



NEW LIFE

THROUGH THE TENDER COMPASSION OF OUR GOD

A Pastoral Vision for the Diocese of Crookston



By The Most Reverend Andrew H. Cozzens, S.T.D., D.D.
The Eighth Bishop of the Diocese of Crookston

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INTRODUCTION: IN THE TENDER COMPASSION OF OUR GOD

*"IN THE TENDER COMPASSION OF OUR GOD, THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK UPON US.
TO SHINE ON THOSE WHO DWELL IN DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH,
AND TO GUIDE OUR FEET INTO THE WAY OF PEACE." (LK 1:78-79)*

These are the first words of Zechariah, father of St. John the Baptist, after more than nine months of silence. He was struck dumb when he doubted the promise of God, through the angel Gabriel, that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son in her old age. But Zechariah doubts no longer as he holds his newborn son. He is astounded at the fulfillment of the promise of God for his people: "God has come to his people and set them free. He has raised up for us a mighty savior, born of the house of his servant David." (Lk 1:68-69) He is in awe before the reality that the long-awaited Messiah is coming to save the world and his own son will have a part in this mission.

The coming of Jesus was new life breaking into the world of death. It was an unlooked for, unmerited, unimaginable gift – that God should become one of us to save us and that we could be worthy to become God's children! Not only would wounded humanity be saved from sin and death, but we could also come to share the very life of God, raised to become God's friends. As we pray in my favorite Christmas carol, O Holy Night: *"Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he*

appeared, and the soul felt its worth."

The coming of Jesus is the most astounding, most remarkable event of human history. It is truly light and life breaking into the tomb of darkness and sin. The whole world lay long under the reign of God's enemy, Satan, the one Jesus calls the *"ruler of this world."* (Jn 12:31) We were held captive by this reign of sin and death. Our first parents had joined his rebellion against God, and the effects of this sin have weighed heavily upon us.

We know these effects all too well. Isolation, emptiness, loneliness, betrayal, exhaustion, anxiety, failure, disappointment and regret are just some from this fallen nature, our broken humanity. Human history is the story of our inability to heal ourselves from the effects of sin and, thus, for the most part, a long story of suffering. But something new dawned when the light of God broke into this world, as St. John describes in the prologue to his Gospel: *"What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* (Jn 1:2-5) New life was born.



The Birth and Naming of Saint John the Baptist,
Sano di Pietro, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975,
www.metmuseum.org



JESUS CHRIST CAME TO SEEK AND SAVE THE LOST

Every religion is in some way an expression of the human heart's longing for God, for salvation in this world. Fundamentally, Christianity is not about our longing for God, but about God's longing for us. He longs for us so much that he becomes one of us. Indeed, Pope St. John Paul II reminds us of this when he states: *"This is the essential point which makes Christianity different from other religions: it is God who comes in search of mankind, and shows the way for us to reach him."* (Tertio Millennio Adveiente, chapter 1)

Zechariah speaks of *"the tender compassion of our God."* This word "compassion" is the Greek word *splanka*, which is an earthy word that refers to the deep guts of the person, his bowels or intestines. The Latin word used to translate the *splanka* is *"viscera,"* from which we get our word "visceral." The Scriptures are describing the depth to which God is moved viscerally by our human need. God is moved by his people, who are lost, and wants to gather them to himself as his beloved sons and daughters.

Jesus is moved in the depths of his heart when he sees our need for a savior. St. Matthew uses the same Greek visceral word to describe the heart of Jesus when he sees the people waiting to be taught: *"At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved (esplanknisthe) with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd."* (Mt 9:36) God was moved to come and save us. Jesus was moved to give his life for us. He wants to incorporate us into his body so we can share his new life – *the* life.

Perhaps we are not used to that word "lost" to describe those who do not know Jesus or live as his disciples. But this is the word Jesus himself uses to describe his mission: *"For the Son of*

Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." (Lk 19:10)

Have you ever had that visceral feeling about those who seem lost? Especially those we love? So many are hurting, many are overwhelmed with anxiety, so many feel empty and even abandoned for lack of love. These are the very wounds Jesus wants to heal!

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Every year we ask for prayer intentions from those who support the Diocesan Annual Appeal. I read and pray for each of those intentions. People ask for many things, but by far the most frequent are prayers for family members who have fallen away from the practice of the Catholic faith. I know many parents and grandparents who shed tears because their children and grandchildren do not practice the faith. They know this pain, which moved the heart of God to seek the lost.

There are people around us who are starving for the Good News of the Gospel. People who do not know their dignity as children of God. People who do not know that they can be forgiven for the wrong they have done. People who do not hope for a better life, for an integrated life of joy, because they do not know what Jesus offers. Perhaps we find our own hearts burdened in these ways. But God desires something more. He desires all "who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death" to be led "into the way of peace." He wants to bring new life.

THE CHURCH EXISTS TO EVANGELIZE

One of the emphases of the Second Vatican Council was that the Church needed to claim her



missionary identity for the modern world. The Church exists to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ and his saving love to the world. Every pope since the Second Vatican Council has declared the necessity of evangelization in the Church, but perhaps none have said it as clearly as Pope St. Paul VI in his encyclical on evangelization:

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, which is the memorial of his death and glorious resurrection."
(*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14)

But what is evangelization? My own experience is that many Catholics do not know what evangelization is and do not see themselves as evangelizers. They think evangelization means standing on a street corner to proclaim the Gospel or maybe knocking on people's doors. This is not the essence of evangelization.

Evangelization is inviting others to discover new life in Jesus Christ and his Church. Evangelization seeks to help hearts and minds be converted to Christ. Jesus said, "*Go and make disciples.*" (Mt 28:19) A disciple is someone who wants to imitate Jesus Christ. When we evangelize, we share with others in many different ways the incredible good news of the gift of life and salvation we have received in Jesus. St. Peter told us, "*Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.*" (1 Pt 3:15)

Evangelization is not simply teaching, or proclaiming, or sharing. Evangelization is inviting someone to encounter the living God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Through

this encounter, they are invited to the fullness of life through the sacraments and the life of the Church. The encounter with God is certainly not a one-time occurrence; rather, it is the way of life we begin in relationship with the Trinity. It is a journey which has no end.

As Pope Benedict XVI said, "*Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.*" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1, quoted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 7)

This encounter usually happens through the witness of those who already know him. Most evangelization happens through relationships. As the famous quote says, "It is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

We are all desperate for this new life that only Jesus can give, and we who have found it must share it. One of my friends likes to say, "I'm a nobody, who wants to tell everybody about somebody." Every Christian has a part in this mission to make disciples. The Second Vatican Council emphasized this mandate to living our Baptism:

The Church was founded for the purpose of spreading the kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all men to share in his saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ ... In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. ... The laity likewise share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world." (*The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 2)

Evangelization will look different for all of us, but none of us is exempt from this mission.



THE WORLD IS IN CRISIS – IS OUR LOCAL CHURCH READY TO RESPOND?

