

To Know, Love and Serve Jesus Christ through His Body – the Church



A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP EDWARD J. BURNS TO THE
FAITHFUL OF THE DIOCESE OF JUNEAU
ON THE VIGIL OF THE SOLEMNITY OF PENTECOST — JUNE 7, 2014

I. Introduction

The Year of Faith

In October 2012 Pope Benedict XVI launched a Year of Faith to be observed throughout the Universal Church, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, the twentieth anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and to promote the New Evangelization.

To launch the Year of Faith in our diocese, on October 1st, 2012, the feast day of St. Therese of Lisieux, the patroness of our state and diocese, I addressed a pastoral letter to the faithful of the Diocese of Juneau and Southeast Alaska. Entitled *Rediscover the Journey and Joy of Encountering Christ*, it spoke of the urgency of the New Evangelization and outlined various diocesan initiatives planned for the Year of Faith.

These included:

- My spending a number of days in each of the parishes and missions of our diocese on an extended Pastoral Visit.
- Beginning the first stage in a diocesan census.
- Introducing the clergy and faithful of the diocese to the New Evangelization.
- Installing equipment and software for each of our parishes in the diocese to advance catechetical ministry and promoting the New Evangelization.
- Conducting the “One Shepherd/One Voice” year-long series of carefully coordinated catechetical homilies preached on specified Sundays throughout the Year of Faith.
- Convening a Diocesan Synod, which would meet on November 21-24, 2013, on the final weekend of the Year of Faith.

The Diocesan Synod

After lengthy preparation, the Synod brought together all of the priests, deacons, and most religious of the diocese as well as representative members of all the parishes and missions; lay associations of the faithful; Catholic charitable and fraternal organizations; youth and members of the Alaska Native, Filipino, and Hispanic communities.

During three days of prayer, worship, conversation, discussion and debate, the members of the Synod recommended resolutions in five subject areas:

- a. Personal Relationship with Jesus Christ;
- b. The Church and Society;
- c. The Future of the Church;
- d. Stewardship and the Temporal Needs of the Church;
- e. Liturgical, Sacramental and Spiritual Life.

Priorities and Themes of the Synod

In their recommendations to me, the Synod members identified their highest priorities. These were:

1. Evangelizing outreach to inactive and alienated Catholics;
2. Steadfast advocacy on behalf of life and opposition to abortion and euthanasia.
3. Promoting vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and religious life.
4. Improving maintenance and care for our church buildings and other parish and diocesan structures.
5. Joining the priests of the Diocese in the spiritual practice of abstaining from meat on all Fridays of the year (*Rediscover the Journey and Joy of Encountering Christ*, 2012).

Reflecting on the priority given to these resolutions, as well as the other resolutions adopted by the 2013 Synod, I have identified the following themes that underlie them all:

- a. The urgency of the New Evangelization;
- b. The necessity to provide a richer and more systematic catechesis to the adults, children and young people of the diocese.
- c. The desire of our clergy and faithful to grow in holiness and to highlight and strengthen our Catholic identity.

At the heart of our Catholic identity is personal faith in Jesus Christ and lifelong commitment to him as his disciples. As disciples in an increasingly secular society, we need to be well-formed in our faith, not only as a means of living in a way pleasing to God, but to be equipped to explain and defend the values of the gospel.

Similarly, we need to be secure and confident in our identity as Catholics, to know, appreciate and love our Catholic tradition and to grow in holiness and devotion by incorporating or re-incorporating Catholic liturgical, spiritual and devotional practices into our personal and parish life.

For this reason the goals I outline in this letter are grouped to reflect the four sections of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Primary Emphasis on Evangelization and Catechesis

After consultation with the priests, deacons, religious, diocesan/parish staff members, and the Diocesan Pastoral Council, I have decided that while we work to embrace the New Evangelization it is important we focus on catechesis and sacramental preparation.

