprint for evangelization in the modern world. He explicitly stated this as his particular mission at the time of his election, and he lived it to the end.⁷ He spent his entire pontificate interpreting and implementing the Council’s documents according to the light of the Holy Spirit, given in virtue of his office, amid the changing circumstances of the Church and the world.

We now find ourselves forty-four years since the close of the Council. Many questions still need to be asked and answered. Have we understood the Council within the context of the entire history of the Church? Have we understood the documents well? Have we truly appropriated and implemented them? Is the current state of the Church what the Council intended? What went right? What went wrong? Where is the promised “New Pentecost”?

Pope Benedict XVI reflected on these important questions in an address to the Roman Curia in December, 2005:

The question arises: Why has the implementation of the Council, in large parts of the Church, thus far been so difficult? Well, it all depends on the correct interpretation of the Council or—as we would say today—on its proper hermeneutics, the correct key to its interpretation and application. The problems in its implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarreled with each other. One caused confusion, the other, silently but more and more visibly, bore and is bearing fruit.

On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture,” it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the “hermeneutic of reform,” of renewal in the continuity of the one subject – Church – which the Lord has given to us. She is a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council.⁸

Notice, first, Pope Benedict's honest acknowledgement that the implementation of the Council has been difficult and is not complete. Notice also his clear-sighted grasp of how two rival interpretations have led to different "camps" within the Church. This division has weakened our identity and mission.

It is crucial that we all grasp that the hermeneutic or interpretation of discontinuity or rupture, which many think is the settled and even official position, is not the true meaning of the Council. This interpretation sees the pre-conciliar and post-conciliar Church almost as two different churches. It sees the Second Vatican Council as a radical break with the past. There can be no split, however, between the Church and her faith before and after the Council. We must stop speaking of the "Pre-Vatican II" and "Post-Vatican II" Church, and stop seeing various characteristics of the Church as "pre" and "post" Vatican II. Instead, we must evaluate them according to their intrinsic value and pastoral effectiveness in this day and age.

Therefore, we must heed the Holy Father's point that one interpretation, the "hermeneutic of reform," is valid, and has borne and is bearing fruit. This hermeneutic of reform, as described above, takes seriously and keeps together the two poles of identity (the ancient deposit of faith and life) and engagement with the world (teaching it more efficaciously).

Lastly, the Holy Father, going into greater detail later in the address, explains that the "spirit of Vatican II" must be found only in the letter of the documents themselves. The so-called "spirit" of the Council has no authoritative interpretation. It is a ghost or demon that must be exorcised if we are to proceed with the Lord's work.

III. The Current Context

There was a great excitement immediately after the Council: excitement for innovation, change, freedom, renewed dynamism. There was a great desire to implement the Council immediately, with the best of intentions. In doing so, the Church after the Council achieved many things. The Council's *aggiornamento* brought about a great breath of fresh air, a new freedom and excitement about being Catholic. However, this era of change and freedom took place during a most tumultuous time. The 1960s and 1970s brought about a wholesale change within our culture and society, so that it seemed that everything was "up for grabs." The Church seemed to be going the same way as society, suggesting that nothing was certain or solid. If the Church could change some things, it could change anything and everything. Sometimes we set out to convert the world, but were instead converted by it. We have sometimes lost sight of who we are and what we believe, and therefore have little to offer the world that so desperately needs the Gospel. A pendulum effect began in the Church and has not yet stopped swinging. In the effort to correct exaggerations or one-sidedness in various areas, the reform often times swung to the exact opposite pole.

This pendulum swing can be seen in the areas of liturgy, popular piety, family life, catechesis, ecumenism, morals, and political involvement, to name just a few. It seems to me that in many areas of the Church's life the "hermeneutic of discontinuity" has triumphed. It has manifested itself in a sort of dualism, an either/or mentality and insistence in various areas of the Church's life: either fidelity to doctrine or social justice work, either Latin or English, either our personal conscience or the authority of the Church, either chant or contemporary music, either tradition or progress, either liturgy or popular piety, either conservative or liberal, either Mass or Adoration, either the Magisterium or theologians, either ecumenism or evangelization, either rubrics or personalization, either the Baltimore Catechism or "experience"; and the list goes on and on! We have always been a "both/and" people: intrinsically traditional and conservative in what pertains to the faith, and creative in pastoral ministry and engaging the world.

My brothers and sisters, let me say this clearly: The "hermeneutic of discontinuity" is a false interpretation and implementation of the Council and the Catholic Faith. It emphasizes the "engagement with the world" to the exclusion of the deposit of faith. This has wreaked havoc on the Church, systematically dismantling the Catholic Faith to please the world, watering down what is distinctively Catholic, and ironically becoming completely irrelevant and impotent for the mission of the Church in the world. The Church that seeks simply what works or is "useful" in the end becomes useless.