It is obvious to most Christians that the culture we live in is growing further from God. As far back as 1947, Venerable Fulton J. Sheen stated, “We are living in the end of Christendom.” He made it clear that this was not the end of Christianity, nor the end of the Church, rather the end of a society, a culture, that is organized around Christian principles. *“Christendom is the economic, political, social life as inspired by Christian principles. That is finished – we’ve seen it die.”* (Jan 26, 1947)

There was a time when the general culture supported the fundamental truths of a Christian worldview and Christian morals. But now we are living in a culture that has intellectually and morally rejected the truth of Christian revelation.¹

The Catholic Church in the United States needs to respond better. Catholics are leaving the Church in substantial numbers; 26.1 million baptized Catholics in the United States are no longer practicing the faith. There are six and a half Catholics who leave the Church in America for each person who joins it; 26 percent of the total U.S. population is unaffiliated with religion; 79 percent of those disaffiliated before age 23, with 13 as the median age of departure. These numbers continue to rise even though Catholicism continues to grow globally.

This is our experience in the Diocese of Crookston. We have seen a drop of more than 30 percent in Mass attendance over the last 10 years. Our diocese has gone from 14,599 average Mass attendees in 2013 to 10,061 in 2023. Other local statistics have had a precipitous drop since 2013 as well.

Note the following:

2013	
Baptisms	552
Confirmations	357
Marriages	172
(Catholic 89; Interfaith 83)	
RCIA/Full Communion	76
Catholic Population	34,410

2023	
Baptisms	310
Confirmations	316
Marriages	84
(Catholic 57; Interfaith 27)	
RCIA/Full Communion	31
Catholic Population	29,794

There is some good news in that, across the diocese, 2023 Mass attendance increased 5 percent from the previous year. However, we are still down almost 2,500 people from before the COVID crisis.

Other statistics are also important. Fewer marriages, Baptisms and Confirmations mean we will have fewer Catholics. This news should be alarming to us. If these statistics continue in the next 10 years, we will struggle to keep many of our churches open or even run a diocese, just for lack of resources.

I believe it is time to ring the fire alarm! As a Church, we are hemorrhaging people, especially young people, and yet now more than ever, we need God and his tender compassion and love for each of us. As a Church, we need to face this crisis and see what we can do differently. If we do not change, then the crisis will only get worse.

FROM MAINTENANCE TO MISSION

Father James Mallon, founder of Divine Renovation Ministry, who spoke

1: From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age, published by the University of Mary



to our priests at their spring study days in 2024, is one of many voices explaining how the Church today needs to move “from maintenance to mission.”

Maintenance was the way the Church operated for centuries. Our parishes used to be places that sustained and strengthened the faithful amid a Christian culture. There was a time not so long ago in our diocese when the churches were full, and our main job was to provide the Sacraments and religious education to the faithful. This is no longer the case.

Today, we live in mission territory. Pope Francis spoke about this in 2013 soon after he assumed the papacy, when he commented on the parable where Jesus says he would leave the 99 sheep to go after the one that was lost.

“Brothers and sisters, we have one sheep. We have lost the other 99! We must go out; we must go out to them! In this culture – let us tell the truth – we only have one, we are a minority! And do we feel the fervor, the apostolic zeal to go out and find the other 99?” (Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome, June 17, 2013)

Pope Francis is ringing the fire alarm! It should not surprise us. The last three popes have all done this. Pope St. John Paul II said:

“I sense that the moment has come to commit all of the Church’s energies to a new evangelization and to the mission ad gentes. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples.” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 3)

Pope Benedict XVI said:

“[Evangelization] is not something optional, but the very vocation of the People of God, a duty that corresponds to it by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.”

(40th Anniversary of Vatican II’s “*Ad Gentes*,” March 13, 2006)

And Pope Francis in his apostolic letter on evangelization wrote:

“I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways 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.”
(*Evangelii Gaudium*, 27)

What our Holy Fathers have said is that our parishes must become centers of mission. In 2020, the Congregation for the Clergy published an instruction entitled: “The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelizing mission of the Church.” It quotes Pope St. John Paul II saying, “*Evangelization is the cornerstone of all pastoral action, the demands of which are primary, preeminent, and preferential.*” (St. John Paul II, Discourse to Participants at the Plenary of the Congregation for the Clergy, Oct. 20, 1984) In other words, of all the activities we do in the parish – care for the sick, bury the dead, teach the youth, live community life – evangelization must be primary, preeminent and preferential.

I have to say that I know of very few parishes in our country where this is the case. We are still living in maintenance mode, trying to feed and sustain the sheep who come, but we are not really fishing. Jesus did tell his apostles to feed his sheep, but he also made them fishers of men! Our parishes must be mission centers where people are taught to fish for new disciples as Pope Francis said, “The parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 28)

It has been said that if we do not get evangelization right in our parishes, it does not matter what else



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we get right, renewal will not happen. If we do not do this, our parishes will gradually die, especially in our modern world where disaffiliation is happening at record numbers.

IMAGINE NEW LIFE

I believe that if we personally invest in our mission, in 10 years we could have more – not fewer – people worshipping God at Mass in the Diocese of Crookston. If we commit ourselves to living our mission:

- I imagine a time when most of our parishes are evangelizing and forming people to be disciples and evangelizers. This could easily lead to more than 300 people joining the Church each year through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults.
- I imagine that we Catholics in the pews invest in our faith lives through small groups. These groups allow us to support each other in our lives of prayer, in seeking holiness and in our work of evangelizing. Many of these groups already exist. What would happen if 10 percent to 20 percent of those who attend Sunday Mass participated in a small group like this? That equals 1,000-2,000 people. It would provide a movement of ordinary people who are equipped and strengthened to share their faith! It would help parents to support each other in raising their children in the faith.
- I imagine a growing relational-based youth ministry in many of our parishes that allows us to have 20 seminarians and a new religious community with young women in the diocese. As our young people are drawn deeply into relationship with

Jesus Christ through camps, retreats and accompaniment through small groups, they will begin to respond to their vocations.

- I imagine we could have five chapels of perpetual adoration around the diocese where people are praying day and night for the conversion of the people of northwest Minnesota. This would provide a spiritual force that could dramatically affect the number of conversions in our diocese and the spiritual climate of our mission.
- I imagine that because our people are developing missionary hearts, and they see the impact of our efforts at evangelization, they become more generous stewards. Through the generosity of many, we could have an endowment large enough to fund one-third of our diocesan and parish ministry and so bring Jesus Christ to even more people.

I believe if we intentionally live our faith and commit ourselves to become missionary disciples, God will do great things. We could start to see the diocese grow by 5 percent in our Mass attendance each year.

If this happens, and Catholics begin to surrender their lives to the Holy Spirit living as authentic disciples, we will begin to see many kinds of pastoral





ministry flourish. As more people are evangelized, some will discover charisms of service to the poor or imprisoned, others will dedicate themselves to pro-life work or strengthening marriages. New movements of prayer and faith will sprout in unpredictable ways because the Holy Spirit is working.

