



OUR ROAD TO RENEWAL: *Our Journey Toward Holiness*

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My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I have felt the need to share with you some personal reflections through a pastoral letter as I approach the first year anniversary of my installation as your shepherd and pastor, the fifteenth bishop of the Diocese of Buffalo. So much has transpired in the course of this past year that has challenged us and, at the same time, brought us closer together as we discern our future and what we need to do to bring about a true spirit of renewal while defining a new, more hopeful era of Catholic faith and witness. I especially wish to thank my brother priests, our deacons and their families, our religious sisters and brothers, our educators and all the many wonderful parishioners I have had the joy of meeting and getting to know in this first year. The warmth of your welcome and encouragement and the generosity of your spirit has given me constant strength and fueled my enthusiasm for what I know we can make possible together.

A SYNODAL JOURNEY

Having entered into the wonderful season of Advent - a time of watching and waiting for the fulfillment of our common hope in the God who never disappoints and is always faithful to His word - we have also been invited by our Holy Father Pope Francis to participate in a two-year journey of renewal through a universal Synod defined as: *"For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission."* This period of universal listening and reflection aimed at renewing our Church and redefining our shared purpose in this Third Millennium of Christianity provides us an ideal context for our own work that we've begun here in the Diocese of Buffalo to redefine and reassert Catholic faith and witness across Western New York - The Road to Renewal. What is clear to me from my many travels across our Diocese is the enormous resources represented in our parishes and the tremendous potential that we have in coming together as a true family with

many members and diverse gifts but all working together to advance the work of faith. We must resist any tendency to distrust or question one another's motives. In facing our challenges together with patience and mutual understanding - clergy, religious and laity - I have utmost confidence that the renewal we are striving to bring about will foster the unity that is essential to our future while inspiring renewed zeal for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As a people who live according to the fundamental belief that *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,"* (John 3:16), it is our responsibility to make known this belief by our words and actions and in our response to the needs and concerns of others. And yet we know that the realities of our secular age at times strain our efforts and challenge our effectiveness to counter a pervasive narrative of life's meaning and purpose that obscures what we know to be the ultimate truth of our existence. We grow weary, we become distracted and yes, we experience disillusionment. Understandably, the horrendous acts of individuals who presented themselves as ministers of Jesus Christ but who abused the most vulnerable among us have led many to seek another way, and to discern the answers to life's fundamental questions elsewhere. The failings of Church leaders to protect those harmed and prevent others from being harmed has caused a fundamental breach of trust among the faithful and a loss of confidence in those charged with shepherding God's people. It must therefore be our constant preoccupation to work toward forgiveness, to re-establish that essential trust, to candidly acknowledge the harm done and to work unceasingly to bring about healing which, in the end, only God in His infinite grace and mercy can accomplish.

It is all the more necessary that we travel this journey together, as the Holy Father has invited us, knowing that the path at times will be steep and at other times uneven. In both



our own Road to Renewal, as well as the universal Synod, listening to one another is the essential act and our surest guide. We must reduce the volume of competing voices and in Christian charity attempt to truly hear what others have to say. We must be humble and allow our views to be altered by the conviction and veracity of other views and approaches. We must allow ourselves to benefit from the gifts that we need and which may be readily available in the person next to us, but whom we have not considered. It is this process of listening and dialogue within our parishes, among our clergy, parish leaders and educators that continues to guide the work of our Road to Renewal as together we come to decisions that will enable us to define a new, more hopeful and impactful era of Catholic faith and ministry across Western New York.



We live at a time when many are desperate for clarity and direction. Harsh and competing viewpoints have poisoned our discourse, dividing family members, loved ones and friends. Truth seems elusive, as if only determined by fierce and subjective ideological debate. What divides us is clearer than what unites us. Yet as disciples called forth by Christ Himself to bear witness to the Truth, we must resist the forces of division, the tendency to degrade others' points of views and their very humanity simply because we disagree. With humility we must acknowledge our imperfection and the inadequacy of political viewpoints to answer life's most basic questions. We must accept our capacity to learn from others, as well as the need for forgiveness and redemption on the part of all. God's commandment is clear and not subject to interpretation:

In addition to the essential requirement of listening, the Synod (like our Road to Renewal) asks us to consider the structures that have long been in place and to evaluate them in light of the necessities of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Is it the case that we cling to the way of doing things simply because it is the way they have always been done? Do we defer primarily to those in positions of responsibility and authority without considering the charisms of others and who have the potential to reinvigorate our experience of our faith as it's lived in our parishes and communities? What, we must ask, is no longer necessary or conducive to achieving the fullness of our potential as a family of faith and a community of believers?

Jesus made clear to His disciples what was required of them, having received the gift of God's revelation:

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven," (Matthew 5:14-16).

The Synod challenges us also to ask ourselves if we are truly living our faith in ways that are evident and that lights the way for others. As Christians, are we a force for good in our communities and society at large? In our words and through our actions do we foster understanding, reconciliation and inclusion? Do we demonstrate the convictions of our faith and speak out against the wrongs we witness and the injustice experienced by others?

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," (John 13:34-35).

CARE AND CONCERN FOR THOSE IN NEED

Central to our Christian faith from its very beginning is the concern for those pushed to the margins of society, those seemingly forgotten and whose dignity has been disregarded willfully or merely by neglect. Despite living in a nation of incomparable wealth and resources, we see all around us tremendous needs. Children deprived of the essentials for their emotional, mental and physical growth - healthy nutrition, nurturing environments, quality education; families unable to afford adequate housing and the simple amenities that enable a decent quality of life; inadequate access to necessary skills and job resources that make possible economic advancement and eventual financial security; unstable, abandoned communities afflicted by addiction and the pervasive hopelessness that fuels desperation and perpetuates the recourse to violence that is the cause of so much trauma and pain from one generation to the next.

