



CHAPTER 4

A Reason to Hope

"Always be ready
to give an explanation to anyone
who asks you for

A REASON FOR YOUR HOPE."

—1st Peter 3:15

36. **A NEW SEASON OF HOPE.** As I mentioned in my introductory thoughts, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux will celebrate her 40th anniversary on June 5, 2017. As we anticipate our anniversary I feel as if we are on the verge of something truly transformational. On Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017 we will promulgate a new strategic plan designed to lead our diocese into its 40th year and beyond. I initiated strategic planning in May of 2015. I did so because I sensed our Diocese would be stronger by our 50th anniversary if we further cultivated a culture of planning during our 40th anniversary. However, the call for renewal actually came from the Holy Father himself.

37. **A CALL FOR RENEWAL.** In his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel) Pope Francis urges us: "Each particular Church, as a portion of the Catholic Church under the leadership of its bishop, is likewise called to missionary conversion. ... The bishop must always foster this missionary communion in his diocesan Church, following the ideal of the first Christian communities, in which the believers were of one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. ... At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and — above all — allowing the flock to strike out on new paths." (19) He continues: "I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. 'Mere administration' can no longer be enough ... I encourage each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform. ... Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way.' I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization." (20)



38. **A REASON FOR MY HOPE.** Inspired by the Pope Francis' call for "a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform," the aim of our strategic planning is the renewal of parish life. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he continues: "The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be 'the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.'" (21) To date nearly 800 people have been actively engaged in the planning process, either through participating directly on a commission or, most recently, through the outreach to pastors and parish leadership. The strategic plan, with its focus of forming disciples and tools for creative formation, have given me a reason to hope.

39. **A YEAR OF HOPE.** In 1st Peter 3:15 Saint Peter exhorts us: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." I have great hope for our future. I have hope because of what I know to be true about God, as well as the people in our diocese. I have hope because I believe God has inspired the process of strategic planning. I have hope because I believe the strategic plan is going to help parishes more effectively form disciples. I have a reason to hope and I want you to have a reason to hope. Therefore, the theme for the 40th year of our Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux is "A Year of Hope." Our Year of Hope peaks on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017, when we will promulgate our new strategic plan. It is a plan aimed at helping parishes in the formation of disciples. At the heart of the strategic plan is blueprint for forming disciples.

40. **ONE PROCESS, FIVE WORDS.** How do we form disciples? What's the process? Believe it or not, he has made it somewhat clear to see how we form disciples. When we look at the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church's great documents on evangelization, as well as common human experience, we will notice five dimensions of spiritual maturation in Christ. They are: *connect, encounter, conversion, grow, mission*. Rather than looking at these five words as linear steps, consider these as descriptions of inner experience that describe aspects of spiritual maturation. I remember my years of being a pastor. I had the privilege of watching people mature in their faith. For many, the first step was *connecting* with other people who were also searching. Then, over time, they had a personal *encounter* of God. This personal encounter was often life changing, and they gradually experienced *conversion*. They began to learn more about the God, the Bible, and the Church. They began to *grow* in their faith. Finally, they felt more comfortable sharing their story with others. They began to participate in the *mission* of Christ.

During the stages of spiritual growth all five "words" are active, however, depending on where you are in your relationship with God, one of these words might describe where God is taking the initiative to meet you. For example, while participating in a Bible study (*grow*), I deepen my relationships with others in the class (*connect*) and experience God's presence (*encounter*) in the truth of the study. It's like a spiral staircase. I move through the same five aspects of spiritual growth throughout the rest of my life; however, I do so going deeper and deeper. For example, I have had several deeply personal *encounters* of God. Each of them has led me to deepening *conversion*. Each *conversion* has led me to a deepened *growth* in faith. Knowing these "five words" helps me know what's the next step for continued growth.



