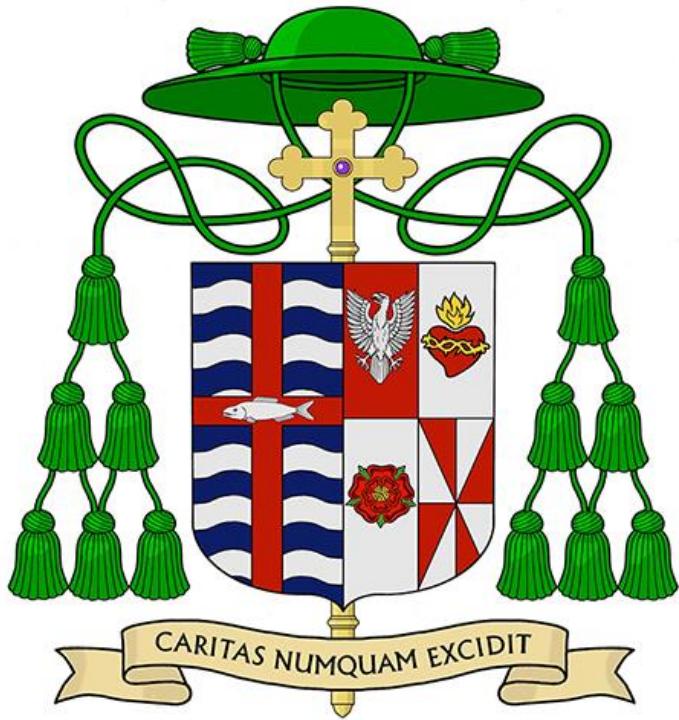

GO MAKE DISCIPLES



THE MOST REVEREND DONALD J. HYING
BISHOP OF MADISON
MAY 31, 2020

Jesus Christ died for you. For you, the person receiving these words, God – the Eternal Creator – became a human being, entered into the messiness of humanity, lived, worked, loved, and prayed with those around him, and at the end of a young life, was unjustly condemned, cruelly tortured, and died as a criminal on a cross.

He did it for you.

Stop, even just for a second, and actually consider that.

You've likely heard it before – maybe even a hundred or a thousand times – but reconsider it; try to internalize it anew.

Now, consider your life. Is it fundamentally affected by the reality that God has such love for you? Does that truth cross your mind on a daily basis? It should. If we really consider that profound gift – that the Lord of life, the Most High, has loved us – it should change everything. But does it?

Does it matter to us that all the human condition involves – even sin, suffering, and death – has been redeemed? In His passion and suffering, Jesus Christ has transformed all that we suffer. He suffers with us, He “co-miserates,” and there is great comfort in that. But He also redeems us and that changes everything. Christ’s Passion and death does not take away that which we endure, but it elevates it to the divine and transforms it. As our Lord promised, by taking up our crosses in the way that He did, we can also follow in His Resurrection and in Eternal Life.¹ It changes the trajectory of human existence. It **should** change everything about the way we live. Fear, anxiety, pain, sorrow, all of ours can be united to His. Hope of eternal life shatters our despair.

In recent times particularly, there has been a renewed focus on human suffering. A novel disease has brought immense distress, not just at the level of sickness and death, but also through isolation, depression, and the misery that can come from economic poverty. Families have been separated, the elderly left isolated, and individuals left financially destitute. There has been an increase in domestic violence, civil unrest, and suicide. In short, suffering has been on the rise and very much on our minds. Through all of this, people of faith have endured separation from one another and lacked the support of community and, most powerfully, the lack of ready access to Sacramental Grace. For those who have no moorings in revealed religion, this may not matter.

But for those with a faith founded upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, all of this suffering can come into a new and meaningful context. This recent health scare has made our essential mission to evangelize the world anew all the more urgent. We realize how much we need God.

