



**THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A MUSTARD SEED**

*A Pastoral Letter*

*following*

*The First Diocesan Synod*

*Diocese of Brownsville*

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TO THE PRIESTS, DEACONS, CONSECRATED RELIGIOUS  
AND THE FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST  
IN THE DIOCESE OF BROWNSVILLE  
THE PARTICULAR CHURCH IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY  
PEACE AND GOD'S BLESSING

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE A MUSTARD SEED

The rich soil of the Rio Grande Valley that produces corn, cotton, sugar cane, maize, and citrus has proven to be equally fertile to the mustard seed that is the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup> The mustard seed was planted by the missionaries who traveled with the *conquistadores*. The first missionaries came from Spain, with determination and a firm commitment to proclaim the Good News of Salvation to the people of this land. In time, Mexico would declare its independence from Spain to become its own nation. The missionaries remained and the Church continued to grow. In 1836, the Republic of Texas seceded from Mexico and later joined the Union known as the United States of America. The missionaries, headquartered in Mexico, were no longer able to minister in Texas, and the care of souls was entrusted to the Church in the United States.

In 1849, at the request of the first Bishop of Texas based in Galveston, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and, four years later, the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament came from France. They nurtured the mustard seed and it continued to grow. By the year 1874, the seed had grown sufficiently for Blessed Pope Pius IX to formally establish the Church in the Rio Grande Valley; the first bishop to serve the Valley was appointed as shepherd of the Vicariate Apostolic of Brownsville. In 1912, the Vicariate Apostolic was raised to the dignity of Diocese and the See was transferred to Corpus Christi. Fifty-three years later, on July 10, 1965, Pope Paul VI separated the four counties known as the Rio Grande Valley from the Diocese of Corpus Christi to officially form the Diocese of Brownsville. Since then, diocesan priests from all over the United States and from other countries, as well as religious priests, sisters, and brothers have come to assist the native priests and deacons, brothers and sisters to nourish the continuously growing mustard seed that has blossomed into the Kingdom of God in the Rio Grande Valley.

*GRACES, BLESSINGS, AND OPPORTUNITIES*

The Church in the Valley continues to bear witness to the message it has received from God himself.<sup>2</sup> The message is not based on speculation, “but in the word of God which she [the Church] has received in faith.”<sup>3</sup> We are the carriers of this message in our time and the foundation of the Church in the Third Millennium. We are the heirs and beneficiaries of the commitments and accomplishments of all those who have preceded us in the faith, from apostolic times to the present. The life of the Church in the coming centuries will in some way rest upon, and be built up from what we do today.

We thank God, above all, for the supreme gift of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, and for our redemption. We thank Jesus for the gift of the Church, for faith and the Sacraments, and for embracing us

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<sup>1</sup> See Mk. 4: 30-32.

<sup>2</sup> See 2 Cor. 4:1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Encyclical letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II: *Fides et ratio* (Vatican City, September 14, 1998), 7. Hereafter, FR., 7. See also 1 Th. 2:13.

as his beloved brothers and sisters. We thank the Holy Spirit for his gifts and for preserving us in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.<sup>4</sup>

We are grateful to the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament as well as to all who have come after them to build up the Church. We are reaping the harvest of what they have sown.<sup>5</sup> They worked closely with the two Vicars Apostolic and the five Bishops who shepherded the faithful in the Valley since 1874 and especially with Bishop John J. Fitzpatrick whom we can truly call the father of our Diocese. I note, as well, the contribution of the priests, the deacons, the religious men and women, and the dedicated laity who have served the Church and for the generosity of our benefactors and friends. We keep them always in our prayers.

This pastoral letter is a reflection on the fine work of those all who participated in the First Diocesan Synod: the pre-synodal council, the members of the synod and the post-synodal council. In a special way, I thank the priests of the Diocese and all those who supported the synod and prayed for its success. Lastly, I acknowledge the efforts the general secretary of the synod and thank him for guiding the Synod so that it could successfully complete its work.

The Apostle Paul writes, “As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time, see, now is day of salvation!”<sup>6</sup>

Now is the time for us to enrich our understanding and our formation in the Catholic faith. Now is the time for us to study the Word of God individually and in groups. Now is the time to study the Church’s teachings and doctrines, and to turn anew to the sacramental wellspring of grace through which Christ refreshes our soul. Let us recommit ourselves totally to the Church’s life and mission by evangelizing and catechizing all those whom we have baptized in the Rio Grande Valley.

### *THE CHALLENGES WE FACE*

The Sower has planted many seeds. Some fell on fertile soil and it is bearing fruit; others did not.<sup>7</sup> Let us keep this in mind as we face the reality of the world today. We have not simply entered a new millennium, but, our own experience shows and what many thoughtful social analysts and commentators say, we appear to be witnessing the birth of a dramatically new and altered age whose spirit and character are still to be defined. We are entering uncharted waters. If we want to reach the distant shores of a more civilized, fully human and faith-filled world, we must say, “Yes” to the Lord’s call, as did our Blessed Mother, the Ever Virgin Mary.<sup>8</sup> To carry out our “Yes,” we will have to row into the deep uncharted waters of our soul. We will have to struggle, but with the help of God we shall succeed.

There seems to be a pervasive social undercurrent of doubt about the significance of the past, disconnectedness with the present, and uncertainty about the future. When the pace and scale of change are as great as they are today, we can easily become engulfed by irrational fears and apocalyptic visions. We see a deterioration of traditional forms of social organization, a decline of once hallowed institutions, and a most serious breakdown of the family. The traditional sources of authority (religious, intellectual, economic, and political) have lost a measure of respect, trust, and allegiance. Some no longer consider them capable of meeting our people’s needs.

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<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church, ed. 2<sup>nd</sup>. (Libreria editrice Vaticana, Vatican City) 2000, § CCC, § 811 - 870. Here after CCC.; See also Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations. Gen. Editor Austin Flannery O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 8 . Hereafter LG.*

<sup>5</sup> See Jn. 4:37.

<sup>6</sup> 2 Cor. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> See Mt. 13:1-9; Mk. 4:1-9; Lk. 8:4-8.

<sup>8</sup> See Lk. 1: 26-38

The emphasis on individual rights has often led to a disregard for the corresponding family and social responsibilities. Many people view today's world as superficial and without a center. They find themselves adrift in a sea of confusion caused by the many voices competing for their attention, and claiming to know what is true and meaningful for human existence. This causes disorientation and alienation; individuals waver between certainty and uncertainty, belief and disbelief.