41. **CONNECT.** We cannot come to full maturity in Christ alone. We need other people. This is why today's tendency toward isolation and relational atrophy is so threatening. We need to connect to people. Whether you consider yourself familiar with Christ or whether you consider yourself a novice at best, the easiest place to start the journey is with other people who are on the journey. As I look back on my earlier years as a young adult in my twenties I recognize a pattern. There were seasons in my life where God "felt" close and there were seasons where God felt more distant. Interestingly enough one of the common threads in this dynamic was whether or not I had people in my life who wanted my holiness more than I did. Likewise, there were countless moments when I wanted to "take the next step with God." Sometimes I did and I grew closer to him, sometimes I did not. Again, one of the common themes as to whether or not I was able to "take the next step with God" was whether or not I surrounded myself with people who wanted this to happen. As I reflect upon my spiritual history I recognize that I need people to walk with me as I walk with Christ.

If there are any of us reading now who recall moments in your spiritual life where you were once closer to Christ, may I reverently ask: What happened? What led to the distance in your spiritual life? May I reverently ask if there were a lack of people in your life to help sustain the fervor? Similarly, if there are any of us reading now who recall wanting to "take the next step with God" but struggled to do so I invite you to consider if you had people to help you stay committed to the commitment. If we are going to live in Christ, we need people to help us. We need to connect with others. We need to stay connected to others who support us on the journey.

42. **ENCOUNTER.** Pope Benedict XVI teaches: "Being 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." (22) We encounter him in a variety of ways. There is no single program, event, or ministry that has the monopoly on how God initiates his presence in our life. However, most people will not give their lives to someone whom they have not first met. And, if our encounter of them was not memorable or life-changing then we probably will not remember them or change our life. Encounter is not a singular event, as if I experience Christ and then walk away from the relationship. I encounter him for rest of my life through sacraments, study, prayer, community, service, etc. However, notice the Holy Father's implicit description of the encounter, it is one that "gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." Our encounter with Christ, especially if it is a life-changing encounter, is critically important today. Luckily, God wants this more than we do.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us: "God calls man first. Man may forget his creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer." (23) What gives me deep encouragement is the Catechism's description of my life and perhaps your life. I often "forget" God. I often "hide far from his face." Admittedly, I too "run after idols" and sometimes "accuse God of having abandoned me." In it all, with all of those patterns, God "tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter." Jesus, our hope, is pursuing you. He is inviting you into a personal encounter with him.



43. **CONVERSION.** When we encounter Christ, especially if it is a profound experience, we become awakened. It is as if just for a moment our eyes are opened. In the encounter we see things differently, we feel things differently. For a moment life is different. However, as the days wane and the initial experience fades, it becomes harder and harder to recapture the experience. This is most often because encounter is most naturally followed by conversion. The experience of encounter is a gift from a person — Jesus. The gift is given not so that I love the gift but that I love the giver of the gift.

Many of us in the moment of encounter say “yes” to God. For many of us, the most concrete way to live in the “yes” is to learn to say “no.” This is where the tough work of the spiritual life takes place: learning to say “no.” We have to choose to choose. As mentioned earlier, Pope Francis encourages us “May we not be robbed of hope.” The thief that most often robs our hope is sin, for I cannot live in a new “yes” unless I learn how to live in a new “no.” In 1st Corinthians chapter 13 Saint Paul speaks eloquently about love. Saint Paul had a life-changing encounter with God and as he speaks of love he is speaking from firsthand experience. It is there he writes: “When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things.” (24) Another biblical image is that of the rich young man. There he is face to face with Christ himself; however, he is unable to let go of the things that prevent his taking the next step with Christ. I believe the rich young man was afraid: afraid of change, afraid of the unknown, afraid of what might happen. However, it is clear that after the encounter with Christ the rich young man needed conversion. After our encounter we need conversion.

44. To help us understand conversion, let us listen to the words of Pope Benedict at a homily during a priestly ordination. “In the words ‘I do,’ spoken at our priestly ordination, we made this fundamental renunciation of our desire to be independent, ‘self-made.’ But day by day this great ‘yes’ has to be lived out in the many little ‘yeses’ and small sacrifices. This ‘yes’ made up of tiny steps which together make up the great ‘yes,’ can be lived out without bitterness and self-pity only if Christ is truly the center of our lives.” (25) Here, he teaches us two essential things about conversion: “this fundamental renunciation of our desire to be independent, ‘self-made’” and “day by day this great ‘yes’ has to be lived out in the many little ‘yeses’ and small sacrifices.” Conversion is perhaps easiest to see in marriage and family. Let us look at marriages. As a priest of 27 years I have spent countless hours with married couples. Marriages only work if two people choose to let go of living independently and choose to live for something bigger than themselves. Two independent lifestyles cannot co-exist and expect that a marriage is going to work. At some point, if the relationship is going to work, couples have to choose to change their lifestyle. Likewise, in order to be present to their children, parents have to often say “no” to what they “want” in order to say “yes” to being a parent.