Some individuals have experienced tremendous isolation, others have seen the stress of communal living brought to a boiling point as the challenges of family life or the frustrations of living with other imperfect human beings has compacted into an increasingly small space. And yet, many folks have felt anew our radical desire for Church, prayer, the Eucharist, and faith.

God desires community in humanity, but He desires communion that is life-giving. He desires a communion that takes our fallen reality and reconciles it. Christ offers us this salvation.

¹ Cf. 2 Tim 2:10-12; Rm 6:8

Consider that for most of human history, the notion even of there being ONE God (as opposed to a multitude of deities) was not widely understood. Over time, God revealed Himself to His chosen people. But even then, God was hidden, He revealed Himself to them slowly and in a mysterious manner. Yes, He had His prophets and through them He revealed Himself to the world through their mighty deeds and prophetic words. But even to His chosen messengers, God revealed himself in an indirect manner - in the form of fire, a voice, an angel, not in a direct way. As much as Isaiah, Hosea, and Ezekiel desired to see God's face, none of them would have dared to imagine that God would humble himself so profoundly so as to become like one of His creatures, enfleshed like all of us and then submit to a horrific death. The conviction, (as expressed in the "stadium sign verse," John 3:16) that, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," is profoundly radical.

God loves the world; He loves you. Not only did Jesus Christ die for us, but He died so that a relationship to God might be available to each and every person in the history of the world. God died so that you might know Him alive. God died so that you might truly live forever and taste even, in this life, the abundant goodness of the Resurrection!

Reflection question: If God loves us infinitely in Christ, how do we respond to such goodness?

We may be tempted to consider the preceding exercise in recalling God's deep, abiding, and personal love and our own response to that, a simple thing. As basic as it may seem, however, Christ's infinite love for us is absolutely fundamental to every aspect of our existence, stretching from why we are even alive and extending to our hope for true and lasting happiness. Therefore, internalizing the reality of God's love for us is essential if we are to bear fruit in our efforts to evangelize others and sanctify the world for Christ.

God desires relationship. He desires relationship *with* us and He desires relationship *among* us. Because that is how He created us, that yearning for authentic relationship is present in all of us. We want to love and be loved. The deepest human fear is to be radically alone and unloved. I recently saw a young man wearing a shirt which proclaimed, "Yes to Relationship. No to Religion." I wanted to tell him that the etymology of the word "religion" is "relationship."

While the number of individuals who have never had exposure to any organized religion of their own is on the rise, so many of us still have been raised Catholic (or at least Christian) from our youth. As such, Church has been part of our families and our local communities. We may have gone to Catholic school, or attended religious education, made our First Communion, and been Confirmed. We have worshiped at Mass, supported parish events, and dropped some money in the collection basket. These activities are all good, of course, but Church can easily become a "thing" that we do, part of our life but not necessarily the central reality of our existence.

We need to act in the name of Christ, certainly, but Church also needs to be a “who” that we are as well. We need to reclaim our identity once again as that “community of believers” described in the Acts of the Apostles² and to be Christ’s Body – living and loving on earth.

We can perceive a certain malaise, not only in society, but even in our Church and in our parishes in these last years. Fear, uncertainty, depression, and loss of meaning afflict many. Because we love the Church and the human race, we want to change that! Pope St. John XXIII recognized the malaise, seeing how a stagnation had settled in the Church, even as a vibrant Christian culture was waning in the West. This concern motivated his launch of the Second Vatican Council; he called on the Holy Spirit to renew the Church, so that she, in turn, could renew the world. He wanted to animate the vast energies of global Catholicism, to reclaim who we are as the anointed community of believers in Christ and then to go out to the world to set it ablaze with the truth and love of the Gospel.

