

“GO,”

# HE SAID

## A PASTORAL LETTER

*From Bishop R. Daniel Conlon  
to the People of the Diocese of Joliet*



### I. INTRODUCTION

There is a great intensity in my heart. During almost 42 years as a priest and now 16 as a bishop, I have witnessed an enormous decline in people’s participation in the life of the Church, as well as an increasing encroachment of secular thinking, and the wretchedness of the child abuse scandal. With the prompting of the Holy Spirit, I felt a pressing need to write this, my first pastoral letter.

I have certainly written and spoken many, many times in a variety of venues. But a pastoral letter is a special means for a bishop to communicate with the members of his diocese. It is an opportunity to express particularly important matters involving everyone in a more thorough way.

Pope Francis especially has inspired my attitude. It’s his way of approaching the realities of the Church and the world in which she finds herself. He speaks and writes in such simple, concrete terms. I feel as though he is right there in the room with me. His words challenge. He pulls no punches.

Through both the content and style of his writing and speaking, Pope Francis has made it clear that the Church is living at a critical moment. It will not do, he insists, to rely on our accustomed ways. The world has changed too much. We need to wake up, maybe even be shaken awake.

Here’s a sample taken from his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”):

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*“I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, way of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with Him.” (#27)*

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In this letter I am hoping to inspire that “desire to go forth.”

Now, the Church in the 21st century is the same Church that Christ established more than 2,000 years ago. We have the same Scriptures, the same sacraments, the same apostolic structure, the same mission or purpose. How we live all that out, though, has to be guided by the “signs of the times,” as

the Second Vatican Council counseled. Because the Church always exists in a real historical context, amidst a concrete social environment, we have to evaluate and adjust to our own circumstances, without violating the *enduring* truths of our faith.

In this pastoral letter I wish to reflect on the local situation, in the hope that, together, we, the people of the Diocese of Joliet, might, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, move forward into the future to pursue ardently the mission entrusted to us by Christ.

It is critically important to keep the mission in front of us. That mission can be defined as the salvation of souls, the building up of God's kingdom, getting people to heaven, and in other ways. They all constitute the same end as did Christ's mission, when He was sent by the Father.

Without this clear focus, we can spin our wheels: lots of expense of energy and other resources and not much progress. A little more than 10 years ago, when Pope Francis was the archbishop of Buenos Aires in Argentina, the bishops of Latin America issued a pastoral letter in which they said:

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*“The diocese is called to be a ‘missionary community’ in all its communities and structures. Each diocese needs to enhance its missionary awareness, going out to meet those who do not yet believe in Christ within its own territory, and to respond adequately to the major issues of the society of which it is a part. But it is also called to go out with a maternal spirit to seek all the baptized who do not participate in the life of the Christian communities.”*

*(Documento de Aparecida, 2007, #168)*

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That is our mission in the Diocese of Joliet, as well. In fact, it is the very reason for our existence. The current child abuse scandal has made the situation even more urgent. People's faith is being tested grievously. Even where faith itself is not shaken, many of us will need encouragement to pursue the mission Christ gave us.

In addition, I am convinced, though, that no one, personally or as a community, can undertake or renew its mission just by

getting up and walking out the door — and certainly not a mission like the one just described above. Considerable thought and planning are required, along with tough decisions and commitment — and, in our case, prayer, much prayer. Great charismatic figures, such as Jesus, Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Kolkata, maintained a clear sense of purpose, associated others with them, and relied on prayer.

In order to provide some perspective to help assess our mission, I have chosen to organize this letter into three major sections, chronologically. I thought it would be helpful to examine briefly how we lived the faith and fulfilled our mission prior to the Second Vatican Council, how we live it in this post-conciliar time, and, finally, to suggest how the Holy Spirit might be challenging us to live it into the future.

As you read this letter, I invite you to ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and grant you the gift of wisdom, so that you might perceive in its words whatever will enable you to grasp more fully how Christ is calling you, as He did His apostles, to “go forth and make disciples of all nations.” As the Father sent the Son, so now the Son sends you. “Go,” He said. That means you. So this letter is meant for you and all of us in the Diocese of Joliet. ■

## II. THE WAY IT WAS

Many of today's young Catholics have no clear sense of what the Church was like prior to the Second Vatican Council, only fuzzy images formed from comments made by their elders. Even many of us older Catholics may not have the sharpest memories, or we remember what we prefer. So a look back doesn't hurt; plus, it provides a context.