We often see people encountering God in a personal way. Yet, we live in a church culture where we assume that the “next step” after encounter is ministry. Perhaps this is the invitation from God; however, many times the “next step” after encounter is not ministry. Instead many times people are called to deepen their conversion. Here, we learn to say “yes” to God in an on-going way by saying “no” to sin. Our conversion supports the on-going encounter.



45. **GROW.** What is next after conversion? Let us simply look at human relationships. Often the natural can help us appreciate the supernatural. Imagine that a man meets a woman. He has a profound encounter with her. He thinks about her often. He wants to pursue a relationship with her. He cleans himself up a bit and begins to show interest. After the first few dates he realizes the only way he can continue the relationship is if he stops drinking to excess. With other's help, he, one day at a time, embraces sobriety. One date is followed by another date. Over time he learns more about her: about her family, her dreams, her interest in him. The natural progression of natural relationship is growth. Likewise, conversion leads to growth. Growth grounds the conversion in something bigger than personal determination or subjective experience. Growth fills the hole within. When we let go of vice during our conversion the letting go created a vacuum. Growth fills the vacuum with something healthy for our soul. Growth in the spiritual life looks as different as the individual person. However, for many it is an exciting time of lifestyle change. I begin to study, learning who Christ is. I begin learning how to stay in relationship with the person of Christ. I begin learning what that church teaches us about him and about my life. I learn what it means to be human and what my life is really meant to be. I begin to learn what God envisions for my role as a husband and father or a wife and a mother. I learn about virtue and about healthy discipline in prayer and decision making. My subjective experience of God is now grounded in the objective teachings of the church. Here, as I grow, I come to see the wisdom of Saint Paul: "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." (26) Encounter leads to conversion and conversion leads to growth.

46. **MISSION.** Let us go back to the example of the man who pursues a relationship with the woman. He is sober. He has changed his lifestyle. He no longer lives only for him. As their dating relationship deepens, the man chooses to live appropriately committed in relationship with his now girlfriend. She has captured his heart. He may even be falling in love. We see it happen all the time. The same is true in our relationship with God. If our man in the example were to be asked by anyone why he changed his life or if he were even dating the only appropriate answer would be the truth. The most natural response is to be unashamed in telling others about what has happened in his life. He loves to tell others about who she is and what she has done for him. In mature Christians, there is no fear of sharing the good news. Pope Francis says: "All the baptized, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization. It would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, to be actively engaged in evangelization." (27) These are challenging words, but they are true nonetheless. Mission is never the fruit of a perfectly planned program or a well-organized manual. Mission is always the fruit of a life which knows what it is to be found and healed, encountered and forgiven. Mission is born of a constant experience of God's mercy. At some point during my growth I will learn to hear God's voice in my life. As I learn to listen, I will inevitably hear him call me into the mission, for I want to share with others how he has changed my life. Encounter leads to conversion and conversion leads to growth and growth propels me into mission.



*The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, 1601
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio*

47. **WHERE ARE YOU?** As I mentioned earlier, rather than looking at these five words as linear steps, consider these as descriptions of inner experience that describe aspects of spiritual maturation. During the stages of spiritual growth all five are active, however, depending on where you are in your relationship with God, one of these words might describe where God is taking the initiative to meet you.

You no longer have to figure things out on your own. Connect, encounter, conversion, growth, and mission are indicators of where God is calling you. However, the call of God is personal and personalized. God can call, God can offer the gift, however, we have to be ready to hear, respond and receive the gift. So, where is God calling you? Which of the five words most speaks to you? Where have you succeeded in the past? Where has your spiritual momentum faded? Where do you need help? What do you really want this Christmas?