Our urgent need at this time is to reclaim and strengthen our understanding of the deposit of faith. We must have a distinctive identity and culture as Catholics, if we would effectively communicate the Gospel to the people of this day and Diocese. This is our mission. Notice that this mission is two-fold, like the Second Vatican Council's purpose. It is toward ourselves within the Church (*ad intra*), and it is to the world (*ad extra*). The first is primary and necessary for the second; the second flows from the first. This is why we have not been as successful as we should be in bringing the world to Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ to the world. We cannot give what we do not have; we cannot fulfill our mission to evangelize, if we ourselves are not evangelized.⁹

With all this in mind, how do we, the Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa, reclaim and strengthen our faith, identity and culture as Catholics so as to engage more effectively in our mission?

IV. Pastoral Priorities for the Diocese of Sioux City

- 1. We must renew our reverence, love, adoration and devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament, within and outside of Mass. A renewal of Eucharistic Spirituality necessarily entails an ongoing implementation of the Second Vatican Council's reform of the liturgy as authoritatively taught by the Church's Magisterium, the promotion of Eucharistic Adoration outside of Mass, regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of the Eucharist and our Mother.**

The Eucharist is the “source and summit”¹⁰ of the Christian life because it contains our entire spiritual good, namely, Jesus Christ himself. His “once and for all”¹¹ sacrifice is made present on our altars, offered to the Father on our behalf and received as food for our pilgrim journey. All that we are and do should flow from our participation in the Eucharist and lead back to it. It is absolutely central to our identity and faith as Catholics. It enables us to engage in our mission. Without a proper reverence, love, adoration and devotion to the Eucharist and the liturgy, we are lost.¹²

The primary purpose of all liturgy, and especially of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, is the worship of God. We sometimes forget this. We go to Mass to worship God, simply because He deserves to be worshiped, and we, his creatures, ought to worship him. Too often we forget that God is transcendent and ineffable, incomprehensibly greater than we can imagine. He is infinite truth and goodness shining forth in radiant beauty. He has created us, keeps us in existence, and redeems us from our sins. In short, He is worthy of our worship. He comes to us at Mass as a Father through His Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. He makes Himself tangibly present to us in the assembly, the ordained ministers, and the proclaimed Word of God. He is also present most especially and immediately in the Eucharist, which has a perfect and infinite value before His eyes. He graciously comes to us, not only to be with us, but also to raise us up to Heaven, to the Heavenly liturgy, where we worship in union with all the angels and saints, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the eternal offering of Jesus Christ to the Father on our behalf. Thus we enter the heavenly sanctuary while still on earth, and worship God in the full manner that He laid out for us!

When we worship God in this way, He sanctifies us, that is, He makes us holy. This is the second purpose of the Liturgy. We are made holy by Jesus when we participate in His divine Sonship, becoming adopted sons and daughters of the Father. We are changed, transformed from the inside out. This comes about through hearing and acting on His Word and by being strengthened and steadily sanctified by a worthy reception of Holy Communion. This in turn leads to a true communion of saints within the local and universal Church. Too often, the purposes of our participation in the liturgy, worship and sanctification, are passed over in a misplaced attempt to “create community,” rather than to receive it as a fruit of the Holy Spirit’s activity within us.

Since, in the Church’s liturgy, we meet God in a unique way, how we worship – the external rites, gestures, vessels, music, indeed, the building itself – should reflect the grandeur of the Heavenly liturgy. Liturgy is mystical; it is our mysterious encounter with the transcendent God, who comes to sanctify us through the sacrifice of Christ made present in the Eucharist and received in Holy Communion. It should radiate Heavenly truth and goodness. This radiance, the splendor of truth, is called beauty. Our liturgy should radiate true beauty, reflecting the beauty of God Himself and what He does for us in Christ Jesus. It should lift up our soul — first through our intellect and will, but also through our senses and emotions — to adore God as we share already in Heaven’s eternal worship. In this vale of tears, the liturgy should be a lodestar, a transcending place of wonder and comfort in the midst of our day-to-day lives, a place of light and high beauty beyond the reach of worldly shadows.¹³ So many people only connect with the Church, and sometimes with prayer and God, through Sunday Mass. Should we not offer an experience of beauty and transcendence, compellingly different from our day-to-day lives? Should not every facet of our offering be proportionate to the divine reality?