Each of our popes since then have echoed and built upon that call and in a particular way, they have called for a New Evangelization – new, Pope St. John Paul II said, in its ardor, method, and expression – but not new in its core message: that we are created by God for loving relationship and that the Son has come into the ruin of our world to reconcile us to the Father and to invite our response to believe, love, and follow Him. This New Evangelization, St. John Paul said, should be particularly aimed at cultures where a flourishing Christian presence has been supplanted by secular ideologies. Pope Francis, in turn, urges us to go out to proclaim boldly the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to every person we meet, especially those on the fringes of society and not simply serve those who approach the Church. The New Evangelization involves every single one of us. “What you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops³.”

There are a great many people in our own families and communities who now embrace only portions of the Christian message. To supplement and fill out their worldview, they draw from pieces of teachings reflected in other religions and with various aphorisms and slogans from near and far. The result of this amalgamation is a largely polite society on the surface. Tolerance, of a sort, seems to be the supreme virtue. Acceptance of others is a good thing, but without a connection to the love and the truth which IS Jesus Christ and His full and lasting message, our society has gradually begun to disintegrate. People are rightly alarmed by the malaise in our society, but only haltingly do we consider that we often are attempting to find a permanent cure in the wrong places – no matter the promise the latest fad may hold. Many people look to political leaders, self-help gurus, material success, and to every sort of drug and elixir to satisfy the thirst that only the Living Water can quench.

In some ways, this dynamic is present in our parishes as well. There has been an attempt to look out to the world for a way to “save the Church.” As a result, many have concluded that it is easier to live by the world’s wisdom, adjusting our faith to its standards. We must engage in a new evangelization, reminding ourselves of the Gospel message, putting aside that which does not

² Acts 2: 42-47; Acts 4:32

³ Mt 10:27

satisfy, and offering this Truth and Love to others anew – beginning with those around us – and calling them to discipleship.

Jesus gives us a model for doing this. Consider the way Jesus calls St. Peter to follow him. You may recall the Gospel accounts of Matthew⁴ and Mark⁵, wherein Jesus encounters the fishermen brothers, Andrew and Peter. In those accounts we hear Jesus simply say the words, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men,” and Andrew and Peter drop their fishing nets and follow him.

It’s simple, it seems. Jesus shows up in their lives, He calls, they follow.

But, John’s Gospel expands the lens to see how we arrived at the moment of Jesus’ call to them and their response. At the very beginning of John’s Gospel,⁶ we see John the Baptist spreading the good news that God’s Anointed has come. One of those listening to John the Baptist is his disciple, Andrew. When Jesus walked by, John turned to Andrew and another of his disciples and proclaimed, “Behold, the Lamb of God.”

After staying with Jesus for a little while, Andrew goes immediately to his brother, Simon (Peter) and tells him, “We have found the Messiah!” And Simon Peter then encounters Jesus himself.

The same goes for each and every follower of Jesus. They are called to faith through the mediating help of a trusted person in their life.

Reflection question: Who are the people God has used to call us into relationship with Him?

As I have considered this effort of evangelization I return often to the story of Pentecost. It is a portion of our story that is perfect for this effort, and also the starting point for my entire ministry as a bishop. I’d like to consider it again as we renew our efforts to give new life to our own local Church and call on our sisters and brothers to reclaim their birthright as baptized Christians.

To set the stage, recall that Peter, Andrew, and the other Apostles and disciples have now followed Jesus around Judea, Samaria, and Galilee for three years. They have seen His mighty deeds and heard His teaching. Peter has professed that Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. They were given insight into what was to come – His torture and death – and told that He would rise again.⁷ And yet, when Jesus was actually taken, unjustly sentenced, tortured and crucified, all but a few of them ran. And, aside from perhaps the Virgin Mary, all of them were left perplexed and even scared.⁸ Peter, the one to whom Jesus entrusted such responsibility and who was the first to profess Him as Messiah, denied Jesus and hid from being associated with Him.