The so called New Age rejects both the revealed truth of what a human person is and the traditional explanation of humanity based on the social sciences. It ushers in a growing conviction that unrealized human potential must be sought through unconventional paths of spiritual awakening, associated with a so-called postmodern age. This exploration signals an introspective turn that has too often resulted not in a deeper self-understanding, but in deeper self-absorption and more widespread loneliness.

Such thinking leads to an attack against all objective standards of right and wrong in the name of tolerance. It reduces sin to psychological categories of explanation, and leads to a moral permissiveness that results in self-degradation, shame, and ultimately a loss of respect for oneself, for others and for the Church. This can easily lead to the conclusion that we must forego judgments and the establishment of laws that choose the moral "preferences" of some over those of others. The only rule allowed to remain is that of the majority and whatever it holds.

Advances in communications technology have greatly increased our access to and exchange of information. The relentless advance of science and technology, and the expanding horizons in every sphere of knowledge, promise to continue to transform the world and our Valley, altering the way we live, work, and interact. They have also facilitated the dissemination of distorted information by activists and special interest groups, seeking to leverage public opinion in support of their ideologies. This has resulted in further tearing the social fabric and fostering division in the human family. Even devout believers have become prey to confusion and syncretism in their faith.

These conditions challenge the Church to sustain the bonds of local communities, and to hand on our faith to the next generation in a consistent and integral way.

### *THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE*

To effectively respond to these challenges let us ask ourselves the question asked by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, forty years ago: "What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What is the purpose of these victories, purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?"<sup>9</sup>

As your bishop, I desire for you, what the Church desires and has always sought for all the people of God: that you may attain the happiness and fullness of life to which the Lord calls you in this life, and union with God at the end of your earthly existence.

My message today is the same message Jesus proclaimed and entrusted to the Apostles: "Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand."<sup>10</sup> Jesus calls us to seek the perfect world, that is, the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> The goal of Jesus' preaching and ministry was to establish God's reign.<sup>12</sup> Jesus explained, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I expel demons, then the reign of God has come upon you."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations*. Gen. Editor Austin Flannery O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (Dec. 7, 1965), 10. Hereafter GS.

<sup>10</sup> Mt. 3:2.

<sup>11</sup> See Mt. 6: 33.

<sup>12</sup> Mt. 9:23; cf. Mt. 11:4f.

<sup>13</sup> Mt. 12: 28.

Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was not an earthly empire and it could not be understood in earthly terms.<sup>14</sup> It was to be a universal kingdom to which all were called. “People will come from East and the West, from the North and the South,” he said, “and will take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God.”<sup>15</sup>

At the appropriate time, Jesus entrusted his own message and mission to his Church,<sup>16</sup> and he gave to Peter, the keys to the kingdom: “I will entrust to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus said, “Whatever you declare bound on earth shall be bound in heaven; whatever you declare loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”<sup>17</sup>

As the early Church community began to define itself and develop its shepherds soon found it necessary to correct false ideas about God’s kingdom. “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,” St. Paul wrote, “but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> They warned the faithful that “the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>19</sup> While explaining that Christ’s kingdom transcended the limitations of this world,<sup>20</sup> it was not entirely removed from it. The Second Vatican Council put it this way: “While helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God’s kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass.”<sup>21</sup>

In our endeavors to further the cause of God’s kingdom, we must avoid two extremes. The first is to focus only on the people’s earthly needs, and so equate the building of the kingdom solely to achieving political, socioeconomic, and cultural transformation. The other is to so emphasize the transcendent nature of the kingdom that it seems to be entirely removed from this world; and so, to imply that the earthly concerns and struggles of humanity are trivial or irrelevant to the establishment of the kingdom. The first error conveys the notion that the kingdom is attainable by purely human efforts; the second, implies that human efforts are not necessary at all in bringing about the kingdom, because it can come about solely by God’s initiative.

God’s kingdom is blossoming in the Church,<sup>22</sup> even while its ultimate fulfillment lies beyond this world. It began two thousand years ago and continues to undergo growth and development, according to God’s plan and our cooperation with it. To belong to the Church is not only to enjoy a foretaste of the blessedness of heaven, but also to have the awesome responsibility of praying for the kingdom, proclaiming it, and completing the work that God has entrusted to us in order to bring it about. Whenever we live according to the Beatitudes, the kingdom of God draws nearer to us. Whenever we strive to bring Christ’s love, forgiveness, and healing to others, we are cooperating in the building of the kingdom. Cooperating with God in the building of his kingdom is about working to free ourselves and others from evil in all its forms.

## THE SYNOD’S VOICE

The First Diocesan synod has set goals that, in the years ahead, will be central to this mission. Our particular church is coming of age. We are gradually transforming our mission diocese into a missionary diocese. As we reflect on the humble, yet vibrant, beginnings of the Church in the Rio Grande Valley, we look to a future full of hope.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Jn. 18; 36; See also Mt. 13: 11; Mk. 4: 11; Lk. 8: 10.

<sup>15</sup> Lk. 13: 29.

<sup>16</sup> Mt. 10:5, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Mt. 16:19.

<sup>18</sup> Rm. 14: 17.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor. 6: 9.

<sup>20</sup> Jn. 18: 36.

<sup>21</sup> GS, 45.

<sup>22</sup> LG, 5.

<sup>23</sup> See Jer. 29:11.

The process of the Synod which I convoked at the dawn of the Third Millennium, has provided us with the framework to continue nourishing the mustard seed planted by those first missionaries over 150 years ago, and to build up the Kingdom of God in the Rio Grande Valley in an ever more effective manner. From the listening sessions conducted in the parishes and deaneries with the enthusiastic participation of more than 12,000 parishioners, nine themes emerged. Between 2002 and 2003, the official delegates representing clergy, religious and lay parishioners, gathered in six General Assemblies to further develop these themes. At the closing Mass, the post synodal council presented me with three pastoral priorities that it had identified for the diocese: communication, collaboration, and community (*communio*). Under these priorities, the synod identified nine pastoral initiatives that it considered most important for the life of the Church in the Valley. They are: evangelization, family, Christian formation and education, youth and young adults, social concerns, faith and culture, Christian ministry/service, liturgy and worship, and the Church in the Rio Grande Valley.