I picked 1962 to create a snapshot of “the way it was.” That was the year when the Second Vatican Council was first convened by Pope John XXIII. (It was also the year I completed Catholic elementary school and began high school, also Catholic.)

There was great excitement about the council, yet no one had any clear sense of its significance. The Catholic Church was solid. Catholics knew clearly what to believe and how to behave. Official teachings and rules were rarely questioned. Catholics firmly considered themselves adherents to what they accepted as the true religion and had very little contact with others on the religious level.

Some adjustment to the liturgy had been made by the previous pope, Pius XII, but it was conducted with quiet reverence and uniformity, and mostly in Latin. At most Masses, there was no singing, and people often prayed other prayers, like the rosary, on their own. The hymn repertoire (Latin and English) was quite limited, but this meant that everyone knew the same hymns and felt comfortable singing them. Churches were crowded, and confession lines were long. Most parishes scheduled a number of public devotionals every week and in



PHOTO BY TONI NESSI

*“Those of us who lived in that era had a sense that all was well, actually almost ideal. In truth, many in the hierarchy and academia recognized that major shifts were occurring ... and that the Church needed to respond.”*

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various liturgical seasons.

Seminaries and convents were full. It was not uncommon for even medium-sized parishes to have three or four priests. Priests (well, the pastors) “ran” the parishes and exercised a narrow sacramental and catechetical ministry. Parish pastoral councils, finance councils and the like did not exist, nor was there anything like a parish “staff,” although many lay organizations operated, generally apart from the official business of the parish.

People were expected to register and participate in the parish within whose territory they resided. The exception was in the case of national or ethnic parishes in the larger cities, especially here in the Midwest and the Northeast, intended for immigrants from various countries in Europe; even the majority of them had ceased using their original languages by 1962, and membership had declined, as people melded into the English-speaking mainstream.

Most parishes, at least in the cities and larger towns, had elementary schools, and almost all the Catholic children attended them. Not only did these schools form the children in the Catholic faith and culture, they also separated them from the public schools, which had a Protestant underpinning. Most of the teachers in the Catholic schools were selfless religious sisters. Likewise, young Catholics were expected to attend Catholic high schools that were staffed overwhelmingly by sisters, brothers and priests belonging to religious orders. There was also the opportunity to attend Catholic colleges and universities, most of which had been established by religious orders.

Catechetical instruction was almost universally presented by means of the *Baltimore Catechism*, in use throughout the United States from 1885. That meant that children at the elementary level learned the same material in a clear and repeated fashion.

There was a vibrant Catholic press, and many households subscribed to more than one publication.

Lay Catholics were encouraged to participate in the political process, to belong to labor unions (recognizing that not very many Catholics were in the managerial ranks), and to take an interest in the needs of the poor. All of this was approached very much from a uniquely Catholic perspective. At the national level, the bishops addressed public policy issues but were far more selective, and perhaps a little more restrained, than they are today. But, then, general American culture provided fewer points of conflict with Catholic teaching.

Catholics were devoted to strong family life, typically

marked by regular prayer, especially at meals and the rosary, and the training of the children in the faith. The norm was for Catholics to marry within the faith, to refrain from intimacy before marriage and to marry in the Church. Gender definitions were clear and strong. Although, because of World War II, significant numbers of women worked outside the home, the norm was still for mothers to stay at home. Divorces were rare, and, because artificial birth control was accepted as immoral, families were often large. Children were generally welcomed as a blessing, and all were routinely baptized, with an expectation that they would live out their lives as faithful Catholics.

In 1962 the Diocese of Joliet was, like me, 13 years old. It was still shepherded by its first bishop, Martin D. McNamara. There were 240,000 Catholics, out of a general population of 765,000. Almost 400 priests (two-thirds belonging to religious orders) served 112 parishes and missions. Some of these priests, and almost 1,000 sisters and 200 brothers, staffed 12 high schools and 72 elementary schools, with a combined enrollment of 31,000 students, along with seven seminaries (with over a thousand seminarians) and three universities. There were almost 8,000 baptisms that year and 1,500 weddings, compared to 1,500 funerals. It was, what we have come to call, a highly institutionalized entity.