⁴ Mt 4:18-22

⁵ Mk 1:16-20

⁶ Jn 1:35-42

⁷ Jn 14

⁸ Jn 20:19

The Apostles continue to be afraid and confused right up to the moment of Pentecost when the Church is born, the moment wherein the Holy Spirit of God descended upon the Apostles, the first followers of Christ, and through His anointing, transformed them from a band of scared followers, to be the very Body of Christ here on earth. Their confusion gives way to clarity, their fear to inspiration. The Spirit of God came upon the Church and transformed these individuals in such a profound way that the entire world would literally never be the same.

When you think about it, many of the Apostles and disciples had already experienced the Risen Christ, but weren't sure what to do with that. Peter went back to fishing (what he knew). They were largely silent and afraid to share what they had experienced. How I would love to have been a fly on the wall in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit arrived! What happened up there? Did the Apostles' hair catch on fire? Were those first followers of Jesus thrown against the wall from the force of the wind? We do not fully know. What is clear is that this spiritual anointing fundamentally changed them. If they were afraid, confused, and silent about their experience of the risen Christ before, now they rush into the streets of Jerusalem, bold, clear, and eloquent in their witness to Jesus Christ crucified and risen as the new meaning of human history. They proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. This bold assertion is the definition of the word "kerygma", the centerpiece of our faith.

How much is this like us and so many of our family members and friends? We have experienced the Risen Christ on some level, but are not sure what to do with that. We go about our business, doing that which we know and that with which we are most comfortable. And we remain largely silent and afraid to share what we've experienced. It strikes me that we are so much like those first disciples of Christ. And what happens to them?

By remaining faithful to Christ, even in their fear, for nine days they pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus has instructed them. How could they possibly have known what to expect? When the Holy Spirit descended upon them in wind and flame, this experience changed everything.

The Apostles immediately spread throughout the world and take on the pagan culture with the absolute confidence that if they share their faith and speak the Good News, that it will have its effect. They do not remain huddled together, but immediately go out.

The Acts of the Apostles details Peter's preaching to the crowds on Pentecost. And Scripture tells us that, when the crowds heard his strong message, "they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, 'What are we to do'?" Peter says to them, "Repent and be baptized.⁹" He promises that if they do, they will receive the Holy Spirit as well. And indeed, that promise is fulfilled through the Church's Sacraments of initiation until today. The Church is born and sustained in the explosive power of the Holy Spirit!

Right there is the whole inspiration, definition, and expansion of the Church's mission – which is precisely what evangelization is. I've said before that people are often scared by the word "evangelization," but it is very simply rooted in the Greek and Latin for "the Gospel" – *evangelion*

⁹ Acts 2:36-38

or evangelium, or “the good news.” Evangelization is, “good-news-ization,” telling the good news to others about the richness of our relationship with Christ and the saving and merciful nature of His coming.

If you think about it, if those first disciples had not followed God’s plan and gone out, if they had simply rejoiced in knowing they were loved and saved, and left it there, neither you nor I would know Christ. We would not have received this good news ourselves.

If we are truly to be disciples then, we have no option but to do the same. Being a mediator, a missionary to others, is fundamental to our being disciples.

We have been given a treasure. It has taken over two thousand years and has literally cost people their lives to deliver it, but we now have it. The thing about this gift, however, is that we can sit with it, and we can and should spend time considering how grateful we are for it – offering our thanks to the Giver. But if we only place it on a shelf or, worse, bury it, it will be taken from us. A fundamental tenet of Alcoholics Anonymous is that one can only maintain personal sobriety if one is busy helping someone else find theirs. So it is with faith. Faith shared is faith strengthened.

Why is this? What compels us to evangelize? Love. Love of Him who first loved us. Love of our neighbor. Love of ourselves as He loves us. When you think about it, if we truly valued the gift God has given us in loving us, redeeming us, and drawing us to Himself, the only appropriate response is to love, to thank, and to glorify Him (and this should always flow from and lead to the Eucharist). The best and most perfect way to love God is to keep His Commandments¹⁰ and the last mission He gave His disciples was precisely to evangelize – to make disciples.¹¹ To love our neighbors and to love ourselves perfectly, we should desire to work for the salvation of souls – to bring others and ultimately ourselves into perfect union with God. The love of God compels us to evangelize.

