



***Let us Go Forth from the Upper Room***  
**Pastoral Exhortation**

Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception  
of the Blessed Virgin Mary  
December 8, 2021

My Dear Friends in Christ:

Earlier this year I shared with you an exhortation that I hope encouraged all the members of our diocesan family to use wisely the time we had during the pandemic for our personal, spiritual growth. **Each of us was invited to pray, reflect, and to deepen our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, both to gain the spiritual strength we needed to face the challenges of the pandemic, as well as prepare ourselves for the time when we could go out in mission into a world** that is very different from the one we knew before the pandemic struck. I believe that the changing world provides us an opportunity to reintroduce the truth, beauty and goodness of Catholic faith to our contemporary world.

We entered into our personal Upper Room imitating the example of the Apostles who once gathered in the Upper Room for the celebration of the Last Supper. On the night before He died, the Lord desired to fortify them in advance of His Paschal Mystery- His free gift of Himself for the salvation of the world. They returned to the Upper Room after the Lord's Resurrection, plagued by lingering doubts and fears, hoping that they could trust in the Lord's promise to them. It was also in the Upper Room that they received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who came with the sevenfold gifts of God's divine life and transformed them into courageous witnesses to the Lord's Death and Resurrection. The apostles left that Upper Room with a burning passion to preach the kerygma, that is, the message of salvation that comes to us through Jesus Christ, to all who were willing to listen. They went out to establish and nurture communities of faith and to search out and accompany those who were seeking true meaning and purpose in life. **The Apostles knew, as we know, that the search for the meaning and purpose of human life is found in Christ Jesus, the Lord.**

My dear friends, I recognize that the ongoing pandemic, with its unexpected twists and turns, continues to impact and endanger our lives in many ways. We need to remain vigilant, prudent and safe in all that we do so that we can protect every human life, especially the most vulnerable in our midst, against the scourge of the Coronavirus. However, I also believe that the mission of renewing our Church cannot wait until the pandemic has completely ended, since this may take many years to realize. With courage, prudence and safety, we can

begin over the next nine months to realize our first steps to re-engage the people around us in the mission of the Gospel. The urgency of this work impels us to act.

By relying upon the intercession of the Apostles, I invite you, even in small ways, to leave the comfort of your spiritual Upper Room and to go out into mission. **For while the circumstances surrounding the pandemic continue to change, our mission into the world can begin prudently and safely, seeking to bring a message of healing and hope to our neighbors, friends and people of good will, many of whom are weary of what we have endured these past 21 months.** Many are seeking healing and encouragement in their ordinary lives and they can find new life in Jesus Christ.

## I. The Apostolic Age

While no age is identical with any age that went before it, I believe that our contemporary world shares some similar characteristics to the world in which the Apostles lived. It will be helpful if we reflect upon these similarities, so that we can learn from and imitate the example that the Apostles gave us. **For we cannot forget that the most explosive era of growth in the history of the Church was the first three centuries of the Church's life.** It was a time when embracing Christian faith was a crime and often the penalty incurred was death. If the Apostles and disciples could surmount such odds in service of the Gospel, we can be hopeful that our efforts can also bear great spiritual fruit.

There are three characteristics of the apostolic era that have echoes in our contemporary, secularized world. First, Roman society lacked a coherent vision of life or a universal set of values. The result was competing values, widespread confusion and dissension. Philosophers often spoke of truth in contradictory ways that had little effect upon the ordinary life of many people. The question of the meaning of life was one that many did not have the luxury to ask, given the toil and suffering they endured simply to survive. Further, the larger culture was marked by a lack of respect and protection for human life, especially unborn and vulnerable life, a hedonistic sexuality and a glorification of wealth, power and societal status. **This world, with its defective value systems, was the world in which the Apostles preached and brought many to Christian faith. They did it by preaching the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, clearly, effectively and without compromise.**

A second characteristic of the apostolic world is one that has marked every human age - the desire for authentic human community. Part of the success behind the growth of the Roman Empire was the military decision to allow conquered countries to retain their distinct cultures and languages. This permissiveness did not extend to any religion that challenged emperor worship or the adoration of pagan gods. However, what truly creates authentic community is genuine love, friendship and a mutual respect that was often lacking in many communities of the Roman world, often exhausted from war, taxation and forced labor. It was into this world that the Apostles went forth to establish small Christian communities that accompanied their members during times of pain, suffering, joy and triumph. While these early communities were not free from difficulties, the Apostles and their successors always called the early Christians back to forgiveness, unity and mercy. It was these early

Christian communities that consoled the first Christian martyrs on their way to death with the knowledge that their loved ones would be cared for by their ecclesial family.

Finally, the Apostles went forth into a world that left many of its citizens behind. It was a society that catered to the needs of the wealthy, powerful and influential. Many who had questions or opposed the order of society were ignored or treated with callous neglect. Among those who suffered the most were widows, orphans, the poor and those who became refugees because of Roman military campaigns. They were forced to find refuge in the shadows of society, hoping against hope that their presence would not invite active persecution or worse. **Emboldened by the power of the Holy Spirit, it was to these people that the Apostles went, inviting them to become part of a community that would not simply tolerate them but love and accept them.** We recall the courage of Saint Paul in the Areopagus, who preached the message of salvation in Christ while listening to the concerns of his listeners and seeking to answer their questions with honesty and respect (Acts 17: 16-34). The Apostles went where others feared to go, encountering all those who were forgotten by society or struggled with their own personal questions, doubts and fears. It was from among these people that the next generation of fearless witnesses of Christian faith came forth, to the amazement of the secular world around them.

