



In the name of Jesus

A Pastoral Letter 2021

*Most Rev. Douglas J. Lucia
Bishop of Syracuse*

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Ash Wednesday

Introduction

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

One of my great desires in the 18 months since I became your bishop on August 8, 2019 has been to share an initial pastoral letter outlining my vision for this local Church we call “home.” It is said that “Home is where the heart is!” and my heart is certainly at home here in Central New York and in my concern for this portion of God’s flock.

From a young age, one of my favorite images and devotions has been that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In part, it might be because there was a beautiful statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on the high altar reredos of my home parish of Holy Angels in Altona, NY. I remember also my mother bringing us to Mass on the First Friday of the month and desiring us to make our “Nine First Fridays.” To this day, when I am at my parents’ house, I can still see ever present their own statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus which for many years was found in a wall shrine in the living room.

Such images cause me to hear Jesus’ call in the Gospel, echoing through the ages: “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest [refresh you]” (Mt 11:28). This invitation and images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with open arms or pointing to his heart aflame with love are some of the most consoling and endearing expressions of where the heart of Jesus is for you and me.

Nonetheless, since I became a bishop, I am very concerned about how seriously people take their relationship with the God whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we can do in relationships, do you and I just take God for granted and expect God to be there for us no matter what we do or how much we ignore him in our lives? How seriously do we take our belief that our God is a Trinity of Persons, a community of love, and that we are all created “to know, love, and serve God” in a community called “Church” and to spur one another on to holiness of life and eternal happiness?

On August 8, 2019, when I began my service among you as the Bishop of Syracuse, I stated, “We are all in this together.” Now, more than ever, I am of the conviction that unless we work together as a family “to re-build this Church” (using the words Christ spoke to St. Francis of Assisi), the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ is in danger of being consumed by a culture of death whose sole purpose is to make us happy now, with no regard to the next life, i.e., our heavenly citizenship (cf. Phil 3:20).

Rise and Walk

During Advent 1978, Bishop Frank J. Harrison, the seventh Bishop of Syracuse, wrote a pastoral letter to the people of the Diocese of Syracuse titled, “We Are the Church.” In 2001, over 20 years later, Bishop James M. Moynihan, the ninth Bishop of Syracuse, issued a pastoral letter titled, “Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry.” Most recently, in 2017, my immediate predecessor, Bishop Robert J. Cunningham, the tenth Bishop of Syracuse, addressed the faithful in a pastoral letter titled, “Enriching the Church.” It focused on the role of the family in the life of the Church of Syracuse and beyond. As a continuation of these reflections on the role of Christ’s faithful in building up the Church – the living Body of Christ – in the world today, I offer, as the eleventh Bishop of Syracuse, this pastoral letter with its focus on the common inheritance in which we all have a share: *“I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give to you: **in the name of Jesus** Christ the Nazorean, rise and walk”* (Acts 3:6).

These words take on new significance for me when I receive letters from Christ’s faithful throughout the diocese. The letters contain varying opinions; but one common theme: “Walk the talk!”, “Walk like Jesus!” These are indeed huge footsteps to follow. But we must stop to consider that Jesus comes to meet us on the way, as he did with Simeon and Anna in the temple at his Presentation. In fact, Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms and as he meets his Lord he is filled with peace. The Lord reaches out to him as a “light to the nations” (cf. Lk 2:32) and a “lamp unto our feet” (cf. Ps 119:105).

However, it doesn’t stop there! For once Simeon and Anna had encountered the Christ, they knew they could go forth from the temple not because their work was done, but to carry Christ’s light in the temple of their bodies and to radiate Christ to those they would meet along the road of life. Recently, in a meeting with catechists, Pope Francis spoke of their vital responsibility in leading others to a personal encounter with Jesus through prayer, the Sacraments, and Scripture. In particular, he noted: *“There is no true catechesis without the testimony of men and women in flesh and blood”* (Audience 30 Jan 2021).

This sacred mission is one for all ages and invites you and I to consider how we care for the temple of the Holy Spirit – of God – which is our own body, physically and spiritually. Such care then extends to the human family as Jesus calls us: *“to love one another as I have loved you”* (Jn 13:34). It calls us also to examine how Jesus Christ is seen through us in our words and even more in our deeds.

The pastoral epistle of the Letter of James states: *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also, faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead”* (Jas 2:14-17).

Faith without works is lifeless...is dead. That is the great danger we face in the Catholic Church today. So many pay no heed to our Catholic faith and are turned off to religion in general because they do not witness behavior that exhibits the face of the God in whom we say

we believe, particularly, “God [who] is love.” Some feel they are condemned and are unredeemable in the eyes of “righteous churchgoers,” so why bother? Others want to make God into their own image, rather than the other way around. And yet still others say, “I believe, but...” and their faith and life don’t jive.