Do you believe this is possible? It might take more than 10 years, but nothing is impossible for God!

CHANGE IS HARD!

For decades, we have been operating in maintenance mode, but if we are going to get different results, we are going to have to change. We will have to look at our structures and our way of living the faith, and evaluate what we should do differently. If we seek to evangelize, we will have to operate differently in our parishes. It is good to remember, though, that change is sometimes easier than not changing. Not changing in this time could be painful. Just think of the pain we experience now. Many of our children no longer go to church. Many of our families only go to Mass on Sunday when it is convenient. Our churches are often sparsely populated, and we see many people without hope. This is the pain of slowly dying parishes that are not able to evangelize.

This can be quite dispiriting. In some parishes, we have the same number of Masses for 150 people as we previously had for 500 people.

There is also a cost to you, our faithful parishioners, of living in maintenance mode. It is the experience of having the same people do the same things to keep our parishes going. Fewer committed folks to do the same number of tasks becomes draining and discouraging.

Do we want to do something about this? Do we want to do something different for the next generation? Are we preparing the next generation of leaders? If we do not evangelize, nothing will change.

As we begin to make our parishes mission centers, some people will resist. They will not understand why we must change. But if we do not change, we will continue to decline.

HOW WILL THIS HAPPEN?

Each of us must be willing to respond to a more intense living of the Christian life. As Sherry Waddell has made clear in her book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, because of the culture we live in, if people are going to stay in the faith, they must be intentional about their faith. The cultural currents against the life of faith are so strong that they will pull downstream a plant that does not have deep roots and a strong stalk. Today, Christians must be prepared to stand against the cultural currents. We must become intentional disciples.

Remember how renewal happens in the Church: It has always been saints who renew the Church. It is true that the history of the Church and the world is filled with brokenness, but it is also filled with incredibly heroic figures who allowed their broken lives to be captured and healed by Jesus Christ and then used for his mission. Sometimes the saints were great figures who lived extraordinary lives, but often they were ordinary people who lived deeply in God. They allowed God to use their ordinary lives for extraordinary things. In our own country, we think of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, a convert to the faith who, after her husband died, founded a religious community and the Catholic School system throughout the United States. We think of St. Katharine Drexel, who founded two schools right here in the Diocese of Crookston, one on the White Earth Reservation and St. Mary's Mission at Red Lake. Then there is the witness of Blessed Solanus Casey, a simple priest who lived near Detroit. His main job was to answer the door, but he ended up helping thousands of people as they came to seek his advice. In our own diocese, we have the example of Sr. Annella



Zervas, O.S.B., who was a parishioner at St. Joseph's in Moorhead. We are beginning to investigate her well known sanctity. She did nothing extraordinary in the world's perspective. But she did heroically accept the sickness God allowed her to have, and she offered it for the salvation of the world. Her witness to the power of suffering love has affected many people and is very important in our world. Even though her life was hidden in many ways, she said yes to God, and God always uses that total yes to spread his kingdom, even in mysterious ways. Who will be the next saints from the Diocese of Crookston? Will you say yes to the way he wants to use you?

We do not need extraordinary saints. We need ordinary disciples who are fully committed to mission.

PRINCIPLES FOR A MISSIONARY CHURCH

To bring about the renewal of the diocese, we need to understand and live certain principles. There is no road map that always shows us the next steps to take. With regard to programming and efforts, we will have to try new things and see what works. Yet, understanding and implementing certain principles can ensure we begin to grow.

The principles are in three categories:

1) Living Discipleship, 2) Primacy of Prayer and 3) Parishes Becoming Mission Centers.

First, if the goal of evangelization is making disciples, then we need to make sure we know what a disciple is, how they are made and how they are sustained. We will explain what an authentic disciple is, how they are born through an encounter and how they must be formed in both heart and mind. We will see how discipleship is sustained and supported through intentional relationships, often in the accompaniment that happens through small groups.

Second, we must see the primacy of prayer in this work, since the work is

fundamentally God's work and not ours. We must understand how we will only be successful if we keep the relationship with God first in our lives. Flowing from this life of prayer we must become docile to the Holy Spirit, since the Holy Spirit is the principle of evangelization.

Third, we must understand how our parishes are to become mission centers. This will include a real focus on the family and on vocations in our parishes. If we support families well, our young people will grow strong in the faith, and strong families will produce vocations to the religious life and the priesthood that will exponentially expand our mission. To do this we have to understand how the Eucharist, which is the heart of the parish, is the source and summit of evangelization. A parish centered on the Eucharist will become a missionary parish.

This section is the longest section of this pastoral letter because these principles are essential to the missionary Church we are trying to create. Here we will simply explain the principles. Over the next five years these areas will be the places where we will be formed together. We must become experts in these areas in order to grow into the evangelizing Church God wants us to be.

1. Living Discipleship

Understanding Authentic

Discipleship: An authentic disciple is someone who acknowledges Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of their life and is seeking to grow daily by centering his or her life on him. The early Christians loved the phrase "Jesus is Lord." "Lord" was the title used most frequently for Jesus Christ in the New Testament. He is the one to whom I submit my life. He has set me free from sin and death, and I must center my life on my relationship with him. I must let his Gospel become the supreme rule of my life. Since this is not something I can do on my own, I must seek his grace daily through the life of his Church. Jesus established his Church so that we could help each other



become disciples. An authentic disciple seeks every day to love and serve Jesus Christ first in his or her life.

Encountering Jesus: Authentic disciples are born through encountering Jesus as Lord and Savior. Pope Francis speaks about the encounter with Jesus in the strongest terms: “**Christian faith is either an encounter with Him alive, or it does not exist.**” (*Desiderio desideravi*, 10) Everything changes when I encounter the living God in Jesus Christ and experience that he is real, God who is alive, who created me, who has a plan for my life.

An authentic encounter with Jesus always contains certain essential elements. In the Scriptures, I identify at least four of them:

1. First is the realization that **Jesus is God**. Someone who encounters Jesus realizes he is no ordinary man; he is the source of all life. As Jesus described himself, “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” (Jn 14:6) We see this encounter in several places: The call of the Apostles St. Matthew or St. Peter; the woman at the well; the forgiveness of Mary Magdalene or Zacchaeus. In every case, the person realizes they are before more than an ordinary man and their life is changed.
2. The second essential element of a true encounter with Jesus Christ: **repentance**. When I really encounter Jesus as God, I immediately experience that I am not worthy to be with him. I am a sinner. Repentance is at the heart of Jesus’ message. When the Gospels want to summarize Jesus’ message, they say, “*This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel.*” (Mk 1:15) Repentance means concretely turning away from my sinful way of life and seeking to live as God desires. This is what we see in the Gospels. Those who really encounter Jesus turn from their sinful ways and begin to follow him.
3. The third essential element of a true encounter happens at the very moment I realize I am a sinner. **I also realize I**

am known and infinitely loved! This infinite love of Jesus for the sinner is one of the most striking elements of the Gospels. We see it in the woman at the well, in Zacchaeus the tax collector, the woman caught in adultery, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Peter, the story of the prodigal son, and there’s more. In each of these cases, a person stands before Jesus and they recognize they are a sinner, but in his eyes, they feel his infinite love and mercy. This is the encounter that gives us the desire and courage to change.