Many small details can make liturgy either beautiful or banal. In recent decades, in place of beauty and “noble simplicity,”¹⁴ our main principle for discerning and choosing the “little things” has tended toward utility, ease, and even cheapness. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, before his election as Bishop of Rome, wrote the following about Church music, that is easily applicable to all parts of the liturgy:

A Church which only makes use of “utility” music has fallen for what is, in fact, useless. She [the Church] too becomes ineffectual. For her mission is a far higher one. As the Old Testament speaks of the Temple, the Church is to be the place of “glory,” and as such, too, the place where mankind’s cry of distress is brought to the ear of God. The Church must not settle down with what is merely comfortable and serviceable at the parish level; she must arouse the voice of the cosmos, and by glorifying the Creator, elicit the glory of the cosmos itself, making it also glorious, beautiful, habitable and beloved.... The Church is to transform, improve, “humanize” the world—but how can she do that if at the same time she turns her back on beauty, which is so closely allied to love? For together beauty and love form the true consolation in this world, bringing it as near as possible to the world of the resurrection.¹⁵

Pope John Paul the Great, addressing some bishops of the United States on October 9, 1998, recognized the same urgent spiritual needs:

To look back over what has been done in the field of liturgical renewal in the years since the Council is, first, to see many reasons for giving heartfelt thanks and praise to the Most Holy Trinity for the marvelous awareness which has developed among the faithful of their role and responsibility in this priestly work of Christ and his Church. It is also to realize that not all changes have always and everywhere been accompanied by the necessary explanation and catechesis; as a result, in some cases there has been a misunderstanding of the very nature of the liturgy, leading to abuses, polarization, and sometimes even grave scandal The challenge now is to move beyond whatever misunderstandings there have been . . . by entering more deeply into the contemplative dimension of worship, which includes the sense of awe, reverence and adoration which are fundamental attitudes in our relationship with God.¹⁶

It is imperative that we recover this wonder, awe, reverence and love for the liturgy and the Eucharist. To do this, we must feel and think with the whole Church in “reforming the reform” of the Second Vatican Council. We must accept and implement the current stream of magisterial liturgical documents coming from the Holy See: *Liturgiam Authenticam* (2001), the *Third Typical Edition of the Roman Missal*, and its new *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (2002), *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (2002), *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), *Spiritus et Sponsa* (2003), *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004), *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), and *Summorum Pontificum* (2007).

It seems that all is not well with the Liturgy, and the Church is trying to help us. The pendulum swings, the hermeneutic of discontinuity, and the divisions within our Church have been seen and felt in the Liturgy more than anywhere.

The Church’s Magisterium, not our private opinions, is our authoritative guide in this *ressourcement*. The liturgy belongs to the entire Church, and in a special way to the faithful – not to a particular Diocese or parish, and certainly not to individual priests. I exhort everyone, especially our priests, to keep up with the Church. I

expect them to read, study, and understand the above documents and their inner logic and place within the ongoing reform of the Church. It is vitally important that we offer resplendent worship to God alone, with understanding and excellence, obedient to the Church. My own liturgies at the Cathedral, though imperfect, are also meant to be exemplary for the whole Diocese. It is a grave error and a form of clericalism, whether by clergy or lay ministers, to change the liturgy, or even to choose ungenerously among legitimate options, to suit only our own preferences and opinions. This respect for the whole of Tradition is not simply for the sake of “rules and regulations”; this is not legalism, as some have said, but our love for Christ, so that from His Eucharist with all its preeminent beauty and sanctity, He can shine forth for all to see and love.

The Council’s goal in reforming liturgy was, of course, to facilitate the “fully active and conscious participation”¹⁷ of all the faithful. We have made great strides in this area. In the same address to bishops cited above, the Holy Father said:

Full participation certainly means that every member of the community has a part to play in the liturgy; and in this respect a great deal has been achieved in parishes and communities across your land. But full participation does not mean that everyone does everything, since this would lead to a clericalizing of the laity and a laicizing of the priesthood; and this was not what the Council had in mind. The liturgy, like the Church, is intended to be hierarchical and polyphonic, respecting the different roles assigned by Christ and allowing all the different voices to blend in one great hymn of praise.

Active participation certainly means that, in gesture, word, song and service, all the members of the community take part in an act of worship, which is anything but inert or passive. Yet active participation does not preclude the active passivity of silence, stillness and listening: indeed, it demands it. Worshippers are not passive, for instance, when listening to the readings or the homily, or following the prayers of the celebrant, and the chants and music of the liturgy. These are experiences of silence and stillness, but they are in their own way profoundly active. In a culture which neither favors nor fosters meditative quiet, the art of interior listening is learned only with difficulty. Here we see how the liturgy, though it must always be properly inculturated, must also be counter-cultural.