Those of us who lived in that era had a sense that all was well, actually almost ideal. In truth, many in the hierarchy and academia recognized that major shifts were occurring in the post-World War II world and that the Church needed to respond. ■

### III. THE WAY IT IS

By way of concrete example of these shifts, we can view the statistics for the Diocese of Joliet, just cited above for 1962, now in 2017, 55 years later. The only one that remains the same, or even close to the same, is the number of Catholic universities: three. Today we estimate 600,000 Catholics, out of a general population of 1.9 million. Two hundred and sixty priests (about one-third belonging to religious orders) serve 125 parishes and missions, while 400 sisters (many retired) and 50 brothers work in various capacities. There are no seminaries now, but seven high schools and 46 elementary schools with 19,000 students. There were almost 7,000 baptisms last year and 1,200 weddings, along with 3,300 funerals. Clearly, while the general and Catholic populations have

grown in 55 years, the other numbers have fallen significantly, except funerals!

Some of the statistics are firm, such as the number of parishes and baptisms. The number of Catholics is based on parish registration records. Any pastor will tell you how difficult it is to assure the accuracy of those records. People switch from parish to parish, sometimes week-by-week, and some never formally register. Some parishioners on the rolls have ceased participating in parish activities, including Sunday Mass, and may think of themselves as Catholic only superficially. Some no longer consider themselves Catholic at all. (Because of their baptism, Christ still embraces them. So do we.)

That sense of parish membership is a good indicator of the general state of Catholics' attitude to the whole range of beliefs and practices today. While some Church members adhere faithfully to the entire body of ecclesiastical doctrines and regulations, the vast majority of Catholics in the United States feel comfortable picking and choosing, what have become known as "cafeteria Catholics." Indeed, many are indifferent to what the Church teaches or expects of her members.

Commentators typically attribute this situation to four factors: the significant changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council itself; the general atmosphere of change subsequent to the council, with many unauthorized and spontaneous innovations; the promulgation in 1968 of the encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, dealing with birth control; and the general shift of modern culture toward secularity and greater personal autonomy. More recently the awful child abuse scandal has caused enormous revulsion and mistrust.

One concrete measurement of the changed situation is that average Sunday Mass attendance in our diocese (and generally throughout the country) has fallen from around 80

percent of the Catholic population in 1962 to around 20 percent today. The number of priests available to celebrate those Masses has also dropped considerably, as has the number of religious sisters. Many Catholic schools have closed, with far more children attending religious education programs conducted in evenings or on weekends. For many parents who do choose Catholic schools for their children, academic excellence is sometimes more important than religious formation.

Regarding marriage, far fewer Catholics seek to be married in the Church; many couples delay marriage and cohabit beforehand, and Catholics divorce at the same rate as others. There is widespread acceptance of same-sex unions, along with increasing muddle around sexual identity. Positively, marriage has been set forth more dynamically as a true vocation in the Church. Programs, such as Marriage Encounter, have been a blessing to many couples. Undoubtedly, many Catholic parents are leading fervent "domestic churches," while other Catholic children are growing up with little formation in the life of faith at home.

The ecclesial community here in the United States has experienced significant division since the council over the way the liturgy, especially the Mass, is celebrated. One irony is that people of my generation (Baby Boomers) who pushed for so much change in the late 60s and 70s are now finding themselves resisting the desire of many younger Catholics for a more traditional style. Often parishes are, in fact, defined by their liturgical style. We are a long way (at least in my opinion) from settling on a commonly accepted form.

Very few use the *Baltimore Catechism*, with its question-and-answer format, as a primary teaching instrument for children. Although catechetical materials have slowly improved, all in all, Catholics today seem to be largely uninformed about the teachings of the Church regarding Scripture, the liturgy, morality and prayer, and many other topics. This is one of the reasons why so much emphasis has been placed in recent decades on adult faith formation. Bible study groups, lectures, and innumerable tapes, videos and digital productions are available.

The Catholic print media, augmented now by these other forms of communication, are still very viable, although I suspect that readership is down. Many of the more popular publications have a decided bias, and people subscribe accordingly.