4. The fourth essential element of a real encounter: **I am invited to follow him in a new life**. Someone who really encounters Jesus’ mercy wants to follow him. They begin to strive to live his new way of life. St. Paul is such a powerful example of this. When Saul meets the Lord and realizes his blindness, he realizes he has to re-order his whole life around Jesus. Years later, he would describe the experience this way:

“Whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him.” (Phil 3:7-9)

It all begins with the encounter with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This essential experience, which happens sometimes all at once and other times over a period of years, is the mark of a true disciple. It is not enough to know about Jesus. One must come to know Jesus and encounter him regularly.

Many people in our pews have never had this encounter. They do not understand that discipleship, living the Catholic faith, means living in a personal relationship with Jesus and surrendering their life to him. We must find ways to invite everyone to this life-changing encounter.



Formation of the Heart and the

Mind: Becoming an authentic disciple is not something that happens all at once. Real change, real conversion, takes time. In fact, it takes a lifetime. I am constantly seeking deeper conversion and trying to grow closer to Christ. Getting to know Jesus and becoming like him means I need to form my intellect to see the world the way he sees. As St. Paul says, *“Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.”* (Rom 12:2)

This means coming to a view of the world based on God’s word, a biblical worldview, which allows me to see the world around me and the circumstances of my life in light of God’s truth. This will involve understanding the errors and virtues of our age. As we seek to renew our faith life, we will recommend certain books and programs of study for developing a mind formed after the truth of Christ.

I must continually study and grow in my faith. The Catholic intellectual tradition is the richest treasure of truth in the world. It is vast and expansive, and it has something for everyone. These riches are very accessible today thanks to so many great modern interpreters and excellent platforms and publishers.

Our Catholic schools play an essential role in this formation, especially for our young people. We have the privilege in our Catholic schools of forming the

whole person both body and soul. Not only must our schools be places where young people encounter the love of Jesus Christ and the power of his Sacraments, but they must also form young hearts and minds in a Catholic worldview. As we struggle against a different worldview presented in public schools, we might need to find ways to expand Catholic education through supporting home schooling or other educational opportunities so we can help parents raise authentic disciples.

Accompaniment and Small Groups:

Discipleship is sustained and supported through intentional relationships, often in the accompaniment that happens through small groups. The Christian life was never meant to be lived alone. The commandment of Jesus to love one another as he has loved us (Jn 13:34 and 15:12) requires that we are living in intentional relationship with other Christians – not just that we have Christian acquaintances but that we have real friendships of support and encouragement. We need people whom we have committed ourselves to grow in love together, to learn to love as Christ loves. Christian community needs to go deeper than coffee and donuts after Mass. It needs to be an experience of sharing of faith, support in struggles and laying down our lives for each other in real love.

My experience is that most of the time this happens in some kind of intentional small faith sharing group. We cannot be close friends with many people, so a



small group allows more intimacy and support in relationships. There are many forms of this kind of small group, and some wonderful examples are already operating in our diocese. There are **Cursillo** small groups, **Teams of Our Lady** and other forms, where people support and help each other to grow deeper in faith.

We live in a time of increasing isolation. God desires to draw all people out of isolation and loneliness into the communion of his love in his Church. People should be able to come into our churches and be impressed with how we love one another. This will not happen unless we have real friendships formed in small groups, where real sharing and support can happen.

It is also much easier to evangelize in a community. Having a place to invite people into so they can experience a group of people living differently can be very attractive to those who live in our isolating world.

2. Primacy of Prayer

A Life of Prayer: Prayer is the place where we live this ongoing relationship with God, and it is essential to authentic discipleship. Every day, each of us needs time to set everything aside, enter into silence, and focus our hearts directly on God. We need to open our hearts to his word and to his Holy Spirit so his truth and love can transform them.

If we do not do this, then we will not be led by him. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes this clear:

“Prayer is a vital necessity. Proof to the contrary is no less convincing: if we do not allow the Spirit to lead us, we fall back into the slavery of sin. How can the Holy Spirit be our life if our heart is far from him?”
(2744)

If we never spend time alone with him in prayer, our hearts will be far from him.

In our time of personal prayer, we are gradually able to discern his voice speaking to us. We begin to experience how much he loves us. We come to see that he is with us in our sufferings. We learn to surrender to him our difficulties. This is the place where we learn to live his commandment to forgive, to love our enemies. It is the place where we are called to generosity and where he reveals how he wants us to give ourselves. The graces we receive in the Sacraments come alive in prayer and we are able to follow and serve him.

Without prayer, we cannot live as authentic disciples. Without this daily encounter with Jesus Christ, with his truth and his love, we will not grow to become like him. Without daily prayer, we will never overcome our deeper sins and struggles. The encounter with God’s love and truth must not remain an event in the past but must be something we seek every day.

Relationship, Identity and Mission:

These three words represent a way to understand and live the Christian life, which I learned from Pope St. John Paul II. The order is essential to understand the truth of how we are called to live. First and foremost, human beings were created by God for relationship, and our relationships reveal to us who we are, our identity. Only when we know who we are do we know how we should act and what we should do – our mission. Our mission flows from our identity, which flows from our relationships. If I do not know who I am, I will easily act in the wrong ways. I will only know who I am if I am rooted deeply in my relationship with God. Even many good Christians can get the order wrong. We are tempted to take our identity from what we do, from our mission, emphasizing doing as more important than being.

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*OUR MISSION FLOWS FROM OUR IDENTITY,
WHICH FLOWS FROM OUR RELATIONSHIPS.”*



Pope St. John Paul II articulated this way of living most clearly in his *Theology of the Body*. He pointed out that in the beginning we were made for communion (relationship). We discover the truth of who we are, our identity, as we stand before the loving gaze of God. I am his beloved son or daughter. This identity is further developed as I stand before others and discover that I was made for communion with others. I was made for self-gift to and for others.

Love reveals who we are. As Pope St. John Paul II said in his first encyclical, *"Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it."* (*Redemptor Hominis*, 10)

When I know I am God's beloved, I am ready for mission. When I live deeply my relationship with him, I desire to give myself away for him. I begin to do the mission with his strength and in his will, and not doing only what pleases others or myself, nor serving out of a need to be needed, but out of overflowing love. In this way my mission bears true fruit. As Jesus said, *"Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing."* (Jn 15:5)

This way of understanding our lives also reveals the primacy of a life of prayer over action. As we call each other to mission in the Diocese of Crookston, it is very important that we remain rooted first in our relationship with God. This relationship will be the great source of our fruitfulness.

At the end of the great Jubilee Year in 2000, Pope St. John Paul II wrote a letter to the whole Church that he intended to be a call to evangelization, a pastoral vision for the new millennium: *Nuovo Millennio Inuente* (*On the Coming of the New Millennium*). In it, he wrote that all our actions must be rooted in contemplation.