Conscious participation calls for the entire community to be properly instructed in the mysteries of the liturgy, lest the experience of worship degenerate into a form of ritualism. But it does not mean a constant attempt within the liturgy itself to make the implicit explicit, since this often leads to a verbosity and informality which are alien to the Roman Rite and end by trivializing the act of worship. Nor does it mean the suppression of all subconscious experience, which is vital in a liturgy which thrives on symbols that speak to the subconscious just as they speak to the conscious. The use of the vernacular has certainly opened up the treasures of the liturgy to all who take part, but this does not mean that the Latin language, and especially the chants which are so superbly adapted to the genius of the Roman Rite, should be wholly abandoned. If subconscious experience is ignored in worship, an affective and devotional vacuum is created and the liturgy can become not only too verbal but also too cerebral.¹⁸

Full, active and conscious participation: we have made great strides in this over the years. But often this has happened in a superficial, partial way resulting from a narrow and truncated interpretation of these terms. It is time to dig deeper, “to put out into the deep,”¹⁹ into a new and authentic liturgical spirituality that is both old

and new, active and contemplative, historical and mystical, Roman and Iowan, familiar and challenging. All of this also applies to our “fully active and conscious participation” in liturgy outside the Holy Mass, especially in Eucharistic Adoration, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Marian devotions, and the Liturgy of the Hours.

Eucharistic Adoration is not, as some have said, a distraction from the central meaning of the Mass, or from the reception of Holy Communion. It is instead a great help and one that I wholeheartedly support and encourage in the parishes of this diocese. Eucharistic Adoration is an extension of our reception of Holy Communion, and brings about a deeper longing and preparation for our next reception. Just as you cannot be exposed to the sun without receiving its rays, neither can you come to Jesus exposed in the Blessed Sacrament without receiving the Divine Rays of His grace, love and peace.²⁰ I exhort all communities of the diocese to explore ways of making the Eucharist more central in our lives through periods of Exposition, Adoration and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and Eucharistic Processions.

In far too many places and among too many of our people, the regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation has fallen by the wayside. This must be remedied if we are to grow in humility and holiness, and truly benefit from the gift of Jesus in the Eucharist. Without this Sacrament, we lose a sense of sin in our lives, and overlook the obstacles it places in our path. Unless we confess our sins, they fester in our hearts, corrupting our good works and spiritual practices.²¹ Indeed, many, without knowledge and unheeding, now receive Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin, making their Communion unfruitful at best and damning at worst.²² Too many parishes only offer one hour of Confessions, and sometimes less, on Saturdays. I exhort and encourage priests to make themselves available in a generous way for this great Sacrament, on days and times convenient for the faithful. If priests set aside time, and preach on the need for repentance and sacramental confession, they will come.

Devotion to the Blessed Mother, such an important part of our tradition and spirituality, also leads to a deeper appreciation and love of the Blessed Sacrament. She is the Mother of the Eucharist, the one who gave Jesus Christ to the world. She is also our Mother in the Order of Grace. “Having been Assumed, body and soul, into Heaven, she does not lay aside her saving office,”²³ but always and everywhere leads souls to her Son, telling them, “Do whatever He tells you.”²⁴ When we are fervently devoted to the Blessed Mother, especially through the Rosary and Consecration to her, she leads us to her Son, most especially present in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

The Liturgy of the Hours is the prayer of the whole Church. By this constant prayer, we consecrate the day and all its activities to our Savior, and offer ourselves in union with His suffering. Priests and deacons are required to pray the office every day. It is and can be a great source of support and help in pastoral ministry and growth in personal holiness. The Church has always desired that the faithful also share in this Liturgy. I encourage all parishes to consider how they might develop such opportunities.

- 2. We must strengthen catechesis on every level, beginning with and focusing on adults. If we, who are supposed to be mature in faith, do not know the Catholic Faith well, how can we live it and impart it to our children and future generations of Catholics?**

Our relationship with God the Father, through Jesus Christ His Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is the absolute center and purpose of faith. Christian faith is primarily a mystical relationship with God. We are made sons and daughters of the Father, partakers of the Divine Nature. We become by grace what Christ is by nature.