The popes since the council have spoken out more frequently about contemporary events and circumstances in the secular arena, as have



episcopal conferences, like the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Gradually, though, the lay faithful have tended to form their views on these matters more according to the positions of political parties or personalities. This makes it difficult to establish a unified Catholic position on political issues, which in turn makes it difficult for the Church to influence these issues. On the positive side, Catholics can be found, and accepted, readily in the ranks of elected and appointed government officials (although many dissent publicly from Catholic teaching). They also have influential positions in business and public education.

It is fair to say that many Catholics have been reinvigorated by the changes that resulted from the Second Vatican Council, and there has been a remarkable increased involvement of lay Catholics in the work of the Church, both within the parish proper and in the larger world. For example, pastors rely more on the talents of lay people to assist them with the leadership, management and ministry of our parishes (as do bishops!). Many men and women feel that they are real stakeholders and look for opportunities to serve the Lord more significantly. Much of the laity, on the other hand, has not yet experienced those impulses.

The council's reintroduction of the permanent diaconate has been welcomed in most U.S. dioceses, certainly here in Joliet. My own conviction is that the potential for diaconal ministry has yet to be fully tapped. ■

## IV. HOW IT MIGHT BE

### *Reflecting On Our Own Faith*

Before imagining or envisioning how we might live our faith as the Church in the future, especially as missionary disciples, we should examine our personal attitudes. As a backpacker, I know that attitude is critical when starting off on the trail. The type and circumstances of the trail, the weather, my physical condition, even the makeup of the hiking party are all significant factors. But my own interior attitude is paramount. The same could be said about athletics, pregnancy or just going to work.

When Jesus told His apostles that He would be handed over and put to death, their reactions were all over the place. Some were ready to fight for Him. Some were for running away. Some tried to change His mind.

As we look at the circumstances of the Church today, particularly in our own country and diocese, people's attitudes are likewise all over the place. Some Catholics feel hopeless and assume that the Church will lose the battle against an increasingly hostile culture. Some lean in that direction but expect that there will be a "remnant" community that will persevere. Some people are ready to rely on the Holy Spirit for

a powerful renewal that will enliven the Church in her missionary witness. Maybe someone out there even believes that our secular culture will recognize its hollowness, and we will return to a new Christian era.

Most Catholics, I suspect, or those who think of themselves as Catholic, have not even thought about the issue. They put one foot in front of the other without looking right or left, in front of them or behind. They go to Mass (regularly or irregularly), know what the Church teaches (more or less), believe what the Church teaches (fully or selectively), and are committed to live as disciples of Jesus (heartily or haphazardly). They may not think much about the future of the Church, even if they have a few opinions about its present shape. They may not even think about their own ultimate future.

Now, please, understand, these remarks are not intended to be negative and certainly not judgmental. Every backpacker has to take responsibility for his or her own attitude. The reality, though, is that, once on the trail, each hiker's personal attitude will ultimately affect everyone.

One of the truths that Catholicism has retained through the centuries is that we are in this together. Only God knows how the journey will end for each of us. We are, nevertheless, going to make the journey as part of one company of disciples. Many though we are, we have all been baptized into Christ. We are one body, having eaten of His one Body and drunk from His same Cup.

So, the attitude of each member toward our future is important. That is what makes this letter important to every member of the Diocese of Joliet, however tenuous the relationship may be.

Attitude is only the beginning, albeit the essential beginning. What is also important to acknowledge is that each person, by virtue of baptism and confirmation, has received unique gifts that are intended to be contributed to the common mission of the Church. Those can be very ordinary gifts, not necessarily something "churchy."

Using the backpacking analogy again, a group of backpackers typically split up the common gear, like tents, cooking equipment, and food, with each person carrying a portion. No matter what you are carrying, we will all need it. As St. Paul would say (First Corinthians), no person's contribution is too small. More importantly, in some way or other, each person's gift or gifts are ultimately needed for a successful mission.

Before you read any further, please, take a moment — maybe a couple of days — and reflect on your own attitude toward faith, your relationship to Christ and His Church, and on the unique gifts with which you have been endowed by the Holy Spirit. Where does Christ fit into your life, or, maybe better, how does your life fit into Christ? To what extent have you committed yourself to be His disciple? How much are you willing to do to make the world a better place by spreading the Gospel and leading people to Christ and the life He offers? How might you do that? Do you believe that God is powerful

enough to let you make a difference? Does it matter to you?