We are disciples, we are evangelizers, and we are called to be missionaries to those around us out of love. We want every human being to know and love God, to experience salvation.

Reflection question: Name two or three immediate people to whom God is calling us to be mediators and messengers of God’s love, to serve as missionary disciples.

I know that many people in our diocese are already working so hard in these efforts. Some have devoted their entire lives to the Lord and to evangelization, and for that, I am very grateful. But the Lord is challenging all of us, especially me, in this crucial moment of history, to consider what we are doing and to set out afresh. Sharing our faith has always been an essential component of Catholicism. This is not something terribly novel. What is new is the cultural context in which we find ourselves. Many people are indifferent to religion, view it as fiction, or even see it as detrimental. This evangelizing initiative is not simply a project that will capture our attention for

¹⁰ Jn 14:15

¹¹ Mt 28:18-20

several years and then disappear. It is, rather, a call to a whole way of life as a disciple of the Lord Jesus.

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

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

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

In the first phase, I am asking each pastor to form and renew his own parish leaders. I'd like the priests themselves, along with staff members and volunteers to wrestle with the realities I've laid out here and to deepen their own prayer lives. The goal, of this phase, as written in our timeline document, is that priests and parish leaders will "grow in their understanding of and zeal for the work of evangelization, embracing this as the primary mission of the parish: to preach the Gospel with courage and confidence, with fidelity to the teachings of Christ and his Church, with Spirit-inspired creativity, with generosity and self-sacrifice, being continually transformed and renewed in heart and mind."¹²

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

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

Phase III is going out beyond the walls of the parish to proclaim the good news to the world. This will require taking time in between the second and third phases to create a deliberate parish plan for evangelization. This planning process, drawing from our renewed prayer, is an effort to get each parish community to ask, in the context of their own communities: "How do we live out our mission in a new and bold way? How do we engage those who are not involved in the life of the

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

¹³ Mt 19:27

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

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

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

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

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

As I write this, so many of us have been reminded of the gift that we have in simply being allowed to attend Mass together on Sunday. It has been difficult not to gather for Mass and I hope we never have to go through this again. Yet on the flip side, I’ve heard from a number of people regarding the chance they’ve had to put aside so many outside distractions to focus on their families, and actually to rest during this time of quarantine. Let us not forget the good of that. The Lord desires for each Sunday to be a mini retreat for us, not turned in on ourselves, but turned to Him. The Lord desires for us on Sunday not to be “socially distanced,” but intensely communal. Let’s take the good parts of the quarantine experience and refocus our Sundays, so that we never forget to take the time for worship, family, holy leisure, rest, study, and prayer together, recognizing that each day of our lives should be centered on the life we have in Him.

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

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

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

As a Church and as a world we face a challenge that is both unique and yet much the same as the challenge always faced by the Church, even from its very first days. The challenge is unique in that we are, in many ways, in an age which can be labeled “post-Christian.” In our day the impact of the coming of God to dwell with us in the person of Jesus Christ is often ignored, overlooked, and forgotten because it has become at one and the same both comfortable and inconvenient. For nearly two thousand years, most of the Western world has taken the reality of the Incarnation as a given. And in that time, the once earth-shattering teachings of the God-man have become watered down. The portions which are still palatable have been incorporated into the general niceties of our society and the more challenging pieces have been marginalized. The pivotal notion of God becoming man and dying for us, however, is often overlooked and unknown. Does the Christ event actually stand as a radical grounding of most human lives?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Given on the Solemnity of Pentecost, the 31st day of May in the year of Our Lord 2020.

+ D. J. Hying

+Donald J. Hying
Bishop of Madison

¹⁴ Mt 28:18-20