From these, I have selected two for the first phase of our pastoral plan: the New Evangelization, and Liturgy and Worship (a general promotion and renewal of our sacramental life). These two priorities are of primary and permanent importance insofar as evangelization is the font of the Church's growth within and throughout the world; and the sacraments are the font of the sanctification of the Church and its divine element. The sacraments give life to the Church, and evangelization foments its growth.

## EVANGELIZATION

Twenty-five years ago, Pope Paul VI proclaimed: "We wish to confirm, once more, that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the church. Evangelization is, in fact, the grace and vocation proper to the church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize. . ."<sup>24</sup> Pope John Paul II called for a new evangelization "new in its ardor, new methods and new expression..."<sup>25</sup>

Evangelization is, therefore, our most fundamental mission. We must proclaim God's love and announce Christ's saving power to the ends of the earth and, thus, draw all people to him, the "one mediator between God and man."<sup>26</sup> Only he, as universal Savior, can reveal God the Father to us and lead us into communion with him. Evangelization is our response to the command of the Lord,<sup>27</sup> and to an awareness that no one can believe the gospel if it is not proclaimed. The Apostle Paul asks "How can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?"<sup>28</sup>

"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" is the mission that Jesus entrusted to us through the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>29</sup> We have indeed fulfilled the first part of this command. We have almost 900,000 baptized persons in the Valley; the question is how well have we taught them all that Jesus taught us?

In times past, we often considered the priest or the sister to be the principal agent of evangelization.<sup>30</sup> Pope John Paul, II building on Pope Paul VI's teaching, reminded us that the responsibility to evangelize

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<sup>24</sup> EN 14

<sup>25</sup> Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, (Mexico City, January 22, 1999), 66. Hereafter EA.

<sup>26</sup> See 1Tim. 2:5. See also Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, (Vatican City, November 10, 1947), Hereafter MD.

<sup>27</sup> See Mt. 28:19-20.

<sup>28</sup> See Rm. 10:14.

<sup>29</sup> See fn. 3.

<sup>30</sup> See Apostolic Exhortation of his Holiness Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (Vatican City, Dec. 8, 1975), 15, 21. Hereafter EN.

belongs to the whole church. “The lay faithful, precisely because they are members of the *Church*, have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel: they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>31</sup>

The first form of evangelization is the active witness of one’s faith.<sup>32</sup> The most powerful witness a Christian can give is to “love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>33</sup> Thus when one has compassion for the needs of others, especially the poor and afflicted, his/her actions speak louder than words. The Christian, therefore, gives witness of Christ’s love through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.<sup>34</sup>

We cannot forget, however, that he not only fed the hungry and gave sight to the blind; he came not to condemn sinners, but so that they might have life and have it to the fullest.<sup>35</sup> In our broken world, the greatest poverty an individual can experience is not a material poverty but a spiritual poverty whereby the person does not know Christ or God’s love for us. Consequently, the clear oral proclamation of Christ’s good news is always the paramount objective of evangelization.<sup>36</sup>

Some may suggest that evangelization should be carried out through the implementation of various programs sponsored by the Diocese and/or the local parish. The success of evangelization, however, depends far more on the renewed and fresh opening of our minds and hearts to the truth of Christ, and on deepening our relationship with him. To use the late Holy Father’s words, we must launch a new evangelization; “new in its ardor, methods, and expression.”<sup>37</sup> And we must begin by rowing *mar adentro* (into the deep), allowing the Gospel to enrich our own lives and the life of the Church at home, before we venture out to proclaim it to others.

#### *THE DOMESTIC CHURCH*

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wisely placed the family as the nucleus of our religiosity. They call the family “the domestic church,”<sup>38</sup> the place in which we first live in community, and learn how to love, how to share, and how to work together for a common cause. It is in the home that the parents first teach their children, by word and example, how to embrace and live the Gospel. The Servant of God, John Paul II, called us to this when he told us that the new evangelization starts at home, in the family. “What is first needed for the evangelization of the world are *those who will evangelize*. In this regard everyone, beginning with the Christian family, must feel the responsibility to foster the birth and growth of *vocations*, both priestly and religious, as well as in the lay state, *specifically directed to the missions*.”<sup>39</sup>

#### *THE PARTICULAR CHURCH*

St. Paul, the indomitable preacher to the Gentiles, said, “If I preach the gospel this is no reason for me to boast, and woe is me if I do not preach it.”<sup>40</sup> With these words, the Apostle appears to underscore the importance of the Sunday homily. “The preaching, inserted in a unique way into the Eucharistic celebration, from which it receives special force and vigor, certainly has a particular role in

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<sup>31</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of his Holiness John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, (Vatican City, Dec. 30, 1988), 33. Hereafter CL. See also Encyclical Letter of his Holiness Pope Pius XII, *Mystici corporis christi*, (Vatican City, June, 9, 1943), 18-20. Hereafter MC.

<sup>32</sup> EN, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Mt. 19:19

<sup>34</sup> CCC, § 2447.

<sup>35</sup> See Jn. 3:15-16; 6:60; 10:10.

<sup>36</sup> See EA, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Address to the Assembly of CELAM (March 9, 1983), III: *AAS* 75 (1983), 778. See also EA, 6.

<sup>38</sup> LG, 11.

<sup>39</sup> CL, 35.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Cor. 9:16.

evangelization, to the extent that it expresses the profound faith of the sacred minister and it is impregnated with love.”<sup>41</sup> It is often the only opportunity we have for the Christian formation of our adult parishioners. Priests and deacons, together with the Bishop, bear a responsibility to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ “in season and out of season, [and to use Sacred Scripture to] refute falsehood, correct error, call to obedience, but [to] do all with patience and sound doctrine.”<sup>42</sup> To this end, I call upon our priests and deacons to join me in making a firm commitment to devote specific periods of ordinary time to designing, developing, and preaching sermons based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

There is another kind of preaching which is more properly called “catechesis” and it is often entrusted to the laity. Catechesis echoes the doctrine of the Church. It can take place in parish religious education classes and in tent missions, as well as through Disciples in Mission and *proclamadores de la palabra*, the San Juan Diego Ministry Institute, etc... To do it successfully, keep in mind “that the religious situation today calls for a catechesis that is more kerygmatic and more organic in its presentation of the contents of the faith.”<sup>43</sup>