This is not a school test, and no one is going to give you a grade. Especially, don't give yourself one. Perhaps this is the first time you have ever asked yourself these kinds of questions. As you reflect, don't be afraid to talk to the Lord. Consider keeping a bit of a record or journal of your reflections. (You may be shocked to find yourself sharing those reflections with others someday.)

## *Moving Toward Missionary Discipleship*

However things might be for the Church in the future, much will depend on the courage and commitment of her members — all her members. For the Diocese of Joliet, that means roughly 450,000 adults. Can you imagine if 450,000 people were to engage enthusiastically in a common enterprise in our seven counties (DuPage, Ford, Grundy, Iroquois, Kankakee, Kendall and Will)? Satan, of course, is lined up on the other side to try and make sure that doesn't happen.

I need to be clear that this letter does not intend to lay out a precise, concrete, step-by-step plan for reviving the faith and engaging in missionary discipleship in the Diocese of Joliet. Even after all my years of ordained ministry, I would not dare to presume that I could provide such a plan on my own. In addition to requiring the contribution of many, many more people, trying to move us forward as Christ's community of faith locally will take time.

I would like to define some key principles to guide our move into the future. What you are about to read is not for the faint-hearted. I mentioned backpacking, not a walk around the block.

### **1. We need to prepare ourselves to be missionary disciples.**

The personal reflection I have already asked you to make — and now this first principle — is surely uncomfortable for many of you. Because we are a practical people, we tend immediately to ask, "What needs to be done? Let's get started." But remember, even Jesus spent time in prayer, alone and with His apostles. Even with only three years of public ministry available to Him, He couldn't just be running around doing things. He had been sent by the Father. So He had to listen to the Father.

Equally important, Jesus did not intend there to be two kinds of Church members: the "professional class" and the rest, whom we sometimes cynically say are intended to "pray, pay and obey." Until the Second Vatican Council, the "professional class" consisted of the priests and religious sisters and brothers. In more recent years, permanent deacons, lay ministers, both paid and volunteer, and other lay faithful who experience a special intensity of commitment and involvement could be added to this list.

Yet, there is a nagging sense that the grace imparted by God in baptism and confirmation provides to everyone a sharing in the power of Christ's death and resurrection and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Certainly there are special graces conferred in the sacrament of holy orders and religious profession. But isn't the fundamental charge of preaching the Gospel and drawing people to Christ and His gift of eternal life the responsibility of everyone?

### **■ LAY FAITHFUL**

In the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," the bishops convened at the council wrote:

*"Upon the laity, therefore, rests the noble duty of working to extend the divine plan of salvation ever increasingly to all men of each epoch and in every land. Consequently, let every opportunity be given them, so that, according to their abilities and the needs of the times, they may zealously participate in the saving work of the Church." (#33)*

"According to their abilities and the needs of the times" requires much discernment. Obviously, not every lay member of the Church can or will be a missionary disciple in the same way. The roles of parent, grandparent, godparent and madrina are significant themselves. Opportunities and gifts for other mission efforts will vary as life unfolds.

Even before a person can engage in this discernment, he or she needs to be a true disciple. You cannot give what you do not have. Becoming a true disciple entails a deep conversion of heart. How does the conversion of heart come about? Well, it varies from person to person. Most Catholics may be further along than they realize. While there are certainly dramatic conversions, like St. Paul's, most of us fall in love with Christ gradually, just like men and women do. The process is assisted by the grace we receive in baptism and confirmation, constantly renewed through holy communion and penance.

Discipleship begins when you sense that Jesus Christ loves you and is calling you to follow Him. You are a disciple if you, in turn, acknowledge that He really is the Son of God and the true source of your life here and for eternity, that you love Him more than anyone else, that you want to form your daily life and its decisions around Him, and that you want to talk about Him with others.\*

It means that you are willing to follow Him wherever that leads. Please, note, being a disciple means much more than being a good volunteer at your parish!

Developing this sense of discipleship requires (at least ordinarily) a knowledge and understanding of the Gospel. Now,

*\*Thinking about loving our Lord more than anyone else can be unsettling; yet, His immense love for us makes it easier for us to love others.*

perhaps in earlier times, knowledge of the Gospel could focus on the core of the message, what we call the kerygma. With today's far greater levels of education and communication, a little more knowledge of the Church's teaching is necessary.