But how can we be in relationship with God if we don't know Him? We must be catechized; literally, we must have the faith "handed over" to us. This means four things. First, faith is a gift. We receive the gift of faith from God, through the hands of those faithful teachers who live it deeply, especially in the family. We don't make or define faith; we either accept it, completely as it is, or not. Second, the structure and content of faith – the doctrines and disciplines defined by the Church's teaching authority – are the structure and content of this mystical relationship. All this, too, is received as part and parcel of the gift of faith, and cannot be picked over "cafeteria-style." Third, we are saved by receiving and accepting this whole faith. Faith changes us, beginning with Holy Baptism and the full sacramental life in which we meet and love and worship God. From this meeting, faith changes our nature, our values, our goals, our tastes, everything. We become "new creations," radically new and remade in the image of Christ. Fourth, we are never fully catechized. We are never perfect in faith, having nothing more to learn, to understand, to grow in. As long as we live in this world, we remain pilgrims, struggling to love and follow our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the heart of Christianity and catechesis is not an idea but a person, the person of Jesus. He is the primary and essential object of our teaching; everything else is taught with reference to Him. Furthermore, Jesus is the primary teacher – anyone else who teaches is simply Christ's spokesperson. Each catechist should be able to apply to himself the mysterious words of Jesus, "my teaching is not my own, but His who sent me."²⁶ Our message is Christ's message, not our own opinions.²⁷

Jesus' teaching is the same today as it has always been: the Deposit of Faith, both written (Scripture) and handed down (Tradition), always rooted in Sacred Scripture and interpreted by the Church's Magisterium. Sacred Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* must be the primary sources of formation for our catechists and their teaching. Especially important in the communication of the Gospel today is the inseparability of Christ and the Church. Many people seem to think that the Church is an after-effect, an accident of history rather than something directly willed by God. Instead, the Church is an essential aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, directly willed and structured by Him, endowed with the Holy Spirit, the fullness of truth and all the means of salvation. She is no mere human institution, despite the sinful human beings who comprise her in this world, but His Sacrament, Bride and very Body. She is the Kingdom of God, visible in human history, already but not yet perfected in Heaven. A love of "our Mother and Teacher" the Church should be fostered at every level, not primarily as an institution, but as a holy mystery to be contemplated, loved, suffered for and renewed by our commitment.

We receive and accept the fullness of faith in the Church both objectively and affectively. Before the Second Vatican Council, our catechesis in the United States was very strongly formal and aimed at the head. We memorized concise answers to common questions, and followed the disciplines of the Church because that was what Catholics did. We knew the answers to "what" and "how," but not the deeper answer to "why." We fell into a shallow formalism; we did not use the form for its true end, namely, a deep, personal, intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that transforms our hearts. After

the Council, we swung wildly in the opposite direction: our catechesis became very strongly affective in order to emphasize the relational aspect. We tried to mine our experience of God's love for us, to learn how to love God deeply, personally, and intimately in return. But without the formal knowledge of faith, experience alone is not a solid teacher. As a result, two generations of us now have a very poor knowledge both of the Catholic Faith and of Jesus Christ. A religious illiteracy and ignorance pervades many sectors of the Church; it is an open wound in her side. We need a solid, systematic, and comprehensive catechesis, not eschewing "what" and "how," but answering also "why," faithful to the entire Deposit of Faith and the Church's Magisterium, forming both head and heart.²⁸

Despite the Church's constant emphasis on the primary importance of adult catechesis, we continue to focus, sometimes exclusively, on youth and adolescent education.²⁹ It is the Church's constant teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children, yet we continually fail to provide them with the requisite formation, knowledge, and skills. Instead, we attempt most, if not all, the teaching in schools and parish programs! How can parents and parishioners live the Catholic Faith and impart it to others if they don't know it themselves? I learned a long time ago in my seminary studies, "*Nemo dat quod non habet*" — no one can give what he does not have. Youth and young adult catechesis cannot be healthy unless we have rigorously well-formed adults who witness the Catholic Faith in their lives, in teaching their families, and in the Church and the public square.

For this to take place, the leadership of the clergy and catechists is irreplaceable. As Pope Paul VI taught us, "The modern world listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if it listens to teachers it is because they are first witnesses." At the foundation of our catechesis must be personal witness to the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.³⁰

I am convinced with Pope John Paul the Great that the "the more the Church, whether on the local or the universal level, gives catechesis priority over other works and undertakings, the results of which would be more spectacular, the more she finds in catechesis a strengthening of her internal life as a community of believers and of her external activity as a missionary Church."³¹

3. The first two pastoral priorities, renewal in Eucharistic Spirituality and Catechesis, will foster faithful families that are the foundation of the Church and the society. We are called to protect, build up and foster holy families in our midst, without whom the Church and the world perish.

"A man and a woman united in marriage form a family together with their children. God instituted the family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution. Marriage and the family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children."³² This seems really basic, but it is worth repeating in our day and age when the family has sometimes lost its centrality and cohesiveness, and is under constant attack from cultural and ideological forces. Not only are its purposes sometimes unknown or ignored in practice, but God's authorship of marriage and its nature (and hence its priority over arbitrary civil law) is flatly denied. Therefore we must be attentive to protecting and strengthening family life. We need holy families, lest the Church and the world perish.