The early missionaries in South Texas knew how to proclaim the Gospel in a manner understandable to the local people. They centered the life of the Church on the domestic church and, when appropriate, gave religious meaning to tribal customs. The development of the *altarcitos* in the home enabled our ancestors to keep and foster the faith when priests were scarce. Following the example of those early missionaries, indeed following the tradition of the Church, it is important that we recognize, respect, and challenge the culture of our people. “In America, the *mestiza* face of the Virgin of Guadalupe was from the start a symbol of the inculturation of the Gospel, of which she had been the lodestar and guide. Through her powerful intercession, the Gospel will penetrate the hearts of the men and women of America and permeate their cultures, transforming them from within.”<sup>44</sup>

Like the early missionaries, we too must understand the culture of the people to whom we are to preach the Gospel. The person from the valley, the “valleyite”, is the result of a second *mestizaje*. The valleyite catholic is a deeply religious person born in South Texas, or a recent immigrant, who resides in the State’s four southernmost counties known as the Rio Grande Valley. Influenced by both the North American and the Mexican realities, the valleyite blends the customs and traditions of the two, and speaks English, Spanish, and Tex-Mex. The family is enriched by varied cultures that include enduring traditions and basic fundamental values, such as a strong belief in the sanctity of children, family, community, and spirituality.<sup>45</sup> The Valley culture encompasses a mixture of traditional and contemporary ways of functioning, exercising paternal authority and defining female roles. The valleyite is concerned about success in life, is inclined to embrace the principles of a consumerist society, and expects to be accorded and to enjoy the freedoms guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America.

#### MODERN MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Jesus stood on a boat to preach, so that the crowds could see and hear him.<sup>46</sup> St. Paul preached at the Areopagus, where people gathered.<sup>47</sup> John Paul II took his pulpit worldwide to proclaim the Good News of salvation. In the third millennium, technology offers us a pulpit that can reach from our home to the very ends of the earth. “For the new evangelization to be effective, it is essential to have a deep

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<sup>41</sup> EN, 43.

<sup>42</sup> *The Liturgy of the Hours*, Vol III, Ordinary Time, weeks 1-17, Translator. ICEL (New York, Catholic Book Publishing Co.), 1975. From the antiphon of the Canticle of Zechariah, Feast of Timothy and Titus, Bishops.

<sup>43</sup> EA, 69.

<sup>44</sup> EA, 70.

<sup>45</sup> G. Rodriguez. *Raising nuestros niños in a bicultural world*. New York, New York: Fireside Rockefeller Center 1999. pg. 14.

<sup>46</sup> See Lk. 5: 3.

<sup>47</sup> See Acts. 17: 22.

understanding of the culture of our time in which the social communications media are most influential. Therefore, knowledge and use of the media, whether the more traditional forms or those which technology has produced in recent times, is indispensable.”<sup>48</sup> Following the example of St. Paul, for the past 25 years the Diocese has been airing catholic programs through its television and radio stations. Currently the Diocese has also developed an interactive web site as a way to utilize the modern means of communication to proclaim the Good News.

The modern means of communication technology are making the world smaller by the day. Letters that would take weeks to be delivered can now be e-mailed in a matter of seconds around the world. While the future of technology continues to be bright with its many wonderful promises, we must be cautious not to allow our noble achievements and ambitions to blind us with pride. This may lead us to a future we did not want for ourselves or our children: a future with new forms of oppression rather than liberation, loneliness and isolation rather than solidarity and communion. This could result in a dark culture of disbelief and death rather than a bright one of faith and life.

#### *AD GENTES*

Reflecting over the last 150 years, we note how much fruit the tiny mustard seed planted by the early missionaries has produced. It has grown into a healthy and fertile bush. It is time for us to take the mustard seed from it, and plant it elsewhere. It is time for our mission diocese to become missionary. We have taken our first tiny steps by creating a fraternal relationship between our diocese and the Diocese of Choluteca, Honduras. We have for many years contributed to our neighboring and sister Diocese of Matamoros, and a number of our parishes have serious missionary involvements, principally in Mexico.

What must our next steps be? In order to strengthen these bonds, we must form lay men and women to serve as missionaries *ad gentes*, through the San Juan Diego Ministry Institute, and we must discern what other missionary endeavors we may undertake.

#### *EVANGELIZATION PASTORAL INITIATIVE*

Because due to other commitments, many of you may not be able to go to other lands, we must discover how you may be missionaries “at home.” Thousands of pilgrims come to the Basilica every week. They come seeking favors from God through Mary’s intercession and in search of reconciliation and peace. They present us with a wonderful opportunity to be missionaries at home. There are hundreds of *colonias* in our diocese whose residents beckon us to bring the Good News to them through our programs of evangelization and catechesis. I invite you to serve as a catechist or a disciple in mission, serving your own parish or one of the colonias within it.

There are many baptized Catholics in our diocese who have not been adequately evangelized, due to their difficult life experience of years past. As a response to the tremendous challenge of evangelizing all the baptized the pastoral plan for evangelization is taking shape in the form of *Disciples in Mission*, a pastoral process that integrates prayer, the Sunday liturgies, faith-sharing groups for adults and teens, catechesis, family activities, planning, and follow-up activities into a coherent, parish-wide experience of evangelization. By doing this, the missionary dimension of the Church is restored to the heart of the community of faith—and this is the key to the Church’s ongoing revitalization.

This diocesan evangelization initiative, which has already been partially implemented in the parishes, is coordinated through the Office of Pastoral Life & Planning. Over the next three years (2007—2009), by means of this initiative, we will invigorate a recommitment to the New Evangelization in the Rio Grande Valley. All the parishes in the diocese, as well as the diocesan offices of Catechesis, Family Life, Catholic Schools, Youth & Young Adults, Catholic Social Services, Communications and the San Juan Diego

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<sup>48</sup> EA, 6, 72.

Ministry Institute will collaborate in this effort together with the Lay Ecclesial Movements in the diocese. Our goal is to build on the good already happening in a parish by inserting a missionary consciousness into the liturgies, the religious formation programs, catechesis, and all other activities currently in place.

All of us who have been given the gift of faith are called to freely share this gift with others. I invite all of you, therefore, priests and deacons, sisters and brothers consecrated to the Lord, and all the faithful of the diocese to join me in this effort. Let us tell others how God is acting in our lives. Let us share the Gospel with those who have no church community, and with those who have distanced themselves from the Catholic community. Let us also extend a hand of welcome to those seeking full communion with the Catholic Church. As we proclaim the Gospel by sharing our faith, let us do so in the spirit of dialogue, with respect and concern for others. Let us listen and let us pray, allowing God to touch the other person's life with his love and mercy. Our approach must be gentle, inviting and non-threatening. Let us not proselytize, manipulate or pressure anyone. Evangelization is sharing the Good News that we have experienced and inviting others to join us.