"It is important however that what we propose, with the help of God, should be profoundly rooted in contemplation and prayer. Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of 'doing for the sake of doing.' We must resist this temptation by trying 'to be' before trying 'to do'" (*Nuovo Millennio Inuente*, 15).

This is why *"it is therefore essential that education in prayer should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning."* (*Nuovo Millennio Inuente*, 34)

All this being said, we cannot wait until we are perfect, or holy enough, to begin to evangelize. As the Church's identity is to evangelize, if we do not do it, we will not be who we should be, and we will not be fruitful. Rooted in prayer, we must take the first steps of evangelizing; our mistakes and successes, then, should drive us back to prayer. We need to remember that our identity before God is what matters the most, not our rate of failure or success.



Docility to the Holy Spirit: A life of prayer will open us to the work of the Holy Spirit. The mission of the Church began at Pentecost. At his Ascension, Jesus said to his apostles, *"I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with*



power from on high.” (Lk 24:49) Jesus knows they cannot fulfill the missionary mandate of the Church without the “power from on high.” The same is true for us. The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization in the Church.

If we are to be effective evangelizers, we must have a relationship with the Holy Spirit. Do you know what it is to be led by the Holy Spirit? Do you know what the voice of the Holy Spirit sounds like? All of us have a relationship with the Holy Spirit through the sacraments, and if we are living in a state of grace, the Holy Spirit is living in us. But we must learn to ask for the guidance and supernatural strength that comes in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the giver of gifts, and the beauty of the Church is that each of us has been given certain charisms. A charism is a gift of the Holy Spirit given to a person or to a group in order to bring God’s saving love to the world. As our life of discipleship strengthens and grows, so too do our charisms. There are many beautiful charisms in the Church: charisms for hospitality, for preaching and teaching, for the care of the poor, for spiritual direction, for healing, for sharing God’s word, and many more. When the Holy Spirit comes alive in people, their particular charisms come alive. As a Church, we do not need to “control” or directly encourage all these charisms, even though they always have to be exercised in communion with the Church and her leadership. Our pastoral vision cannot possibly anticipate all that the Holy Spirit will do, and we need to be flexible and creative as we listen and discern what it is that the Holy Spirit wants us to do. We want to help people come alive in the Holy Spirit and learn how to surrender their lives to him, and we know that he will use the charisms for evangelization, as this is Jesus’ primary goal for the world.

3. Mission-Centered Parishes

Parishes Becoming Mission Centers:

It is not only our hearts that must be

filled with the Holy Spirit, but also our communities, especially our parishes. As noted before, there was a day when parishes existed mainly to feed the sheep who came. They did this through sacraments and faith formation: forming a community of disciples. Today, this is not enough. Our parishes must become centers of missionary outreach.

To do this, every parish must have an evangelistic process or tool. There are many of them (Evangelical Catholic, Christlife, Catholic Missionary Disciples, etc.), but Alpha is a good example of a relationally based program that provides a place for people to experience the Church for the first time, or to come back to the Church. Parishes will need to develop a strategic approach that allows them to have a point of entry for those outside the Church. Generally, Mass is not the first point of entry but the culmination of an evangelization process. A strong Order of Christian Initiation of Adults is an important part of this process.

We also need to develop discipleship pathways in our parishes. This means we need to walk with people from the first moment they engage with or return to the Church. Retreats, small groups, adult education and education in prayer are all important aspects of this process. Too many times, people have become Catholic through the initiation process, only to drift away from the Church a few years later. A full life of the Church, rich with small group accompaniment, will continue to strengthen disciples to become missionaries themselves.

If our parishes do not develop as mission centers, we risk becoming a nice Christian club – a place where we feel comforted when we come together, but not a place that changes the world around us. A club exists for its members, the Church exists primarily for those who do not yet belong. The Holy Spirit will always drive us to find those who do not yet know him, as he drove the Apostles at Pentecost to proclaim and share the love of Christ.



Focus on the Family and Vocations:

Amongst all the important pastoral initiatives we will have to do, two areas deserve special focus in our work – support of the family and vocations.

Support of the family, especially parents, is essential to our mission to hand on the faith. Studies show that the most influential factor in determining whether a child will practice the faith when they grow up is the practice of the faith of the parents.

Christian Smith, Ph.D., from the University of Notre Dame, has been studying this question for years.² His studies show that it was not enough for parents simply to practice their faith, and much less to practice it intermittently. Young people who stay in the Church say that **their family regularly talked about religious topics in the home**, that faith was “very important” to their family and that they themselves were **regularly involved in religious activities**.

There are never any guarantees that

a child will grow up and practice the faith, and many wonderful parents have children who are not practicing. But there are ways we can help children in today’s world. Dr. Smith points out four essential aspects:

1. Successful parents are able to explain why their faith is important to them (the why).
2. They are intentional about establishing a religious culture in the household (the how).
3. They give good content, i.e., exposing their children to religiously significant practices, relationships and experiences (the what).
4. They help their children to interpret the world through the eyes of our faith. Children are not simply exposed to religious content but begin to understand its central significance in their parents’ lives and in their lives. The Catholic faith becomes a profound reality that shapes the daily life of the household and the lens through which the family interprets the events of their lives.

In light of this, we need to evaluate our religious education process. Most of those involved in religious education in the Diocese of Crookston today have told me they have concerns about the

2: Read more about these studies here: <https://familyformationblog.net/2017/05/08/the-home-that-makes-a-difference/> and at Notre Dame’s McGrath Institute for Church Life at: <https://icl.nd.edu/>



effectiveness of our methods. We know that a high percentage of families who come to religious education, or even send their children to one of our Catholic schools, do not regularly attend Sunday Mass. If families are not regularly attending Mass, there is almost no chance the children will practice the faith when they grow up, no matter how much we teach them in religious education. We need to accompany parents to help them become authentic disciples so they can raise their children in such a way that their faith will become their own in adulthood.

The fruit of strong families who live the faith will be an increase in vocations. The question of vocation is central to every person's life. God has called each of us to follow him in a specific vocation. A Christian vocation is a way to live my whole life as a loving response to Christ. This is true for every state of life: marriage, singlehood, religious life and the priesthood. Everyone is called to the fundamental vocation of holiness, and every vocation is a gift of self in imitation of Christ, who laid down his life for us.



*THE FRUIT OF STRONG FAMILIES WHO
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Yet, in every age of the Church, Jesus has invited some people to follow his own way of life, a way of celibacy, poverty and obedience. These people receive a call to dedicate themselves completely to his service. They become living witnesses to the reality of heaven by forgoing this world's greatest goods. Their way of life allows a special relationship of intimacy with the Lord, since they have sacrificed that beautiful human intimacy of marriage and given their hearts completely to him.

Since its beginning in 1909, the Diocese of Crookston has been blessed with many consecrated women and diocesan or religious order priests. Over the years, many women joined the Sisters of St. Benedict or the Sisters of St. Joseph; more recently, young women from our diocese have joined other communities.