While we will see catechesis and sacramental preparation as a priority, the other resolutions of the Synod that I have accepted will be incorporated in the Diocesan Pastoral Plan which will be drafted and adopted in stages during the coming year. Our task on the personal, parish and diocesan level is this: we need to become much better equipped to be active missionary disciples and to continue to have an active, missionary local Church.

II. To know God and to Believe in His Love and Divine Plan

Discipleship is foundational for every aspect of Catholic life. Discipleship is key to addressing the challenge posed by the fewer number of Church vocations and the enormous numbers of Catholics who have drifted away from the practice of the faith. Only disciples who intimately know their Lord and who know and cherish our Catholic tradition will encourage and foster vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and the religious life. And only those who are disciples appreciate the urgent necessity to invite back those Catholics who have drifted away from the practice of the faith, and share their hope in Jesus Christ with those who are seeking to know the purpose and meaning of their lives.

Deepen Personal Faith in Jesus Christ

To renew and strengthen the Church in Southeast Alaska we must work together to make personal faith in Jesus the touchstone of parish life, especially in teaching and preaching.

Our parishes need to find ways to provide those seeking to know Christ with tested and effective programs of evangelization and discipleship formation. Similarly, parishes need to provide regular and ongoing opportunities

for Bible study for adults, youth and teens. As the great Church Father, St. Jerome said, “Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ.”

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is the sacramental and catechetical process that leads those who come to faith in Jesus and in his Church to conversion and the new life of Baptism. It is also the model for all evangelization and catechesis in the Church. Strengthening and improving the implementation of the RCIA in our parishes is absolutely necessary for the success of the work of evangelization and faith formation.

While the parish catechetical and sacramental preparation programs are established to help form our children and young people as disciples of Jesus, the parents are the primary teachers of their children in the faith. We must help parents understand their responsibility and assist them in their role of passing on the faith to the next generation. By supporting the catechetical practices at home we will strengthen, renew and improve the catechetical and sacramental programs, youth ministry and adult faith formation on the parish level.

Young people completing their Christian initiation by receiving the sacrament of Confirmation should understand the faith, know the basic doctrines of the Church and be able to articulate their commitment to Christ. To strengthen the connection between this sacrament and lived discipleship, I am raising the age at which a young person receives the Sacrament of Confirmation to the second semester of eighth grade at the earliest.

And, parishes should look for ways to promote and organize small faith sharing groups as a means of deepening personal faith in the Lord.

Know and Understand Jesus Christ, the Faith, and Teachings of the Church

Discipleship begins and is sustained by encountering Jesus and our gift of salvation through Him in the life of the Church. As Catholics living in a society and in a region that increasingly promotes secular ideologies or that misunderstands our beliefs and traditions, this is all the more reason why we must help our people know and understand Jesus Christ and the doctrines of the Church. Therefore, we must commit ourselves to fostering a culture in this diocese of continuing education and formation in the faith, both for the faithful and those engaged in pastoral ministry—especially for our priests and deacons. All of our parishes must find effective ways to provide ongoing, consistent and high-quality catechetical programs for adults. It is important that the faithful of the diocese acquire a thorough foundation in the Catholic faith as presented in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The ongoing formation process for priests and deacons will find opportunities to address how we preach on the faith and teachings of the Church in our homilies. At the same time, our parish catechetical and sacramental programs should utilize the technology and electronic network that now connects the diocese.

III. Celebrating God’s Plan for Us in the Church

Embracing the Mysteries of Faith

The Eucharist is the source and summit of our life as a local Church and as parish communities. We refer to those who attend Sunday Mass each week as ‘practicing Catholics,’ yet we know that participation in the Sunday Eucharist, especially among younger Catholics, has declined. Beginning with our own example of never missing Sunday Mass unless prevented by a serious cause, we need to work together to foster active and prayerful participation in Sunday worship by all the faithful, to promote a deeper understanding of the Mass and sacramental life and to deepen our personal faith in Jesus through listening to his Word and receiving his Body and Blood.