It is both our mandate and our surest path to holiness that we embrace the call to respond to those in need, to ease the burdens of others and with selfless care and concern for others, to provide hope where it is absent. We have no clearer teaching than what Jesus offered His disciples after seeing the vast crowds clamoring to hear and touch him:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the

earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” (Matthew 5:3-9).



EUCCHARISTIC REVIVAL

Over these past two years, the global pandemic which has taken so much from us in terms of the loss of loved ones, cherished friends, and the personal connections that give so much meaning and joy to our lives, has also disrupted and reshaped the shared experience of our faith. The requirement to avoid coming together for the nourishment which is the source and summit of our Christian lives - the Eucharist - was a terrible burden, though necessary for the protection of the health and well-being of ourselves and others. We had to adapt to new ways of worship and rely on internal reserves of faith to see us through what for many was a desert-like experience that deprived us of our essential spiritual nourishment. It is all the more reason that we revive our passion for the Eucharist and reflect on the sustenance it provides us individually and as a family of faith, uniting us, giving us strength and defining our purpose as disciples - “Do this in memory of me.”

At our November meeting in Baltimore, the nation’s bishops approved the launch of a “Eucharistic Revival,” recognizing the need to renew focus on the Eucharist and our appreciation for, and understanding of, this primary Sacrament as central to what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ:

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him,” (John 6:54-56).

In issuing the new teaching document - The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church - the Conference of Catholic Bishops has provided a blueprint for a renewed understanding of the Eucharist as essential to our identity as baptized believers of Jesus Christ and as the unifying power of our parish communities:

“We have been reborn in Baptism and nourished by the Eucharist so that we may live in communion with God and one another, not only today but also in the fullness of the heavenly Kingdom. To worship God on Sundays, then, is not the mere observance of a rule but the fulfillment of our identity, of who we are as members of the Body of Christ. Participation in the Mass is an act of love ... The Sacrament of the Eucharist is called Holy Communion precisely because, by placing us in intimate communion with the sacrifice of Christ, we are placed in intimate communion with him and, through him, with each other.”

Our parishes will be asked to identify ways over these next two years to promote greater understanding for the Eucharist and to celebrate the gift which it is in the life of the Church. Special emphasis should be given to fostering encounters with Jesus through Eucharistic devotion, while also contemplating and proclaiming the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist through seminars and group discussions, as well as in special liturgical celebrations and, importantly, in outreach to those in need and those most vulnerable. We must be ever mindful that the first disciples were instructed by Jesus to proclaim what they themselves had heard and experienced and to bring others to the Truth they had come to know. The bishops therefore make clear this fundamental connection between Eucharist celebration and the need to act on the mysteries it reveals:

“The personal and moral transformation that is sustained by the Eucharist reaches out to every sphere of human life. The love of Christ can permeate all of our relationships: with our families, our friends and our neighbors. It can also reshape the life of our society as a whole ... This love extends particularly and “preferentially” to the poor and the most vulnerable. We all need to be consistent in bringing the love of Christ not only to our personal lives, but also to every dimension of our public lives,” (The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church).

In the summer of 2024, there will be a National Eucharist Congress held in Indianapolis with the aim of sending forth more than 80,000 Eucharistic missionaries. In addition to the in-person gathering, there will be virtual participation opportunities through live-streaming and other special television broadcasts to ensure the broadest possible participation. Much more will be communicated as plans further develop.

THE JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

It was fifty-seven years ago that those gathered for another Sacred Synod convened as the Second Vatican Council articulated the summons to the entire Church which by nature is perpetually on a journey: “The Universal Call to Holiness.” In chapter five of the seminal document of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church -Lumen Gentium - the Council leaders asserted:

“Thus it is evident to everyone, that all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society. In order that the faithful may reach this perfection, they must use their strength accordingly as they have received it, as a gift from Christ. They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbor. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history.”

As it was made clear then at a time of colossal change in the Church and society, so we must make clear in our own day and time: the gift we have received through baptism in Christ is one that must be lived conspicuously and shared with utmost generosity for the benefit of others and the good of society. In pursuing holiness not merely for our own edification, we have the potential to enlighten others to the Truth that is defined by God alone, validated and manifested through the faithful witness of His people; to reveal the Father’s all-encompassing and unconditional love, and the power of that love to forgive, heal and reconcile all people as His children. This must be our ultimate concern, to rediscover zeal for Christ’s Gospel and through our authentic witness, entice others to believe in its power to redeem and renew their lives also.

CLOSING

And so my brothers and sisters of our family of faith here in the Diocese of Buffalo, I implore you to seize this unique moment in the life of our Church to engage in the work of renewing and redefining our Catholic faith individually and collectively on the Road to Renewal and by participating in the journey of the universal Synod now underway. No one engaged in this journey travels alone. We support and sustain one another and together will overcome whatever obstacles we encounter along the way. Although the course at times may be unsteady and even uncertain, our destination is clear: Jesus Christ - His way, His truth and His life.

So honored as I am and forever grateful to the Lord for the gift to serve you as your pastor and shepherd, I am also your fellow traveller, who wishes to assure you of my commitment to support you, to listen and to learn from you, and to share whatever gifts I may have to complement your own. Evoking the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Hebrews:

“... Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ... Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble...” (Hebrews 12: 1-2; 14-15).

May God’s immense and abiding love inspire us always to seek the good of one another and reveal at every opportunity His Holy Spirit living and working among us!

Sincerely in Christ Jesus,



Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher
Bishop of Buffalo