Like other places, our diocese is facing a shortage of these priestly and religious vocations. For us, the shortage is becoming severe. We have only a couple of religious women still serving in our parishes. And although we have 33 priests serving the diocese, including four religious priests and eight extern priests on "loan" from other dioceses, 10 will reach retirement age (70) in the next decade, or are already serving beyond the typical retirement age. We are blessed to have four men in seminary, which is normally a nine-year formation process, but our next priestly ordination will not be until 2027. In 10 years, we likely will have approximately 25 priests to staff our 66 parishes, which are currently staffed by 33 priests. This stark reality demands two responses.

First, we will have to carry out our mission with fewer priests. This will affect where and when Mass occurs. Secondly, and more importantly, we need to increase our efforts in promoting the vocations of priesthood or consecrated life to our young people. God is still calling!

I am delighted that in 2023 we were able to establish a Serra Club, dedicated to helping us promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life in all our parishes. The work of the Serra Club will help us keep vocation ministry at the forefront.

Also, I am very grateful to God for the men responding to the call to the permanent diaconate. This call is different from the call to consecrated life since it is a vocation within a vocation. Men who are called to marriage may also experience a call to this dedicated service in the Church. As ordained deacons, they vow obedience



to the bishop, embrace the clerical state, and take on special ministry in the diocese. As part of our pastoral vision, I see a greater role for deacons in helping us carry out the various ministries of the Diocese of Crookston.

Jesus said, “The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Mt 9:37-38). If we pray, seek holiness in our families and parishes, and present the invitation, I believe God will send us the vocations we need to carry out Christ’s mission.

The Eucharist as the Source and Summit of Evangelization:

All salvation comes to us through the Eucharist, which contains Christ himself and makes present through time his saving death and resurrection, his Paschal Mystery. The U.S. Church began a Eucharistic Revival in 2022, which I have had the privilege of leading. I have seen how people who come alive to Christ’s presence in the Eucharist and learn the power of Holy Mass transform into missionaries. Through growing in relationship with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, they learn to make a gift of their lives through him, with him and in him. They learn how powerfully Christ remains with us in the

sacraments and how the sacramental life is a source of abundant graces to sustain them on their journey.

As we grow in our love for the Eucharist, we will want to make the Mass in our parishes an even more beautiful celebration of his love. We see the Eucharist as the true source of our life because here we become one with Jesus. We see the Eucharist as the summit of our lives, because here we participate fully in the one true act of worship, which Jesus offered on the Cross to the Father. Here our sacrifices, our struggles, our whole lives are offered to the Father for his glory and for the salvation and sanctification of the whole world. You can tell when a parish community values the Eucharist. They listen carefully to the word of God as it is proclaimed and carefully broken open. They pray reverently, and the music, the singing, make one remember that here we are united to heaven and the worship of all the angels and saints. The Sunday Mass is the most important thing we do all week, and it deserves so much more than casual effort – it deserves our best response of mind and heart to make it truly transformational. If the Mass is celebrated reverently, the word of God broken open faithfully, and our churches are beautiful places of prayer, others will



Pentecost Sunday Mass near Itasca State Park on May 19, 2024.



see how much we value the gift of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

The work of evangelization is difficult and laborious and cannot be done by our own strength. We need supernatural strength! The sacramental life, especially confession and the Eucharist, is essential to supercharging our evangelization efforts. Without the grace that flows to us from the Sacraments and prayer, we will not be able to sustain the difficult work ahead. It is good to remember that our dedicated priests offer us this strength through the Sacraments, and for this reason we owe them a great debt of gratitude. They have accepted this radical call to lay down their lives for you. God has chosen them for this special service to lead us in the missionary efforts of our diocese. Let us be grateful to them and let us pray for them and support them as they seek to make our parishes mission centers deeply rooted in the Eucharist.

A STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZATION

“Jesus approached and said to them, ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.’” (Mt 28:18-20) This is our mission and duty as the members of his Church in northwest Minnesota. We must make disciples of Jesus Christ through the sacraments and teach people to observe his commandments.

The principles we have explained are the means we must use to move from maintenance to mission. Making this missionary conversion as a diocese will take time, and it will not happen all at once. In northern Minnesota, we know how to build a campfire: Start with a small, tight group of leaves and twigs, and when that begins to burn, add bigger and bigger logs. Setting our diocese on fire with the Holy Spirit will start in

certain parishes with small groups of dedicated disciples and leaders. As the fire begins to blaze in their hearts and in their parishes, it will spread to others. The principles we have listed will help those fires to burn strong, and if we are faithful to prayer and to each other, the fire will slowly grow.

This pastoral vision comes at the end of a year-and-a-half long process of synodal consultation that involved priests, deacons, religious and lay leaders; at one point, every person in the pew was invited to participate. A diverse team of laity and clergy from various parts of the Diocese of Crookston met throughout 2023, and three priorities emerged from us listening, praying and discussing.

To come to a deeper understanding of how to implement these strategic priorities, we consulted 15 national experts in evangelization and diocesan and parish renewal.³ This allowed us to refine the priorities and develop a practical plan with concrete action steps to help our diocese move from maintenance to mission.

3: Jim Jansen, director of pastoral services, Archdiocese of Omaha (Revive); Msgr. James Shea, author, president, University of Mary, Bismarck, North Dakota (Revive / Evangelize); Chris Motz, chief of staff, Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota (Plan); Katherine Angulo Valenzuela, program director, McGrath Center, University of Notre Dame (Revive); Bishop Thomas Zinkula, Diocese of Davenport, Iowa (Plan/Evangelize); Mark Mogilka, author, retired director of parish planning Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin (Plan); Shannan Brommer, director of stewardship and development, Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska (Plan); Julianne Stanz, author, former director of discipleship and parish life, Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin (Revive/ Evangelize); Jane Rutter, author, retired director of stewardship, Diocese of Jefferson City, Missouri (Plan); Susan Windley-Daoust, author, director of evangelization, Diocese of Winona-Rochester (Revive/ Evangelize); Father James Mallon, author, pastor, founder of Divine Renovation (Revive/Evangelize); Curtis Martin, author, founder, FOCUS Missionaries (Revive/ Evangelize); Tim Glemkowski, CEO, National Eucharistic Congress (Revive/Evangelize); Father Simon Hermann, OSB, director of young adult engagement, St Meinrad Seminary (Evangelize); Msgr. Thomas Richter, author, pastor, Diocese of Bismarck, North Dakota (Evangelize)



The three priorities that will help us become a missionary Church are:

1. Revive the faith life of our people.

Many of our current faithful are not yet prepared to meet the challenges that our culture poses to their life of faith. We need to invite every Catholic in the pew to authentic discipleship through a true encounter with the living Jesus, entering a relationship with the Trinity, becoming authentic disciples, living a fully sacramental life in the Church, and allowing themselves to be led by the Holy Spirit. This is the only way we will be prepared to become the evangelists the world needs.