Therefore all of our parishes should increase their efforts to celebrate solemn, reverent, joyful and welcoming celebrations of the Eucharist that are faithful to the universal and diocesan liturgical norms. Parishes need to find ways to deepen and renew understanding by the faithful of the meaning and importance of ‘full, conscious and active participation’ by the Sunday assembly.

Similarly, priests and deacons must give priority to ongoing formation to strengthen and improve their preaching ministry. Our parishes must do whatever is possible to strengthen and improve the formation and preparation of pastoral musicians, lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, altar servers, ushers and sacristans.

We must provide support and encouragement to parents and families to keep the Lord’s Day holy, especially when scheduling of sports and other activities conflict with attending Sunday Mass.

In conjunction with the previously mentioned section on bible study, parishes should consider ways to deepen

openness to the Scriptures as proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word at Mass. Parishes should find ways to encourage and provide group reflection, or lectio divina, on the Sunday readings for the faithful.

We need to evaluate, strengthen and improve preparation programs for the reception of the Sacraments of Baptism, Penance, First Communion and Confirmation, especially in light of evangelization and outreach to inactive Catholics. At the same time, we need to evaluate, strengthen and improve the parish marriage process and preparation and how we support and minister to newly married couples so that they may grow strong in living the Sacrament of Marriage.

The diocese needs to increase its engagement with the lay leaders of prayer who provide the Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest in our small isolated communities. It is important that we determine their needs for on-going formation and support as they provide a wonderful service for the local church.

IV. Living our Lives in Christ as His disciples

Our Commitment to Live Lives That Are Pleasing to God

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means always seeking to live a life that is pleasing to God. We must strive to answer the call to holiness in our lives through the frequent celebration of the sacrament of Penance. But it is not enough to avoid sin – we must also strive to live virtuously and to serve God and our neighbor.

Some ways that parishes can do this are simple, but they need to work at accomplishing these things. Parishes can find a way to schedule and provide a yearly mission or retreat that encourages personal conversion and celebration of the Sacrament of Penance.

Our priests and deacons should instruct the faithful about God’s gift of forgiveness as they preach and teach on sin, repentance, conversion and confession. As we work to strengthen and improve parish sacramental preparation programs, the time of preparation for those approaching their First Penance can provide wonderful moments for parents to grow in the faith and we should not miss these opportunities of Catechesis. This would include effective catechesis for adults on the commandments, the seven deadly sins and the cardinal and other virtues.

In addition to all this, we need to find ways on both the parish and diocesan level to provide ministry and healing for those who struggle with pornography, drug or alcohol addiction or deep-seated moral problems.

After thorough consultation, I have decided to expand the chancery staff to include a Marriage and Family Life Office. This diocese needs to help strengthen families because they are the “domestic church.” We need to offer clear catechesis on marriage as established by God as a beautiful covenant between a man and a woman, modeled by Christ’s love for His Bride—the Church. In doing so, we will have the opportunity to review the teachings of the Church on marriage and family life to prepare to benefit from the fruits of the upcoming Synod on the Family.

At the same time, we also need to work on the diocesan and parish level to provide resources and education on Natural Family Planning to couples preparing for marriage and married couples of child-bearing age. The Church’s teaching regarding sexuality, marriage and family life are to be provided to children and young people with age-appropriate catechesis. And, we need to minister to those couples who are struggling in their marriage or may have experienced separation or divorce, as well as offer our pastoral presence to those who have remarried.

Serving Christ through the Charitable Works of Mercy

Charity is an integral part of faith in Jesus. As his followers, we are witnesses to his love and compassion when we serve and assist those who are poor or in need in our various communities and throughout the world.