Since the council, many parishes and dioceses throughout the United States and other countries have used a variety of resources to help their lay members deepen their discipleship, as well as their knowledge of the faith. Christ Renews His Parish, Renew, Cursillo, Bible study groups, prayer groups, and retreats are just a few. Does it make sense, in response to this pastoral letter, for the Diocese of Joliet to adopt or design such a resource to implement in all of our parishes, something that is likely to appeal to a wide cross section of parishioners? No matter the answer to this question, every parish must commit itself to assisting its members to become truly conscious and devoted disciples of the Lord.

It is important to note here that some people labor under serious handicaps that hinder them from embracing this level of discipleship. These include people who suffer from broken relationships, habitual sins and addictions, bereavements, and chronic illnesses or disabilities. Persons burdened like this can, with the help of the faith community, seek God's strength in coping with their suffering and, in their own way, gradually be effective missionary disciples.

## ■ RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN AND CLERGY

I intentionally began this section with the laity, precisely because we so often leave them to last. I am convinced that the mission of the Church in the 21st century rests on the shoulders of the laity far more than it ever has. Still, God intended that His people have designated leaders.

For the last few centuries, the apostolic life of the Church has depended enormously on the labors of consecrated sisters and brothers. How much we owe them. Now their numbers are shrinking, although some new communities are developing. The restored permanent diaconate is providing a rich source of leadership in many of our parishes, in addition to the many lay ministers.

Nevertheless, the backbone of the Church's leadership is our priests, particularly the pastors of our parishes. As a bishop, I am convinced that my single most important responsibility is to shepherd the shepherds. The Diocese of Joliet is blessed with wonderful priests, both those who are ordained for service here for life and those who belong to religious orders but who are assigned here currently.

If our lay people are going to experience a deepening of their faith and a profound relationship with our Lord, if they are going to accept the gifts of the Holy Spirit and His prompting to use those gifts for the sake of others, they will require the leadership, example and inspiration of our priests — and I will need to lead the priests. They, and I, more than anyone will need to be strong missionary disciples.

## 2. We need to evaluate our existing institutional resources and determine what are likely to be the most effective institutional resources going forward.

You can have the most motivated army, labor force, sports team — or faith community — but it still needs to have resources and a plan of action in order to succeed. I would like to address these critical issues in the next two sections.

Who of us wouldn't want the resources to do all the things we would like to do? How many of us have all those resources? What we do in the face of limited resources is to decide what is more important among our goals, needs and desires and how to apply our resources accordingly. We backpackers are forced to do this kind of prioritizing. (Yes, you can wear the same T-shirt for a week!)

In Church life, as in most other aspects of life, we become accustomed to doing things a certain way — and begin to think that's the only way they can or should be done (like wearing a fresh T-shirt every day). Obviously, as we have seen over the past 50 years, not every reordering of priorities or the realigning of resources is for the best. So we have to be careful. Still, it seems clear that the present circumstances of doubt, disunity, and disappearance call for an examination of what resources we have and how best to use them.





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There are more than **600,000** Catholics in the Diocese of Joliet. On an average Sunday (including Saturday evening), around **120,000** people participate in Mass at 125 churches.

## ■ PARISHES

Let's start with our parishes, simply because they are the locus of so many of our resources. Ask almost any Catholic, and "my parish" will convey the strongest sense of belonging and loyalty. Catholics, as a whole, contribute far more time, talent and treasure to their parish than to any other entity, ecclesiastical or otherwise. (Thank you!) If we were to eliminate parishes wholesale, Catholics would be like ants whose nest had just been obliterated.

But ... parishes are very expensive, humanly and financially. Huge sums are needed to maintain buildings. Priests are spread thin to staff them. Committees, councils, organizations and programs soak up volunteers. To what extent do human and financial resources go into running the parish, and to what extent do they go into evangelization? Jesus instructed His disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations." Well-maintained buildings and smoothly functioning activities cannot substitute for that mission.

However, parishes are still necessary. People do need a base where they are formed by the Word of God and made new by the sacraments, a place from which to launch their apostolic works and to come back to be rejuvenated with fellowship. A problem arises when we begin to think that the purpose of parishes is just to keep them going — self-preservation — and lose sight of their mission. What we need to do then is to assess how the assets of our parishes — human, physical, financial — can best be used to accomplish the mission.