The Holy Spirit, the first gift of the risen Christ to his people, gives us both the ability to receive the Gospel of Jesus and the power to proclaim it. Above all, we proclaim the Gospel by living our lives in accord with the faith we profess. Our relationships and every day activities in our families, workplaces and society are to be shaped by Gospel values. We witness as an evangelizing community when we gather around the table of the Lord and when we reach out to those in need.

#### LITURGY AND WORSHIP

In today's society, there is a tendency to explain human behavior according to the categories of the social sciences—psychology, sociology, and anthropology. This inclination has perhaps caused some of the faithful to lose sight of the transcendence of the Sacraments, and of their primordial importance for our life in Christ. Some members of the Church may have become confused by changes introduced into the sacramental rites after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Others may have become distracted from the vital importance of the Sacraments by the heightened attention given to other matters of importance, such as the pastoral dimension of the Church's ministry, and the forms of service which the Church renders to society. In order to foster a lively sacramental renewal and more devout participation, let us carefully consider the rich value of our liturgical life and the Church's doctrine on the sacraments.

#### THE LITURGY, GOD'S WORK

Liturgy literally means "public work" or "service in the name of/on behalf of the people."<sup>49</sup> In the Christian tradition, liturgy or divine worship means "the participation of the People of God in 'the work of God.'"<sup>50</sup> The sanctification of humanity occurs, through signs "perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment [is realized] in ways appropriate to each of these signs."<sup>51</sup> Every liturgical celebration is an action of the Mystical Body of Christ, that is, Christ, the head, and his members, the body. As a result, every liturgical action "is a sacred action surpassing all others."<sup>52</sup>

Liturgy has three fundamental aspects. First, liturgy is an expression of Christ's priesthood when the Church worships.<sup>53</sup> Second, it expresses Christ's prophetic role by proclaiming the Good News. Third, it is an expression of his kingly role by showing us how to live and challenging us to live a life of service and of charity.<sup>54</sup> Because of this intimate union between the Church and Christ, the Church is the visible

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<sup>49</sup> See CCC, § 1069.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> *Vatican Council II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations*. Gen. Editor Austin Flannery O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 7. Hereafter SC.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> See SC, 7.

<sup>54</sup> See SC, 9.

sign of the communion in Christ between God and humanity.<sup>55</sup>

The Church was established on the day of Pentecost<sup>56</sup> by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.<sup>57</sup> The Spirit ushered in a new era, in “which Christ manifests, makes present, and communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of his Church, ‘until he comes’.”<sup>58</sup> Christ “lives and acts in and with his Church.”<sup>59</sup> Christ, the head of the body the Church,<sup>60</sup> having suffered, died and risen from the dead “now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace.”<sup>61</sup> The sacraments are accessible to humanity because they are perceptible signs of word and action.<sup>62</sup> The sacraments make present efficaciously the grace that they signify by the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup> For example “in the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims ...”<sup>64</sup> In every Mass Christ is present “...not only in the person of his minister,... but especially under the Eucharistic elements...He is present in his word...He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings.”<sup>65</sup>

The source and goal of the liturgy, is God, the Father. His blessing upon all creation, especially man and woman, is revealed and communicated in the Church’s liturgy. “In his Word who became incarnate, died, and rose for us, he fills us with his blessings. Through his Word, he pours into our hearts the Gift that contains all gifts, the Holy Spirit.”<sup>66</sup> The liturgy is the source and summit toward which the activity of the church is oriented. It is also “the fount from which all the Church’s power flows.”<sup>67</sup>

The Holy Spirit’s work in the liturgy is not only “to prepare the assembly to encounter Christ,”<sup>68</sup> but also to manifest Christ to the faith of the assembly. The Holy Spirit makes “the saving work of Christ present and active by his transforming power”, and enables the communion with Christ to bear fruit in the Church.<sup>69</sup> This same Holy Spirit moves us to seek with diligence the Kingdom of God and to detach “from the vanities of this world.”<sup>70</sup>

#### *THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS*

The Church speaks of the central mystery of salvation as the “Paschal mystery,” because the Hebrew word *pasch* referred to the lamb of sacrifice which the Israelites offered to Yahweh, and then consumed, before fleeing from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land.<sup>71</sup> This Passover under the Old Covenant between God and his chosen people prefigured the new covenant of Christ’s Passover from slavery to sin and death, to new, resurrected life and freedom from sin in the Kingdom of God. Christ’s Passover established a New and everlasting Covenant between the Father and his people. We are incorporated into Christ’s Passover through the sacraments.

In the fullness of time God gave the world His only Begotten Son for the salvation of humanity. When,

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<sup>55</sup> See CCC, § 1071. See MC, 38-46.

<sup>56</sup> See Acts. 2.

<sup>57</sup> SC, n. 6. See also LG, 2.

<sup>58</sup> CCC, § 1076; 1 Cor. 11:26.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Col. 1:18.

<sup>61</sup> CCC, § 1084.

<sup>62</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> SC, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> CCC, § 1082.

<sup>67</sup> SC, 10.

<sup>68</sup> CCC, § 1112.

<sup>69</sup> See CCC, § 1108, § 1109, § 1112.

<sup>70</sup> MC, 4.

<sup>71</sup> See. Ex. 12 – 14.

Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity became man, He united in his person the human nature and the divine nature. This became the instrument of our salvation.<sup>72</sup> God became like us in every way except sin.<sup>73</sup> In Christ “the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth and the fullness of divine worship was given to us.”<sup>74</sup> This divine worship took form in the Seven Sacraments.

The nourishment of the Kingdom comes from its liturgical life expressed in the Seven Sacraments instituted by Christ and, in a very special way, from the Eucharistic celebration.<sup>75</sup> The Sacraments are as vital to the life of the Church as food is for the development of the human body.<sup>76</sup> They were entrusted to the Church, and are safeguarded by her, so that they can dispense the divine life to us.<sup>77</sup> The efficacy of the Sacraments flows from Jesus who gave his life for us on the cross;<sup>78</sup> they are efficacious signs of grace and an essential ingredient for God’s building of His Kingdom. They make the people of God holy “to give worship to God.”<sup>79</sup> They are divided into three types: Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist), Sacraments of Healing (Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick), and Sacraments of Vocation/Service (Matrimony and Holy Orders).

## SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

Through the waters of Baptism we make our Passover from death to new life in Christ. Baptism not only incorporates the person into the Church but it washes away all sin.<sup>80</sup> The baptized person becomes an adoptive son or daughter “of the Father, a member of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>81</sup> Anointed “with the chrism of salvation . . . [the person is] forever a member of Christ who is priest, prophet and king.”<sup>82</sup> Thus it is the doorway for the reception of the other sacraments.

The Sacrament of Confirmation perfects baptism. We recall the Apostle Philip preaching in Samaria about the Lord Jesus and his message. He convinced them to abandon the Magician Simon and embrace the Gospel. “Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the holy Spirit, for it had not yet fallen upon any of them . . . Then they laid hands on them and they received the holy Spirit.”<sup>83</sup>

Today, in Confirmation, the fullness of the Holy Spirit is given like on the day of Pentecost, and Jesus’ promise to send an advocate, guide, and protector is fulfilled. Confirmation roots us into deeper divine filiation, incorporates us more firmly to Christ, strengthens “our bond with the Church... and helps us bear witness to the Christian faith in words and accompanied by deeds.”<sup>84</sup>

The Eucharist was instituted by Christ at the Last Supper the night before he died, in order to perpetuate his sacrifice on the cross until he returns in glory.<sup>85</sup> The Eucharist is a perpetual memorial of Christ’s saving death and resurrection, a sacred banquet and fellowship of love, a source and bond of unity, and nourishment for the soul. Above all, it is a sacrifice, the sacrifice of Christ made present in our time.<sup>86</sup> The Sacrament of the Eucharist is the highest of all the sacraments in excellence, because of the Real

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<sup>72</sup> SC, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Col. 1:18.

<sup>74</sup> *Sacramentarium Veronense* (ed. Mohlberg), 1265; See also, SC, 5.

<sup>75</sup> J. Neuner, SJ and J. Dupuis, SJ., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. Jacques Dupuis, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Alba House: New York, 2001), 1311. Hereafter ND.

<sup>76</sup> See MC, 18-20.

<sup>77</sup> See CCC §1131.

<sup>78</sup> See MC, 31.

<sup>79</sup> SC, 59.

<sup>80</sup> CCC, § 1263.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, § 1277; § 1279.

<sup>82</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship, *Rite for Baptism* (Vatican, May 15, 1969), no. 50.

<sup>83</sup> Acts 8:15-17.

<sup>84</sup> CCC, § 1316.

<sup>85</sup> See MD, 2.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 67-69.

Presence of our Lord, body, and blood, soul and divinity. It is at the heart of the Church's life because it unites us to the Paschal Sacrifice.<sup>87</sup> It is the memorial of Christ's Passover and the work of our salvation.<sup>88</sup>

## SACRAMENTS OF HEALING

The Sacrament of Reconciliation has five aspects: conversion, penance, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation.<sup>89</sup> Sin was not part of God's original plan.<sup>90</sup> Sin was introduced into creation by Adam and Eva through their disobedience.<sup>91</sup> As a result, humanity was separated from God by its own action and not by God's. Thus, in order to return to communion with God the repentant sinner seeks conversion, confesses sin and renders reparation. The penitent is restored to a state of grace by God's love, mercy and compassion, when absolution is given by the priest.<sup>92</sup> The penance assigned is given as medicine to help the sinner, weakened by sin, to recover the strength needed to persevere in the Christian path.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is often misunderstood by many to be the sacrament of the dying. This is a misconception. Jesus came to deliver us from suffering, illness and pain. These have always been part of human life. Thus in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick<sup>93</sup> the person's illness is connected to the suffering and glorified Lord and healing takes place.<sup>94</sup> The Holy Spirit is given to console the sick person and to strengthen his/her soul and body. Christ commends the sick person to the Father's mercy, as he commended his own spirit to the Father from the cross.

## SACRAMENTS OF VOCATION/SERVICE

The Sacraments of Matrimony and Holy Orders are a resounding, "Yes!" to the Lord's call. The Sacrament of Matrimony is an intimate communion of life and love.<sup>95</sup> Marriage is a partnership of a man and a woman equal in dignity and value. Christ calls a man and woman who have received God's gift of conjugal love to live out their marital union as a living sacrament, or sacred sign, of the faithful love of God for his people, manifested in the spousal love of Christ, the bridegroom, for his beloved bride, the Church. The "great mystery"<sup>96</sup> of the nuptial relationship between Christ and his Church is made concrete in the two becoming one flesh.<sup>97</sup>

While all the baptized share in the Royal priesthood of Christ, their sharing differs from the Sacrament of Holy Orders, whereby the ordained minister participates in his ministerial priesthood.<sup>98</sup> The ministerial priesthood differs from the royal priesthood, not only in degree but in its very essence. The relationship between the ordained and the baptized is complementary, as is the relationship between husband and wife. The priest exercises his ministry for the people of God by teaching, leading in worship, and guiding

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<sup>87</sup> CCC, § 1407. See also SC, 47.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., § 1409.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., § 1423-§ 1424.

<sup>90</sup> See Gn. 1:1-2:4a.

<sup>91</sup> See Gn. 3:1-24; See also Rm. 5: 19; CCC. § 397

<sup>92</sup> See CCC, § 1485-§ 1498.

<sup>93</sup> Jas. 5:14-15.

<sup>94</sup> LG, 11. See also, CCC, § 1499.

<sup>95</sup> CCC, § 1660; §1661.

<sup>96</sup> Eph. 5: 32.

<sup>97</sup> See Mk. 10: 6-9; See also Apostolic Exhortation of his Holiness John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, (Vatican City, November 22, 1981), 19. Hereafter FC.