In this area of emphasis, we have four strategies:

1. Help Catholics encounter Jesus as a living person and grow into missionary disciples through explicit proclamation of the Gospel, the Sacrament of Penance, Eucharistic Revival and healing.

We want to invite every person in the diocese to a living encounter with Jesus Christ, especially through retreat ministry. We feel blessed to have a new diocesan retreat center for this purpose. This encounter will involve deepening the sacramental life through confession and the Eucharist, and teaching people how to pray. This renewal will help heal the wounds our fallen world inflicts and strengthen people to live their vocation. We plan to continue to offer Mercy Hours for healing around the diocese, and we also are developing prayer teams that can help pray for healing and deliverance.

2. Teach accompaniment through small groups and mentors. Since small groups are so essential to a fully lived discipleship, we want to train people to accompany one another toward this deeper living of their faith life. Additionally, we are participating in a national pilot program for accompaniment in youth ministry, and we have many people from the diocese learning how to do spiritual mentorship. We recognize the need to evaluate our current faith formation model, including

how we do sacramental preparation. We will be exploring how we can support parents in their work of faith formation.

3. Offer formation for adults and parents in prayer and the faith.

Ongoing formation in the faith can happen in small groups and other parish initiatives. We plan to offer silent retreats for youth and adults to learn to grow in a deeper life of prayer. Teaching on prayer will continue to be central.

4. Continue to cultivate a culture of vocations. The fruit of this Revive priority, which we are already beginning to see, will be a culture of vocations and stronger marriages, which will lead to vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.

2. Plan to use our resources well for mission.

We recognize the need to *evaluate our resources* in light of the mission Christ has for us today. Our human resources, our physical buildings and our financial resources must be placed at the service of our mission. We want to answer the question: *How do we structure our parishes so we can maintain what we need and give resources to evangelization?*

This will require sacrifices for all of us as we seek to change our way of being to meet the demands of the time. It means we will have to learn to work together, since not all our parishes have the resources needed for the mission. Can we share youth ministry? Can we share business administrators or accountants? Can we work together to develop evangelizing teams?

We must face the reality of a diminishing number of priests. This means we need to begin a dialogue about parish planning, so we can discern together the best ways for our limited number of priests to serve our mission. This will require a discernment of models of parish organization and leadership, as well as the creation of structures that increase collaboration and efficiency between parishes.

The goal is that every parish becomes



a mission center with the processes, tools and resources it needs to carry out the task of evangelization.

Under this priority we have four strategies:



1. Transform diocesan communications for evangelization.

This includes the change we have already announced: a quarterly diocesan magazine instead of a monthly newspaper. This change will allow us to provide a more evangelizing format and expand our digital communications. This can lead to a deeper engagement of young adults and amplify our message through podcasts, video, and email to provide hope and inspiration across our diocese.

2. Begin a dialogue about parish planning with key stakeholders across the diocese.

We have re-appointed a diocesan Pastoral Council for the first time in many years. Its members will help us oversee the implementation of this whole strategic vision. We also have appointed a person to lead parish planning and to develop a process during this next year so we can evaluate our resources for mission. Our director of parish planning will bring together people from around the diocese to lay out parameters for collaboration among parishes. We will begin to work with people at the local level to determine how parishes can focus on mission and how we will use our priests and other human resources going forward. We know our priests are generous, but they also have limits; and we cannot continually stretch them and expect them to have energy for mission. We will prayerfully discern with local leadership the best ways

to organize, so we can continue the unique mission Jesus has given us in northwest Minnesota.

3. Create organizational structures that increase parish/diocesan collaboration and efficiency.

We will explore what we can do better together to strengthen our mission. This can include everything from sharing data to sharing people and resources. We must not let our current structures prevent us from carrying out Christ's mission. When we collaborate for the mission, instead of defending our own "turf," we will find the fire of the Holy Spirit working more powerfully in our midst. Through this discernment, we hope to have more deacons serving diocesan ministries.

4. Build sustainable stewardship through accompaniment with pastors and parish leaders.

Stewardship and the use of our financial resources is not an addition to discipleship but is right at the heart of what we do. As we grow in discipleship, we become more generous with our time, talent and treasure. We want to help parishes develop their mission advancement and stewardship capacities as we seek to build sustainable funding through charitable estate planning and good stewardship. This will include growing our Catholic Community Foundation so it can help parishes in their long-term stewardship needs.

3. Evangelize by inviting others to discover new life in Jesus Christ and his Church.

As I have been stating throughout this letter, evangelization is the responsibility of us all. By virtue of our Confirmation, we have been commissioned, sent by the Holy Spirit, to spread and defend the faith.

We know that we are not equipped to fully carry out this mandate. Most Catholics do not understand this obligation, and most do not consider it their responsibility to invite people into a relationship with Christ and his Church. We hope to change this.

Making us missionaries and our



parishes mission centers will take time and require a change in culture. Our parish cultures need to change from an inward-focused maintenance model to an outward-focused mission model.

To do this, we need to educate ourselves on the mission we have. We need to learn practical skills. But most of all, we need to learn how to surrender our lives to the Holy Spirit. In some ways, this is the most exciting of our three priorities because we are going to be surprised by the Holy Spirit. If we can teach Catholics to activate the gifts of their confirmation to help them spread and defend the faith in our world today, then we will see many conversions to the faith. God will not disappoint us if we surrender our lives to him with generosity.

Under this priority we have four strategies:

1. Expose the faithful to the role of the Holy Spirit in evangelization and help them discover how to use their gifts and charisms for evangelization. Learning to follow the Holy Spirit happens not only from good teaching, but also from experience. Retreats will be a great help for this and learning how to pray with and for each other so that the Holy Spirit can be released in us. This will come to fruition in the charisms I have spoken about. God wants all people to discover and use their charisms so the Church can be fully alive as each member learns to operate out of their particular gifts.

2. Equip parish leadership to think in a missionary mode. This means each parish must seek to develop their own strategy for evangelization relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and listening to the people in their parish communities. They must think about how to develop tools for reaching out and pathways for people to come in. Smaller parishes might have to do this work together. This is the fundamental missionary conversion we want to see happen. We will host diocesan leadership summits for leaders to learn and to think in this missionary mode.

3. Prepare the laity to share their gifts as missionary disciples. This will include everything from practical workshops on sharing the faith and discovering charisms to developing evangelizing tools and resources to use as a parish or group of parishes as we seek to find a net with which we can catch fish.

4. Teach tools for accompaniment of others to the fullness of the Faith. Just as in the Revive priority, accompaniment becomes essential for bringing people to mature discipleship. Discipleship pathways must be developed as we connect people who enter the Church into means of fully living their faith. Much of this work will be done in collaboration with the Revive priority.

IT BEGINS WITH ME

For the Church to become who she needs to be in the world today, for the world around me to be transformed, one essential thing needs to change: me. Personal conversion is the way God always renews the Church and the world. It is easy to point to all the problems in the world and all the weaknesses of our Church, but it is hard to surrender my life to God and to ask him what he wants me to do. We have the power to change with God's grace, and if we do that, then he will begin to use us to change the world.