In this mix is where I find the Church is needed even more, not less. Isn’t that the real scenario in which the infant Church found itself? A sinful world needing to hear the name of Jesus to know redemption and to “rise and walk.” Permit me to share with you a candid reflection that was sent to me recently. It illustrates for me what our parish churches must be:

If you're having sex before marriage, go to church anyway. If you are a drug addict trying to beat addiction, go to church anyway. If you were out drunk all night the night before, go to church anyway. If you aren't sure what gender you prefer, go to church anyway. If you can't quit that disgusting habit, go to church anyway. Church is a hospital for the broken, lost, empty, confused, desperate, and rejected. Every sinner has a future, and every Saint has a past. How do we break the chains of addiction and bondage? By prayer - prayer for you and prayer with you! There isn't a single person within the 4 walls of the church that doesn't have something they hate or regret about their past. We've all made mistakes and will continue to - BUT His Grace is enough!! There's things that I'd never want to admit out loud about myself, but God knows. And He loves me nonetheless. So whatever you've done, whatever you're doing, whatever you will do....go to church anyway. It might just change your life!! If you are in church and don't have any of those problems, stop running those people away! Just like you got saved, don't hinder someone else from a life changing/saving experience. It's time to shepherd some lost sheep.

Before people get too upset with the ideas shared above, remember the likes of Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, Matthew, Thomas, Paul the Apostle, Mary of Egypt, Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi, Margaret of Cortona, Thomas Becket, Philip Howard, Ignatius of Loyola, Bartolo Longo, Dorothy Day – and the list could go on – who, despite their sins and weakness, would be recognized as true disciples of Jesus. In turn, they would exemplify the virtues of faith, hope, and love to their neighbors and those struggling in faithful discipleship.

Yet, all mentioned in the above paragraph and other members of the Communion of Saints would be the first to say that without some encounter with Jesus Christ, either personally or through his Church, they would have remained lost. To this end, we hear Jesus instructing us, like he did those present at Lazarus’ tomb: “Take away the stone” (Jn 11:39). Isn’t that the mission that you and I are called to share in as we are raised from the waters of baptism – to be open and to let Christ be known and seen through us? This pursuit is summarized in St. Paul’s letter to the Church of Ephesus: *Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body’s growth and builds itself up in love”* (Eph 4:15-16).

Live the Truth in Love

So how do you and I do this today? How do we share the Holy Name of Jesus and the love of his Sacred Heart with those we encounter in our parishes and in our daily lives?

First, I believe we need to be a people of the **kerygma** – a people who proclaim boldly and with loving conviction the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is both the Gate and the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:9-11). To better know him and his teaching, I consider it important that we invigorate evangelization and strengthen Catholic education and catechesis/formation in parishes throughout our diocese. As a start, I encourage ongoing Bible study and catechesis for parishioners of all ages so they can better know the Word of God and understand its connections with the doctrine and magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church. Such catechesis rooted in Scripture and Tradition will invite participants to greater discipleship and help allay the confusion and error that has found its way into “popular” Catholicism. As noted earlier, faith and works go together and we find discord in the Church when members’ practices are not consistent with the teachings of the Church of which Christ is the Head.

Second, we must be a people of **prayer**. During Advent 1978, Bishop Harrison wrote, *“Thus it is in the Church that people look for the presence of God in the breaking of the bread, in the celebration of the sacraments, and in the songs of praise and proclamation of faith. It is within the bosom of the understanding and consoling family of faith that the weary pilgrim expects to find the Master who gives guidance, support and nourishment for the journey of life”* (“We Are the Church” – p. 11). Jesus Christ “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8) needs to be the head and center of diocesan life. To this end, I would like in the coming months that all parishes of the Diocese of Syracuse engage in an extended period of catechesis focusing on prayer, especially the greatest prayer of the Mass. As part of this renewal, it is my desire that Eucharistic Adoration be a regular part of the schedule of prayer in our parishes, along with a concerted effort to renew the quality of both liturgy and preaching in our churches.

Third, we must acknowledge our **sins and failures**. Since I became your diocesan bishop, like my predecessors, I have sought to confront the crimes and sins committed by persons within our diocese who failed in their charge to teach and pastor in imitation of Christ, the Good Shepherd. At the present time, we are seeking to provide the financial resources to aid victims and survivors through the process of re-organization. The wounds are still very real and in moving forward in our mission as Church, we must never forget the terrible harm done to victims and must do everything possible so that it never happens again. To victims and survivors who may be reading this pastoral letter, I cannot apologize enough. I also invite and ask you to be part of the Church’s rebuilding and revitalization.