<sup>98</sup> See CCC, § 1590-§ 1592. From the Glossary of the CCC " **PRIESTHOOD**: (1) *Of the faithful*: The priestly people of God. Christ has made of his Church a "kingdom of priests," and gives the faithful a share in his priesthood through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation (784, 1119, 1546). (2) *Ministerial*: The ministerial priesthood received in the Sacrament of Holy Orders differs in essence from this common priesthood of all the faithful. It has as its purpose to serve the priesthood of all the faithful by building up and guiding the Church in the name of Christ, who is Head of the Body (1547). See Priesthood of Christ; Presbyter." See also MD, 22, 83-86.

them. In any liturgical celebration he acts *in persona Christi*; it is Jesus, the Head of the body, the Church, who is presiding.<sup>99</sup>

#### LITURGY AND WORSHIP PASTORAL INITIATIVE

The synod delegates were convinced that the enrichment of the sacramental life in the diocese was an essential element in an effective plan for the evangelization and growth of the Church in the Valley. The Synod, therefore, proposed synodal legislation to specifically address this aspect of the life of the church. I approved that legislation as particular law for the Diocese of Brownsville on August 22, 2006, the Memorial of the Queenship of Mary, as a first step in a pastoral plan to renew the sacramental life of the Church in the Rio Grande Valley. We must be diligent not only in implementing the sacramental legislation of the Diocesan synod but also in the implementation of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, for the sake of building up greater unity throughout the Diocese, both in the way we prepare for the Sacraments and in the way we celebrate them. The second step will be the careful implementation of this legislation in every parish. This is the responsibility of the pastors with the assistance of the parish pastoral councils. One year from now, we will assess the progress made in each parish, paying special attention to what is taught in the religious formation programs and in the parochial school. The final step will be to assist the parishes and parochial schools that may have fallen behind, so that the renewal of sacramental life in every parish will indeed occur.

#### FROM HARVESTING—TO PLANTING

The mustard seeds planted by our forefathers have given fruit and it has been harvested though a long synodal process. Like all fruit that is harvested, it first feeds us and gives us the nutrients we need to continue on the journey. As we renew and strengthen the sacramental life in the diocese, we will receive the nourishment that we need to move forward with the mission of the Church in South Texas.

At the same time the fruit produces seeds for planting so that fruit can continue to be produced and harvested. As we recommit ourselves to the New Evangelization by becoming true disciples in mission, we will plant the seed that will build up the kingdom.

Harvesting and planting is an endless cycle. If one lacks, the other will be deficient. Through our First Diocesan Synod, we have been collaborators in the harvest. Let us now become collaborators in the planting, understanding that some will till the soil, some will plant the seed; others will water, and still others will safeguard the plants from weeds and insects. Every one of us has a role to play in carrying out the mission, yet each according to his/her abilities and gifts.<sup>100</sup> As we carry out our respective roles, I make Paul's words to the Ephesians my own, urging "...you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Encyclical letter of his Holiness Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de eucharistia*, (Vatican City, April 17, 2003), 30. Hereafter, EE.

<sup>100</sup> See Rm. 12:4.

<sup>101</sup> Eph. 4:1-6 (NAB)

Strengthened by this unity of faith and love, enriched by the gift of the Sacraments and relying on the loving care of the Immaculate Conception, *Nuestra Señora de San Juan del Valle*, as true disciples of Jesus committed to carry out his mission, let us “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 observe all that (Jesus has) commanded (us)...”<sup>102</sup>

Given at the Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan del Valle National Shrine, in the City of San Juan, in the State of Texas, the United States of America, this the thirty-first day of May, Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Elizabeth, in the year of Our Lord two thousand and seven.

+Raymundo J. Peña

Bishop of Brownsville

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<sup>102</sup> Mt. 28:19-20 (NAB)

## APPENDIX

### PASTORAL STRATEGIES

*Note:*

The First Diocesan Synod engaged in a process of identifying pastoral priorities, pastoral initiatives and pastoral strategies; in order to promote and sustain the mission of the Church in the Diocese of Brownsville. From the materials presented by the Synod, I have selected two for consideration in this pastoral letter, without negating the importance of the others.

Some of the pastoral strategies in all areas treated by the Synod have already been implemented, others are in process. Future planning will address the remaining recommendations that surfaced in our historic Synod.

### EVANGELIZATION

- Develop a process to create evangelizing parishes that welcome, invite and meet the needs of parishioners, in order to bring about spiritual renewal throughout the diocese by offering a variety of programs.
- Explore and implement bilingual programs in every parish that will reach out to the unbaptized, inactive, and alienated Catholics.
- Provide opportunities for Catholics to study the sacred scriptures within the context of tradition and doctrine through workshops and classes at the parish, deanery and diocesan levels in order to assist them in connecting the Scriptures with the principles of Christian Living.
- Develop ways in which the gospel message is proclaimed effectively and that will evangelize and promote the Catholic faith to all people who live in the Rio Grande Valley by utilizing the latest technology available. In exploring viable options, these may include the use of billboards; television commercials, a diocesan bilingual newspaper, a diocesan web site that links all parishes, and additional television and radio programming.
- Facilitate the training of parish lay ecclesial ministers in the area of evangelization, focusing on home visitation and outreach to those in prison, detention centers, as well as the elderly in nursing homes and shut-ins at home, in order to bring them the Good News of Jesus Christ.

### LITURGY & WORSHIP

- Establish liturgical directives and provide support and training to ensure the following: (a) that the celebration of all liturgies are done properly according to the liturgical year, both at the parish and diocesan levels (i.e. G.I.R.M, rubrics, etc); (b) that Continuing Education is provided for all parish liturgical ministers; (c) that we invest in the adequate resources for music, musical instruments and worship aids with copyright licenses, appropriate for the different seasons of the liturgical year.
- Provide guidelines and training to establish liturgical commissions in every parish to ensure quality liturgical celebrations.
- Provide the opportunity for an annual liturgical conference for all parish liturgical ministers by hosting nationally known speakers, including professional liturgical musicians.
- Provide resources (printed and/or online) to assist homilists in evaluating the effectiveness of their homilies, both in delivery and content.
- Establish diocesan guidelines for the proper implementation of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults and follow up to ensure that they are properly observed at all parishes.

## FAMILY

- Develop sacramental preparation programs that encourage and engage the whole family in the catechetical process. Follow-up after the reception of the sacraments are necessary to help families stay connected and committed to the sacramental practice of their Catholic faith.
- Develop programs that support and enable single, divorced, separated and widowed individuals to live out their baptismal commitment, so that they become and remain active in their parish community.
- Establish a full-time Office for the Culture of Life in order to provide opportunities at the parish, deanery, and diocesan levels to promote a better understanding of the dignity and sanctity of human life from the womb to the tomb.
- Design and provide parenting workshops for families with opportunities for formation and faith development through communication and faith sharing skills, which will help parents, impart their Catholic Christian values more effectively.
- Implement and promote educational programs such as workshops and retreats that address the vocation and sacredness of marriage as well as family life issues at parish, deanery, and diocesan levels.