The natural family, divinely ordered throughout human history, is sanctified and elevated by Christ to a Sacrament of the New Covenant.³³ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and Tradition call this the “domestic church.”³⁴ Sacramental marriage is the source of holiness for the spouses, and through them the children. The Christian family is meant to be a school of faith, hope and love, a miniature of the universal church. It is a holy place, a sanctuary, where each has distinct roles and responsibilities, where the faith is passed on, nurtured, lived and deepened. It is a place where spouses love each other “as Christ loved the Church,”³⁵ and pass that same type of love on to their children through natural and supernatural rearing. It is a place where children learn what it means to be human, generous, kind, selfless, obedient, Christ-like and fruitful for their neighbors, the Church and the world. How can this happen if they are not aided by the Church? How can this happen if they do not know the power of the Eucharist, Reconciliation, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the conviction of the faith through proper catechesis?

Now, “the family is the original cell of human society and is, therefore, prior to any recognition by public authority. Family values and principles constitute the foundation of social life.” Therefore, “society, while respecting the principle of subsidiary, has the duty to support and strengthen marriage and the family. Public authority must respect, protect and foster the true nature of marriage and the family, public morality, the rights of parents, and domestic prosperity.”³⁶

If this is the duty of the state towards the family, how much more is the obligation laid upon the Church! We have a grave responsibility to build up and nurture holy families in our midst. We must do so by strengthening their Catholic faith, identity, and culture through the above pastoral priorities, but also by sustained preaching and well-crafted pastoral ministry programs. We must give concrete help against the corrosive effects of pre-marital promiscuity, cohabitation, contraception and abortion, pornography industry, easily executed divorce, and infidelity. But we must also guard against and equip families to resist the breakdown of the family that sometimes happens through over activity, the domination of communication technologies and novelties, and the cult of fun and entertainment, to name just a few dangers.

A concerted effort by the diocesan staff, pastors, priests and deacons, catechists and, of course, parents to find concrete, creative ways of strengthening family life in our communities is an urgent necessity. A renewal of family life is a sure recipe for the renewal of the Church and our society, and it must receive our creative attention and pastoral concern.

4. If we renew the Eucharistic, catechetical, and family life of our diocese, we will simultaneously foster a culture where young people can more readily respond to the radical calls of ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life.

It is no secret that the Church is struggling to fill the ranks of her priests and religious. Why would anyone give their life to the Church and her faith, unless they already know it, love it, and live it? The lack of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life is not a mystery; it is precisely a crisis of faith. Where Catholic faith and life flourish, vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life also flourish. If we are faithful in the above objectives or pastoral priorities, I am confident that vocations will come. If the Eucharist is the center of our lives, so that we worship God alone; if catechesis is strong, so that we know and love God intimately; if families are strengthened through our pastoral ministry, so that the common priesthood sets an inspiring example, then

Catholic faith and life will flourish. When the Church and her faith are strong, our willingness to accept God's call will also be strong. This will be especially true for our young people.

There are many things that we can and should already be doing to foster vocations. Nothing is more important than the personal example of joyful, virtuous priests and religious, living disciplined lives of self-sacrifice, faithfully obedient to the Church, willing to share with young people their dedication to Christ's more demanding call. As I noted before, "the modern world listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers."³⁷ The personal witness of a boy's parish priests to the holiness, grandeur, and beauty of priesthood, to the joy that fills the struggle to die to self for the sake of Christ and His Body, does far more in fostering vocations to the priesthood than any possible program. Likewise, the negative example of unhappy, depressed, uncaring and joyless priests kills vocations. The same holds true for religious.

In addition, personal invitations to consider the priesthood and consecrated life should always be a priority in our relationships with young people. Young people want and need to be challenged, and are inherently attracted to the highest ideals. Community life, shared discipline, and self-sacrificing service to the poor, weak, and vulnerable are especially attractive to youth today. We must challenge them to purge their idealism of all that is not God, by our committed example, devotion to the Eucharist, solid catechesis, and strong Catholic families. Only then we can honestly ask them seriously to discern a call to Holy Orders or religious life.

Impassioned preaching on the importance, inner logic, and beauty of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God is also important. The over-sexualization of our culture and the erosion of marriage as a Sacrament blind us to the value of the celibate life. Marriage and celibacy are not opposed to each other, but rise and fall together. When one is understood, elevated and lived well, it brings about renewal in the other. Celibacy is a precious imitation of Christ, a spousal relationship with Him and the Church, a sign of the life to come in heaven. It is a practical way of serving the Church and the world. It has been present in the Church from the beginning and must not be allowed to die out.