Here's a case in point. On the "books," there are more than 600,000 Catholics in the Diocese of Joliet. On an average Sunday (including Saturday evening), around 120,000 people

participate in Mass at 125 churches. That is just over 20 percent. Except for Christmas and Easter and other special occasions, is your church ever full? For those unique occasions some of our churches are not big enough, and alternate sites are required.

I am not calling for a wholesale closing of parishes, and I have no plan to do so. But a serious evaluation in particular situations could allow us to concentrate more attention and resources on the mission of the Church.

Are there additional or alternative ways to gather people together to provide spiritual and missionary formation and support, particularly beyond Sunday Eucharist? Could other facilities serve this function? Does everything have to be parish-based? What about, for example, store-front outreach centers in shopping centers?

## ■ SCHOOLS

The same analysis needs to be applied to our schools. Catholic schools have been an invaluable asset to the Church, to her individual members and to the larger community. On the other hand, they require substantial financial support from parishes, school families and others. Some of our parishes expend more than 50 percent of their regular income to subsidize their schools.

Currently, there is a task force looking at how we can strengthen our schools, while at the same time reduce the financial burden on parishes and families. Without question, one way is for greater collaboration among schools and parishes. Another important issue is how we can make our schools instruments to form missionary disciples.



## ■ OTHER ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES

Parishes and schools are our most visible and most familiar institutional resources. There are others. For example, people live together in neighborhoods, often from different parishes. Are there ways to organize neighborhood clusters for prayer, study and mutual support? Could the same thing happen where Catholics work together?

We are only beginning to tap the possibilities for evangelization offered by the digital age. More needs to happen through the diocesan Curia, and surely our younger members in the parishes can be of great assistance in this regard.

By contrast, some of our oldest resources — religious orders, Catholic universities, and fraternal organizations (like the Knights of Columbus and the Council of Catholic Women) — can challenge themselves to a renewed, lively commitment to discipleship and to a prayerful discernment of new evangelistic possibilities.

The same process will happen with the diocesan Curia — those offices, agencies and personnel who assist me with the pastoral leadership of the diocese.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to assess how effectively the formation programs for our future priests and deacons are equipping them to address creatively and courageously the circumstances they will face.

### **3. With the help of the Holy Spirit and attentive to the signs of the times and our own gifts, we need to develop promising missionary endeavors.**

Once again, I don't pretend to have some grand scheme up my sleeve. I do believe firmly, though, that the Holy Spirit will guide us and strengthen us to move forward if we are committed to the mission Christ gave us and are truly open and courageous — and if we are willing, for the sake of that mission, to work together without building little fortresses

around our personal preferences and comforts.

Already some Catholic missionary programs, such as Cursillo, FOCUS and the Catholic version of Alpha, have been in operation, with considerable success. I am grateful to those who lead these programs in the Diocese of Joliet. We should be careful, though, not to quickly adopt a program, as though just the right program or programs will solve our problem. Just as with our institutions, the circumstances today require a far more creative and diversified approach toward our missionary endeavors.

## ■ PERSONAL APPROACH

All the organized programs in the world will not be as effective — and definitely will not serve as an effective starting point — as personal engagement. That is why our own, everyone's, sense of discipleship and desire to be a missionary is essential. Each of us can encounter people that no one else can. As Pope Francis wrote:

*"The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God's saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love." (Evangelii gaudium, #120)*

In the first section of "How It Might Be," I asked you to take some time to reflect on your own personal faith and sense of discipleship. We understand that to be missionary disciples requires a deep conversion and a recognition of, and willingness to employ, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, our approach to our brothers and sisters who waver in the faith, or who have given it up, or have yet to hear it, must begin with a gentle invitation to accept the love of Christ.

A personalized approach is indispensable. Certainly, "one size fits all" will not work. People are all over the place. Some still believe, if a bit uncertain, but do not join us often. Some experience a particular hurt that keeps them apart. Still others have found other spiritual homes or attractions but remember their Catholic roots. Some, frankly, don't care, even if at some level they still consider themselves Catholic.