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

For your personal prayer and small group discussion

- What phrase, concept or section most spoke to your heart?
- What phrase, concept or section causes you to think differently?
- Connect, encounter, conversion, growth and mission: which one of these do you feel people struggle with the most?
- Connect, encounter, conversion, growth and mission: which one of these do you feel is the most natural place for you to start if you were going to take the “next step” in your spiritual life?
- What do you really want from God this Christmas? Has your answer changed at all since week one?

FOR YOUR PRAYER

Praying with the Scripture readings from daily Mass

- **SUNDAY, DECEMBER 18.** Matthew 1:18-24: “his mother Mary” (vs 18) Today, consider how Mary waited for God to intervene in her circumstance with Joseph. What person or circumstance in your life are you still waiting upon God’s intervention with? How are you waiting? Are you waiting ‘with Him’ as you wait for Him to act?
- **MONDAY, DECEMBER 19.** Psalm 71: “My mouth shall be filled with your praise” (vs.8) Consider all the ways God has blessed you over the many seasons of your life. How has God helped you this Advent season? Today, take time to thank Him, to praise Him for all He has done.
- **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20.** Luke 1:28-31: “coming to her” (vs. 28) Through the angel Gabriel, God took the initiative in His plan of salvation. God has taken the initiative in your life. In what ways do you notice God’s initiative this Advent?
- **WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21.** Luke 1:39-45 “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled” (vs. 45) What do you sense God has been saying to you through this letter? Do you believe what He has said is true? Ask Him for the gift of faith to truly “believe what was spoken to you by the Lord.”
- **THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22.** Read the Scripture readings for Christmas day to prepare for this weekend’s Liturgy. Prepare your heart to receive.
- **FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23.** Read the Scripture readings for Christmas day to prepare for this weekend’s Liturgy. What do you really want?
- **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24.** Read the Scripture readings for Christmas day to prepare for this weekend’s Liturgy. Are you ready for Him?



ENDNOTES

- 1 Philippians 3:20
- 2 John 15:11
- 3 Saint Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* 1,3,4:PL 32,1312
- 4 Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 10,20:PL 32,791.
- 5 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2566
- 6 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 524
- 7 Romans 8:38-39
- 8 *Spe Salvi* no. 2
- 9 *Spe Salvi* no. 38
- 10 Hebrews 4:15
- 11 *Spe Salvi* no. 36
- 12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2727
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Pope Francis, Address to Youth, Morelia, Mexico, February 16, 2016
- 15 Pope Francis, Homily, Holy Saturday, March 30, 2013
- 16 Pope Francis, Homily, Solemnity of the Assumption, August 15, 2013
- 17 Ephesians 4:14
- 18 Pope Francis, General Audience, Saint Peters Square, October 15, 2014
- 19 *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 30&31
- 20 *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 25&33
- 21 *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 28
- 22 *Deus Caritas Est* no. 1
- 23 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 2567
- 24 1st Corinthians 13:11
- 25 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, Chrism Mass, Holy Thursday, April 9, 2009
- 26 Romans 12:2
- 27 *Evangelii Gaudium* no. 120

A YEAR OF HOPE

SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2017

- What? 200th Anniversary Celebration of Saint Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux
- Where? Saint Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux

SATURDAY, JUNE 3, 2017

- What? Ordinations to the Priesthood
- Where? Saint Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux
- When? 10:00 a.m.
- Who? Brice Higginbotham, John David Matherne, Jean-Marie Nsambu

SATURDAY, JUNE 3, 2017

- What? 40th Anniversary of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux Vespers
- Where? Saint Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux
- When? 7:00 p.m.

SUNDAY, JUNE 4, 2017

- What? 40th Anniversary of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux Mass with Bishop Shelton J. Fabre promulgating the strategic plan
- Where? Saint Francis de Sales Cathedral in Houma
- When? 2:00 p.m.

PASTORAL LETTER RESOURCES

Visit htdiocese.org/pl for resources dedicated to this letter, including audio files of the bishop reading his letter, videos unpacking each chapter, and resources to help you pray with the daily scriptures.



Song of the Angels, 1881
William-Adolphe Bouguereau