Lastly, we must also continue our efforts at creative programs of discernment, such as the recently begun Project Andrew Dinners and forthcoming discernment retreats. But these will never be successful unless we build within our parishes and the homes of the faithful a "culture of vocations," always seeking the will of God in our lives and service to others. Parents play an all important role in encouraging and supporting vocations in the Church.

5. We must acknowledge and embrace the missionary character of the Catholic Faith and the vocation of all Catholics to be, not only disciples, but also apostles.

"Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass."³⁸ Our discipleship of Jesus will always be imperfect and incomplete if we fail to preach the Gospel. Moreover, our faith will wither and die if we do not embrace our call to be apostles. The Church is inherently missionary. Sharing our faith is an intrinsic duty of charity. Each in different ways and according our own circumstances and abilities, we must all be evangelists.

The “New Evangelization” called for by Pope John Paul the Great flows from our deep Eucharistic spirituality, our solid catechesis, our deeply Catholic family lives, and our readiness to discern and accept fully God’s call to live only in Christ. This new evangelization must also be dynamic, orthodox and creative in reaching out to Catholics no longer practicing their faith, our separated brothers and sisters of various communities and those who do not know Jesus Christ and His Church.

It seems to me that we have largely lost confidence in the power of God and His Word to change hearts, to pierce “between soul and spirit, joints and marrow.”³⁹ This confidence can only come from inner conviction in the power of Christ to heal and save. We must accept His infinite grace and mercy ourselves, actually be healed in our own sins, and truly believe, before we can convincingly ask others to accept and believe.

It is not our task to worry about success. Rather, it is our task to be faithful to our imitation of Christ who came to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom. We need to have confidence in God, in his Word, in the truth of the Gospel and its inherently compelling nature. We must plant and water, and believe that God will give the growth. As He promised: “Just as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it fruitful ... so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but shall accomplish that which I purpose.”⁴⁰ In taking up the call to evangelization, we must witness with the way we live our lives, and then define that life as explicitly Christian, announcing the Good News of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We must be willing and able to defend our faith. We must “always be ready to give the reason for the hope that is within us.”⁴¹

As I said above, we are called to do this in different ways. It often happened that after the Second Vatican Council, eager and enthusiastic Catholics were immediately given ministerial positions in the Church as volunteers or paid employees. This is good and necessary, part of the common priesthood of serving the Church. Even more necessary, however, is that the laity take up their apostolate within the world. This also flows from the different natures of our priesthood. The pastors of the Church are called to exercise their ministerial priesthood toward the faithful by preaching and teaching, caring for souls, offering the Sacraments, and shepherding the faithful. But the laity have a more important task, and a much bigger pulpit. “The laity are given this special vocation: to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become ‘the salt of the earth.’”⁴² Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the Church itself.”⁴³ The laity are called to sanctify the temporal order: to bring Christ in their heart, head, and hands into their families, workplaces, professions, schools, and the public square; to show love for Him among their children, friends, coworkers, and even acquaintances. Thus the lay faithful exercise their prophetic, priestly and kingly vocation, received in Holy Baptism. To list all the opportunities around us to do so would be impossible; most importantly, I want to call forth their genius, creativity and zeal to tell me and my clergy how this can be done here and now.

V. Conclusion

“Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a ‘proof’ of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a ‘not yet.’ The fact that this future exists changes the present. ... Faith gives life a new basis, a new foundation. ... Above all, it is seen in the great acts of renunciation, from the monks of ancient times to Saint Francis of Assisi and those of our contemporaries who enter modern religious Institutes and movements and leave everything for love of Christ, so as to bring to men and women the faith and love of Christ, and to help those who are suffering in body and spirit. ... For us who contemplate these figures, their way of acting and living is *de facto* a ‘proof’ that the things to come, the promise of Christ, are not only a reality that we await, but a real presence: he is truly the ‘philosopher’ and the ‘shepherd’ who shows us what life is and where it is to be found.”⁴⁴

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in the time I have been among you I have learned how admirably strong is the faith to which you cling, yet how far it is from the “fullness of faith” to which we are called by our loving Savior. We truly need today those “great acts of renunciation” for the sake of Christ: not so much renunciation of our material things, as of our false attachments to both material and spiritual things. In order to strengthen our devotion to Christ in the Holy Eucharist and worship God rightly, we need to renounce any attachment to how we worship currently. To improve the spiritual depth of how we perform the Church’s liturgy, we will need to renounce attachment to worldly expectations and long-standing habits. To spend more time adoring Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, we need to renounce attachment to how we currently use our time. To deepen our intimate love for God in our hearts and heads, we need to renounce attachment to whatever is not God that is filling our hearts and heads. To live in more intentional and holy Catholic families, we need to renounce attachment to distractions, sins, and imperfections that harm our domestic churches. To accept the divine plan God has for each of us, we need to renounce attachment to our own plans. To change the world for Christ, we need to renounce attachment to how we want the world to be for ourselves.