In addition, the Diocese of Joliet is comprised of people from many social groups. The cultural and spiritual experience of Hispanic, Polish, Filipino, African, Vietnamese, Korean, Indian and other ethnicities is unique. Similarly, young men and women of the Gen X and Millennial generations are looking for a greater sense of welcome and hospitality than earlier generations. Even among a subset like the Millennials, there tends to be a smaller group that is attracted to more traditional liturgy and devotions, like exposition of the Bless-



***“Unlike any other organization, we are empowered, not by bright ideas, or money, or talent or hard work, but by divine grace. The Holy Spirit dwells within each of us. He enlightens, strengthens, encourages and consoles us. The Spirit brings us to Christ and allows us to bring others to Him and ultimately to the Father.”***

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## V. CONCLUSION

ed Sacrament, and a larger group that is attracted to service of people in need.

Then there are many people dealing with marital situations which they believe put them at odds with the Church. The child abuse scandal is a roadblock for others. Some have false concepts of what the Catholic Church believes, leaving them confused and alienated.

The list could go on. But the underlying reality is that people have to be met where they are. Friendship is the greatest precondition for evangelization.

### ■ WORKING TOGETHER

Obviously, almost none of our parishes, even with the vast majority of parishioners on board as missionary disciples, are likely to be able to meet the vast array of circumstances in which inactive or disaffected or potential Catholics find themselves. Even if some were, why duplicate the efforts?

A collaborative approach among parishes and other Catholic institutions makes it more feasible to provide a palette of efforts that can meet the variety of people's needs. We Catholics sometimes look with envy at what some of the large “community” churches are able to provide. Banding together and being creative, our parishes can do just as well — and we have the total package! After all, we are not inviting people principally to a deeper relationship with a particular parish. We are inviting them to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and His unique presence in the whole Catholic Church.

With all of this in mind, I call for a diocesan-wide planning effort to help us become a more truly missionary Church. I will designate certain members of the diocesan Curia to provide staff leadership for this effort, especially Mr. Alex Rechenmacher, and I will rely on the diocesan Pastoral Council and Presbyteral Council for advice and guidance. I charge the eight deans to engage our pastors and other parish leaders, as well as the leaders of other Catholic institutions, in a dialogue about how best to develop local discipleship and missionary endeavors.\*\* The short-term goal is to formulate at least preliminary plans and have them operational, at all levels, one year from now.

This is really a whole new direction for us, and it will require imagination, energy and courage. It is new, and, yet, it is precisely what Jesus directed His disciples to do. ■

\*\*The Diocese of Joliet is divided into eight deaneries: East DuPage, West DuPage, South DuPage, Joliet, North Will-Kendall, South Will-Grundy, Kankakee, Ford-Iroquois.

Just as today's situation has created a great intensity in my heart, I hope this pastoral letter will intensify your desire to be a missionary disciple. Moving forward in new ways is stressful. Remember, though, in His effort to present Himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life, Jesus made people uneasy. Some were so uneasy that they arranged for His execution. Others were just confused or doubtful and walked away.

Whatever your immediate reaction to this letter, I ask that you remain open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in your heart. I am utterly convinced that Jesus, Son of Mary and Son of God, calls each of us who are baptized to be His witnesses, to make known His promise of eternal life, and to expand His kingdom of peace and justice. It is not an easy task, certainly not today, but it is a great one.

Consider having a patron saint to inspire you, someone who walked this earth and struggled like you to bring the love of Christ to others. My saint is Francis de Sales, who served as a bishop in the early days of the Protestant Reformation and who, under difficult circumstances, diligently strove to care for his flock. Pray to your saint, as well as to the Holy Trinity and the Blessed Mother and our diocesan patron, the great missionary disciple, St. Francis Xavier.

Unlike any other organization, we are empowered, not by bright ideas, or money, or talent or hard work, but by divine grace. The Holy Spirit dwells within each of us. He enlightens, strengthens, encourages and consoles us. The Spirit brings us to Christ and allows us to bring others to Him and ultimately to the Father.

With this essential awareness, I conclude with some more inspirational words from Pope Francis's encyclical on missionary discipleship:

***“It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known Him, not the same thing to walk with Him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear His word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate Him, to worship Him, to find our peace in Him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with His Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with Him it is easier to find meaning in everything. This is why we evangelize.”*** (Evangelii gaudium, #266) †