Every parish in the Diocese of Juneau is called to manifest the great love that the Church has for the poor—a love of a mother for her children in need. This manifestation of love should take the form of direct service ministry, such as a soup kitchen, food/clothing pantry, etc. We should always discern how God is calling us to participate in the work of local ministries to the poor and homeless, to those in prison or jail, to the sick and homebound, etc.

In line with our catechetical efforts, our parishes should also provide instruction on the works of mercy and Catholic Social Teaching. Similarly, we need to strengthen and increase awareness and support for the work of Catholic charitable, relief and development organizations on both the diocesan and parish levels.

We also need to continue and expand our participation in the work of global solidarity in partnership with others as we seek to serve the needs of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. As a universal Church our charitable acts are ways to proclaim the Gospel message to the farthest corners of the Earth.

Reaching Out to Inactive Catholics and Inquirers

Sharing the joy and truth of the gospel with those who have drifted away from the practice of the faith and with those who seek to know Jesus, was identified as among the top five priorities by the members of the Synod. It is at the heart of the New Evangelization.

It is my desire to continue to provide on the diocesan and parish level, on-going education for priests, deacons, lay ministers and the faithful on the New Evangelization in general and evangelizing outreach in particular.

Parishes must be prepared to welcome returning or alienated Catholics “back to the fold.” We need to strengthen our capacity as a diocese and as parishes to fully utilize social media to reach out to inactive Catholics and inquirers.

It should not be overlooked that the celebration of specific Sacraments (Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Weddings) and funerals present us with wonderful opportunities to engage people who have been away from Church or who may be attending our Church for the first time. This is our opportunity to offer a warm welcome and introduce them to a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ and His Church.

V. Conformed to Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father – A personal relationship with God through prayer

Regular Daily Prayer

Regular daily prayer is the life-breath of a personal relationship with Jesus. Prayer is at the heart of Christian discipleship. Each of us needs to commit ourselves to some rule of daily prayer in which we praise, thank and adore God, intercede on behalf of the needs of the Church and the world and renew and deepen our friendship with the Lord. Saint John Paul the Great in his encyclical for the beginning of the new millennium (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*) called on every parish to become a school of prayer. That should be the goal of every parish in our diocese.

As priests, deacons and religious are expected to have a yearly retreat, lay leaders should also plan for such moments of spiritual renewal. Our catechists should be provided with various methods of Christian prayer and consider participating in the parish’s bible study or lectio divina.

Parishes should also support the regular recitation of the rosary, Eucharistic Adoration, and other devotions. Parishes should also provide support and formation—especially in Church doctrine relating to the Holy Spirit—for those involved in the Charismatic Renewal. And parishes should look to find ways to provide prayer opportunities that attract young people and inquirers.

VI. Conclusion

I am confident that the efforts and work of the Synod will bear good fruit through the dialogue and collaboration of the priests, deacons, religious and faithful of our Diocese. The goals I have outlined in this letter will be realized in the pastoral plan and administrative policies and procedures which will be forthcoming over the next year.

It is my resolve to keep our Diocese focused on Christ and the mission of the Church as we work together to implement the resolutions of the Synod. Through it all, we will join our efforts to those of the Universal Church as we come to know, proclaim and teach Jesus Christ in this time of the New Evangelization.

As I present this Pastoral Letter to the Priests, Deacons, Members of Consecrated Life and to the faithful of the Diocese of Juneau at the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the Vigil of Pentecost 2014, the Liturgy offers this prayer to the Holy Spirit through which I ask that the Lord will bless our endeavors and give success to the work of our hands:

**Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that the splendor of your glory
may shine forth upon us
and that, by the bright rays of the Holy Spirit,
the light of your light may confirm the hearts
of those born again by your grace.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, forever and ever. Amen.**

GIVEN at the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary
At the 5:30 PM Mass

ON Saturday, June 7, 2014
The Vigil of the Solemnity of Pentecost

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Most Reverend Edward J. Burns
Bishop of the Diocese of Juneau, Alaska