Renunciation is hard work. It is a kind of martyrdom, a dying to self for love of Christ. But “the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.”⁴⁵ Renunciation is possible, in faith and with faith, as our Holy Father has reminded us in *Spe Salvi*. I know this faith exists among us, sustaining us in all our struggles and tribulations, making it possible to accept change and growth. I know that the future of what this Diocese is called to be already changes the present of what this Diocese is and is not. By God’s grace, let us all urgently hope and work together untiringly, to renounce whatever may keep us from loving God totally, for our salvation and that of all our neighbors.

We have an exciting challenge before us. I am convinced that God has great things in store for the Church of the Diocese of Sioux City. God desires each one of us to grow in holiness. Let us abandon all to Divine Providence, knowing that “in reality, holiness consists of only one thing: complete loyalty to God’s will.”⁴⁶

¹ Lumen Gentium #8

² E.g., *Christifideles Laici*, #2: “In looking over the years following the Council the Synod Fathers have been able to verify how the Holy Spirit continues to renew the youth of the Church and how he has inspired new aspirations towards holiness and the participation of so many lay faithful. This is witnessed, among other ways, in the new manner of active collaboration among priests, religious and the lay faithful; the active participation in the Liturgy, in the proclamation of the Word of God and catechesis; the multiplicity of services and

tasks entrusted to the lay faithful and fulfilled by them; the flourishing of groups, associations and spiritual movements as well as a lay commitment in the life of the Church; and in the fuller and meaningful participation of women in the development of society. At the same time, the Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world.”

³ Homily of 8 December 2005, on the 40th Anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council; e.g., “If we live in opposition to love and against the truth - in opposition to God - then we destroy one another and destroy the world. Then we do not find life but act in the interests of death. All this is recounted with immortal images in the history of the original fall of man and the expulsion of man from the earthly Paradise. Dear brothers and sisters, if we sincerely reflect about ourselves and our history, we have to say that with this narrative is described not only the history of the beginning but the history of all times, and that we all carry within us a drop of the poison of that way of thinking, illustrated by the images in the Book of Genesis. We call this drop of poison ‘original sin’.”

⁴ Pope John XXIII, Oct 11, 1962

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Address to the Assembly of CELAM (March 9, 1983), III: AAS 75 (1983), 778. See also *Ecclesia in America*, 6.

⁷ E.g., Inaugural Address of Pope John Paul II, October 22, 1978 : “Do not be afraid. Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid. Christ knows ‘what is in man.’ He alone knows it.”

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Christmas address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005.

⁹ Paul VI, *Evangelium Nuntiandi*, #15: “The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love.”

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium* #11; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #10.

¹¹ *Hebrews* 7:27; see also *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* #11.

¹² *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #5-7; *Mysterium Fidei* #3-7.

¹³ See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987) p. 901.

¹⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #124.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Feast of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1986) p. 126.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul, Address to the Bishops of the United States, October 9, 1998.

¹⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* #10.

¹⁸ Pope John Paul, Address to the Bishops of the United States, October 9, 1998.

¹⁹ *Lk* 5:4

²⁰ *Hab* 3:2-4; Morning Prayer for Friday II. See also *Jn* 1:1-9.

²¹ *Lumen Gentium* #11; *CIC* 959ff.

²² *I Cor* 11:27-29; *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* #9 (and notes 5-8), #19-20, 36.

²³ *Lumen Gentium* #62.

²⁴ *Jn* 2:5

²⁵ *Rom* 8:14-17; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #460, and notes.

²⁶ *Jn* 7:16.

²⁷ *Catechesi Tradendae* #5-6

²⁸ *Catechesi Tradendae* #27, 21

²⁹ See *Catechesi Tradendae* #43, *Christus Dominus* #14, *Ad Gentes* #14

³⁰ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* #41.

³¹ *Catechesi Tradendae* #15.

³² *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* #456.

³³ *Gaudium et Spes* #48; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* #11.

³⁴ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* #456.

³⁵ *Eph* 5:25.

³⁶ *Ibid.* #457-458.

- 37 Evangelii Nuntiandi #41.
- 38 Evangelii Nuntiandi #14.
- 39 Hebrews 4:12.
- 40 Isaiah 55:11.
- 41 1 Pet 3:15.
- 42 Mt 5:13.
- 43 Lumen Gentium #33.
- 44 Spe Salvi, #7-8.
- 45 Tertullian, Apologeticum #50.
- 46 Jean-Pierre de Caussade, Abandonment to Divine Providence, transl. J. Beevers (Image, 1993) p. 24.