## CHRISTIAN FORMATION & EDUCATION

- Establish new parochial schools and ensure that parishes and the diocese participate in subsidizing the existing Catholic schools. Also make Catholic education more affordable in the Valley, start an endowment fund, a funding campaign; adopt a student program, and establish an annual appeal through second collections.
- Invest in a retreat center in the diocese that will provide opportunities to form community, experience prayer and meditation, and enrich the participants' Catholic faith in an environment that is conducive to a genuine adult focused "retreat experience."
- Develop adult faith formation programs at the parish, deanery, and diocesan levels to include topics such as bible study, church history, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, parenting classes, etc. Every parish is to designate a trained Adult Faith Formation coordinator in order to improve such programs offered.
- Provide trained catechetical leaders with adequate facilities along with the financial resources necessary for updated printed and audio visual materials in order to provide quality religious education programs in every parish.
- Provide a diocesan certification process for all parish catechetical leaders, parish catechists and catholic school teachers and require them to participate in the certification process in order to teach and/or continue teaching in parish catechetical programs and Catholic schools.

## CHRISTIAN MINISTRY – SERVICE

- Develop a Lay Ministry formation program to prepare the Christian faithful for active ministry in the parish. Once recommended by their pastor, lay ecclesial ministers are to complete a basic formation course and proceed to obtain training and certification in their specialized area of ministry.
- Develop a formation program for the Permanent Diaconate based on the recommendations and guidelines from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Potential candidates must be recommended by their respective pastors and be active in the parish community.
- Provide continuing education and formation opportunities for lay ecclesial ministers and permanent deacons already involved in parish ministry. Continuing education is to be required and fulfilled by all involved as a sign of commitment if they wish to remain and continue in their ministry at the parish.

- Develop an awareness vocations program that promotes vocations by encouraging and supporting individuals who express interest or exhibit the gifts for ministry, whether through sacramental ordination or consecrated religious life.
- Develop a handbook for parishes to recruit, train, support, and evaluate volunteers in their area of ministry according to their gifts and calling. Every parish is to designate a Volunteer-Ministries Coordinator to host a recruitment Sunday once a year and promote stewardship (time, treasure and talent) as a way of life.

## YOUTH & YOUNG ADULTS

- Ensure that every parish allocates the necessary funds, resources, and personnel to provide effective youth and young adult ministry, given that forty eight percent of our population is twenty-five years of age and younger.
- Ensure that every parish employs qualified individuals, either part time or full time, to coordinate a comprehensive youth and young adult ministry. Parishes that cannot able to afford a part-time or full-time youth minister may consider sharing their resources collaboratively with another parish within the deanery.
- Require all individuals, paid or volunteer, who minister with youth and young adults to be properly trained and certified in the area of youth ministry, and to attend a Protecting God's Children workshop, and abide by the diocesan policies, procedures and guidelines for *Ethical and Responsible Conduct in Ministry*.
- Construct and develop an adequate retreat camp that is conducive to youth, and make it available to all parishes for retreats specifically for ministry with youth and young adults.
- Develop annual events to help youth and young adults share their faith, become involved in social justice issues, socialize, build community, grow spiritually through retreats, promote peer ministry and witness their faith with other youth at the parish, deanery and diocesan levels.

## THE CHURCH IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

- Establish a Diocesan Office for Pastoral Planning that will assist the parishes and the diocesan offices in the implementation of the five-year pastoral plan recommended by the First Diocesan Synod.
- Establish a Diocesan Pastoral Council comprised of lay people from all six deaneries. This diocesan council, in accordance with Canon Law, will advise the Bishop and facilitate dialogue, assuring more consistent diocesan policies and guidelines.
- Develop a diocesan marketing plan in order to maximize the use of technology and mass media to promote programs such as evangelization, ministries, vocations, stewardship, etc.
- Every parish is to establish and implement an effective parish pastoral council to serve as a consultative body to advise the pastor in accordance with the diocesan guidelines and canon law. The Office for Pastoral Planning is to develop a manual for the training and implementation of such councils.
- Develop a process for every parish to implement a parish self-study and or a mission statement with goals and objectives which will ensure continuity when a newly assigned pastor settles in at the parish. The Office for Pastoral Planning can assist the pastors in working with parish staffs and consultative bodies in the parish by providing a collaborative process.
- Establish a process for conflict resolution to ensure a grievance process for all church employees when disputes arise at the parish.

## FAITH & CULTURE

- Develop approaches in every parish that promote an appreciation and sensitivity of the cultural traditions and social diversity that make up the various communities of the Rio Grande Valley, also promote opportunities that celebrate our diversity and unity in Christ, as the people of God.
- Provide guidance and training for liturgical celebrations in order that we don't lose the sense of tradition and popular religiosity as well as devotions, customs (i.e., matachines, posadas) that focus on the cultural heritage of the faith community.
- Implement a program of awareness throughout the diocese that "restores respect" regarding the proper attire and etiquette at liturgical celebrations, through parish bulletins, homilies and our catholic schools and parish religious education programs.
- Teach children and youth the proper respect and reverence for the sacred through our Catholic Schools and parish religious education programs; it should be modeled by adults and practiced at home and promoted from the pulpit on Sundays.

## SOCIAL CONCERNS

- Develop a directory listing all existing agencies and services available at the parish, deanery, diocesan, city, county, state, federal levels; keep it updated and make it available to all parishes for referral purposes as needed.
- Establish an Office for the Culture of Life, as promoted by the late Holy Father John Paul II, whose purpose would be to inform and educate people on the Church's teaching with regard to the sanctity of human life, the right to life from natural conception to natural death, and the threats to human life and dignity, including abortion, cloning and stem cell research, euthanasia, suicide and the death penalty.
- Establish in each county homeless shelters, soup kitchens, clothing thrift shops and food pantries, to help people who are in need of temporary shelter, food and counseling services.
- Provide training and support to individuals who minister to the elderly, the sick at home (shut-ins), and nursing homes; the incarcerated immigrants at the detention centers and those in prison and their families.
- Establish in every parish a Catholic charitable organization and ministry to assist individuals and families who are in dire need of financial assistance, food, clothing, medication and temporary shelter.



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