Of course, at the heart of any renewal is the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation). This encounter with the Divine Mercy of our God is an essential building block in nurturing our growth as a child of God, along with casting out the darkness of sin from our lives. Frequent availability and use of this sacrament should be a keystone of a parish and its parishioners. Its grace strengthens the beacon of the Christian life in a world too frequently darkened and cheapened by sin.

Fourth, we must be a community of **faith and service**. We have already seen that faith and works are intimately connected and without both, the Church is dead! As our diocesan Church continues the process of pastoral planning to best serve the people of this diocese and with the resources that are available to us, it most important to come together even more in charitable outreach and advocacy. This is not always easy because of personal preferences and even biases, but it is necessary if the various parts of the Diocese of Syracuse are to truly give witness of the living presence of Christ. As Bishop Harrison wrote in his pastoral letter: *“To those whose experience of life is impaired by circumstances beyond their control, Jesus came to announce ‘a year of favor’”* (“We Are Church”). This mission of accompaniment and especially reaching out to those on the sidelines of life are the true reflection of what it means to minister in the Name of Jesus. Together we are called to invest our talents for the greater glory of God and the salvation of the world.

Fifth, we must provide **pastoral leadership** in helping the inhabitants of the Diocese of Syracuse respond to the universal call to holiness and come to know themselves as the People of God. Such leadership involves excellence and accountability provided by those who are ordained or commissioned as ministers of the Church. Our current Year of Vocations, under the patronage of St. Joseph, attests to the need for men and women of vision who are willing to give themselves wholeheartedly to God’s dream for the human family. It goes beyond priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, or lay ecclesial ministers. All persons by their baptism have been anointed as Priest, Prophet, and King. Anyone who claims membership in a parish or in the Catholic Church must remember the light of Christ they were entrusted with on the day of Baptism “to be kept burning brightly.” Practically speaking this means we cannot be “Catholic” in name only; our “believing” needs to be evident in our “behaving” and in our engagement in our local parishes.

Diocesan Mission: Our Strategy Today & Tomorrow

These reflections, along with the opportunities and the challenges they represent, are leading me to a new point in my ministry among you. Conscious of our diocesan mission of evangelization to help people discover, know, and proclaim Jesus Christ (“Our Catholic Faith: Know it – Live it – Share it”), it is my intention during 2021 to update our diocesan strategic plan, through a consultative process with clergy and laity. I would then like to develop a framework for a Diocesan Synod to be held prior to 2026, our 140th anniversary as a diocese.

There are three key concepts regarding a Diocesan Synod. It is: (1) *“an assembly...of Christ’s faithful of a particular Church”* (2) *“for the good of the whole diocesan community”* (3) *“assists the diocesan Bishop”* (see Canon 460/CIC 83). As we engage in re-organization as a civil entity, I believe it is also important for us to look at our “communion” as a diocese. Though we are many parts, how can we better reflect the presence of the Risen Christ as Church – as His Body – in the 21st century?

Patrick Collins in an essay titled, “The Diocesan Synod – An Assembly of the People of God,” observed: *“As a person experiences the Church, so he will come to think of the Church. [And] as*

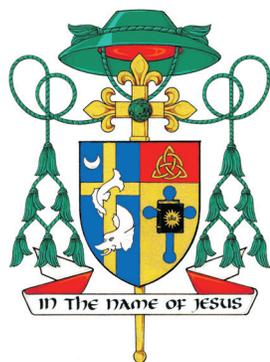
a person thinks of the Church, so it will become for him” (The Jurist 33 (1973), p. 402). The Diocesan Synod is meant to be an agent of (1) Pastoral Organization and Coordination (2) Communion and (3) Reform.

In his work, *Co-responsibility in the Church*, the late Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens wrote:

The church, with its roots in the past, is also reaching out dynamically toward the future: it guards fidelity as well as hope. Renewal is not restoration of the past. Rather the church, taking life from the past, wills to go on to meet the Lord, while answering the needs of the present. Christ was yesterday, is today, and will be tomorrow. He is the past, present and future of the church (p.17).

In such an assembly, one finds an instrument whereby the particular church can address in the local context “the already and the not yet” (Cardinal Suenens). This is my hope as I grasp the shepherd’s staff with which I was entrusted and seek to carry the light of Christ to light the way for our Diocesan family.

This is where my heart is these days. Be assured of my continued prayers for all who call the Diocese of Syracuse “home” and I ask in your kindness to pray that I might give God’s flock in Central New York and the Southern Tier a true shepherd’s care. May the Holy Name of Jesus be ever on our lips and may the love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus burn anew in our hearts!



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