Original sin, which lives in every human heart, is the real cause of all the evil in our world. There is only one thing that can heal the human heart of sin – conversion to the love of Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus, his saving grace, is the medicine that heals and transforms human hearts. It is only in the love of Jesus that we are transformed, and so our

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whole way of being is also transformed. This is why he came to earth, so that “we might have life and have it to the full.” (Jn 10:10) And this new life in Christ begins with you and me.

My contribution can seem so small and unimportant. Yet, Jesus points out that real change starts with a mustard seed that gradually grows into a large tree. (Mt 12:31-32) If you and I seek every day to live as authentic disciples growing in holiness; if we begin to surround ourselves with friends who are doing the same; if we begin in small groups to focus on what we can do to invite others to join us; and if we have the courage to reach out to those drifting from God or far from his Church, beautiful things will happen. Some of the seeds we begin to sow will take root. It begins with God’s love and mercy for me and my response to live holiness, my seeking to build a community that reaches out to those around me who are so desperately in need of the hope of Jesus.

GOD WILL PROVIDE

You were chosen for this time, as was I. If we learn docility to the Holy Spirit today, and to read the signs of the times, we can strengthen each other to be the saints our age needs. Think of the first generation of Christians – they must have felt that the whole world was against them. The Jewish authorities were trying to stomp them out. The Roman authorities were trying to force them to worship their false gods. Yet, filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit, the early Christians began to share the love of Christ with those around them. Little by little, year by year, person by person, they evangelized an empire and within three centuries, most of their world had been impacted by the Gospel, and the world would never be the same. What is to stop us from allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our time and in our place? The only obstacle is our own lack of deep conversion and surrender to the Holy

Spirit. Let us commit and recommit ourselves to lives of holiness, and the Holy Spirit will use us in ways we cannot even imagine.

I want to close with a personal experience that has shaped my vision of evangelization – it showed me how we all have a part to play and how our own interior conversion is the key.

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TIMES, WE CAN STRENGTHEN EACH OTHER
TO BE THE SAINTS OUR AGE NEEDS.”*

When I was a student priest in Rome, I had the privilege of leading some retreats and conferences for Mother St.Teresa’s sisters, the Missionaries of Charity, in Ghent, Belgium. Through them, I met a very special man named Fernand.

Fernand was paralyzed and could only move his head and squeeze his right hand to press a button that opened the front door of his house when someone came to visit. He could speak fine. Fernand wanted to be a priest, but just a few months before he was to enter the seminary, he acquired this strange disease that left him in bed for more than 50 years.

He is the reason the Missionaries of Charity are in Ghent, Belgium. Mother St.Teresa met Fernand through the bishop of Ghent. She spent a couple of hours talking with him through a translator. At one point in the conversation, the translator, a co-worker of Mother St.Teresa, said, “*Fernand, you have no crucifix in your room.*” Mother, seeming frustrated, said, “*Don’t you see? He is the crucifix!*” In fact, Fernand keeps a crucifix on his chest between his arms. He embraced that crucifix always, so he remembers why he is in that bed. Mother St.Teresa was so impressed with him that she decided her sisters should live close to him.



Bishop Cozzens smiles while offering Benediction with the Eucharist near the Headwaters of the Mississippi on May 19, 2024, as perpetual pilgrims kneel.

Each time I visited Ghent, the sisters took me to Fernand's room, where I celebrated Mass for him. During Mass, they took the crucifix from his chest and placed it on the altar. I always thought that was a perfect symbol of what happens at Mass. All of Fernand's suffering was poured into that crucifix and, through the Mass, united to Christ's own offering to the Father for the salvation of the world. When I visited Fernand, he would say to me that he knows he has done more good on that bed than he would have as a priest. He said, *"This bed is my altar, here is where I offer my sacrifice."*

He was perhaps the most joyful man I have ever met. In fact, the sisters told me that when they were having a bad day, they would visit Fernand because being in his presence always cheered them up.

The last time I was there to celebrate Mass for him, he told me two things. He spoke about how he longs to receive Jesus in the Eucharist every day, and as soon as he receives Communion, he begins to long for the next day.

And then he said a line that I will never forget. *"Father Andrew, I am just a man with all my weakness, but I am burning with love."* When he said this, I felt like I was before the burning bush – the fire that burned but was not consumed. I also thought of the burning heart of Christ for love of the world. Fernand had suffered much in his life, and I know it was not easy, but he came to see this as his mission. As he surrendered himself to God, his heart burned more and more, and he was able to see that his suffering, like that of Jesus, was for the life of the world.

Brothers and sisters, each of us is called to this mission of Jesus to make disciples, and each of us will do it in our own way. Some of us are called to go door to door or talk to people on the streets. Many of us are called to help create evangelizing opportunities and invite people to them. Some of us are called to provide hospitality, music, or lead small groups or retreats. Some of us are called to support this work financially. Some are called to suffer and pray for this work to be fruitful. But all of us have a role and for all of us it will involve sacrifice. It begins with our own surrender to the Lord, so he can set our hearts on fire, and let him use us for his mission. Like Fernand, we should be able to say, *"I'm just a man, I'm just a woman, with all my weakness, but I am burning with love."*

"In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us. To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." (Lk 1:78-79)

As I write these lines, we just finished the Star of the North Eucharistic Congress and the launch of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage from Lake Itasca State Park. The thousands who attended these events in our diocese have spoken about the tangible sense that the Holy Spirit was at work. I believe we are on the verge of new life in the Diocese of Crookston. Jesus is working. He is filled with tender compassion for those who are lost and wants to share his burning



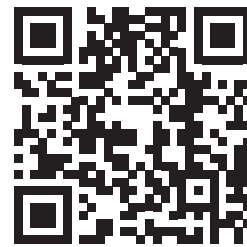
love for the world with us. He wants to use us to shine on the darkness of this world and to guide us into the way of peace.

I have experienced this desire in the heart of God. This is the fire about which Fernand speaks that makes me want to see everyone come to know Jesus Christ and his Church. Have you experienced this? Are you ready to share his love? Do you believe we can be part of this new life? If so, join me in this mission, let this fire of the Holy Spirit drive us to make disciples of those who live around us.

Let us entrust our efforts to Our Lady of Guadalupe, who is the patroness of the Americas and the New Evangelization. As she converted millions through revealing the tender compassion of her Son Jesus Christ to the New World, let us ask her to intercede for our efforts to share the love of Jesus Christ in northwest Minnesota. Let us dedicate the next seven years as we prepare for the 500th anniversary of her apparition to becoming the missionary Church God is calling us to be.



To join the mission, opt in today at
diocrookston.flocknote.com/connect



APPENDIX

For a beginning of this necessary intellectual formation, I recommend several books published by the University of Mary:

From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age

The Religion of the Day

The Christian Cosmic

Narrative: The Deep History of the World

These works help one to understand how to view the world today in light of our Catholic faith. They are short and readable.