My friends, the parallels between the apostolic age and our own age are clear. We too live in a time where the truth is not known, human community is not easily found and the numbers of those whom the world considers “outcasts” is growing. As we take our first steps into our pandemic-scarred world, it would do us well to follow the example of the Apostles and trust that our work may bear great spiritual fruit as theirs did.

## **II. Leaving the Upper Room: Our Threefold Mission**

I invite you to reflect upon three tasks. **They are (1) to teach and preach the Gospel with clarity and conviction, (2) to transform our local parish or school communities into spiritual families united in faith and (3) to create bridges to those persons who feel neglected by the Church or whom the world considers “outcasts.”** While none of us can effectively realize all three of these tasks simultaneously, each of us must discern our personal part to play in this threefold mission. For our world needs the healing presence of Christ, now more than ever.

### **A. First Task: To Teach and Preach the Gospel**

In our relativistic world, which has accepted the notion that the human person is the sole measure of all truth, morality and goodness, Christian faith has a different starting point. We understand the truth to be an objective reality that every person can discover both by the use of human reason (the natural law) and through an act of faith (divine revelation). Reason and faith complement each another in the pursuit of the fullness of truth. Further, truth is ultimately not something but “someone” who took on human flesh and reveals that the essence of human life is to love God above all things and our neighbor as God loves them. **By recognizing and embracing the truth revealed in Jesus Christ, every human person can find lasting joy, peace and purpose in life.**

As we enter into mission, let us begin by redoubling our efforts to teach the fullness of the Catholic faith, first among ourselves and then to those who are seeking a new direction in life. Our diocesan Institute for Catholic Formation will offer a variety of **formational opportunities so that every believer can learn the depth and beauty of Catholic doctrine, morality and the social teachings of the Church.** Many of these opportunities already exist and are ready for use. Now it is up to you and me to make the personal decision to use these opportunities to learn more deeply the fullness of our Catholic faith.

Another task before us is the need to **reimagine the faith formation for our middle school age young people.** Sadly, many of our youth do not engage in faith formation in a consistent way. They often return for the preparation needed to receive Confirmation, which becomes for some graduation from the active practice of their faith. This situation is unacceptable and demands a radical change so that we can engage our youth in a personal and comprehensive manner, through study, prayer, recreation, social life, service and participation at Mass. Work has already begun identifying new models that reimagine formation for our middle school children and teenagers and I look forward to sharing with you the progress that we will make in this regard in the coming months.

Another aspect of teaching the faith is **effectively preaching the kerygma, that is, the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.** Since the formal duty of preaching is reserved to the clergy within the context of the Divine Liturgy, a series of initiatives will be provided in the new year to help priests and deacons to study the Scriptures more intensely and to prepare their homilies with whatever assistance they may require. However, since the most effective form of preaching is not done with words but with our daily, Christian witness, every believer must examine their personal conduct and seek to live an ever more authentic life of faith. It is no mistake that one of the principal reasons cited by young adults for their disaffiliation from the Catholic Church is the hypocrisy they see among believers, especially those in Church leadership, both clergy and lay. If this is true, then a vital way for every believer to preach the Gospel is by an **authentic witness of faith.** Providing such an authentic personal witness demands ongoing conversion from all of us.

**We must also acknowledge that there are fundamental questions that many find hard to answer and create stumbling blocks, especially among our youth and young adults, to embrace the Catholic faith.** Examples of these questions are the following: (1) What is the relationship between faith and reason? Is faith not simply a myth regarding something for which science will one day offer an explanation? (2) What does it mean to be a human person? Is my body an essential part of who I am or simply a container for my human spirit? (3) How can an historical event (i.e., the Crucifixion) have an eternal meaning? To questions such as these, the modern world gives erroneous answers, creating confusion and leading people away from faith. The time has come to correct the world's mistakes. To this end, the Institute for Catholic Formation will soon host an **apologetics series** designed specifically to answer these questions in an honest and comprehensive manner. I invite everyone participate in these presentations, both online and in person, so that we can give credible answers to the questions with which many continue to struggle.

## **B. Second Task: Building Communities of Faith**

Given the fact that our parishes are the bedrock of our Church, I have begun work with the presbyterate of our Diocese to create a process that will strengthen parish communities to enjoy the dual benefits of growing pastoral vibrancy and financial stability. While some parish reconfiguration may be necessary in the years ahead, my desire is that each parish find concrete ways by which it can collaborate with neighboring parishes to strengthen its pastoral ministry. In some cases, such collaboration will also provide financial relief to those parishes that have not recovered from the effects of the pandemic. This process will also seek to overcome any tendency on the local level to seek an unhealthy autonomy from the Diocese and its neighboring parishes. For while a parochial spirit can strengthen a local community, it cannot be absolutized in such a way that we lose the opportunities to collaborate with neighboring parishes in ministry and administration. Likewise, no parish can consider itself separate from the mission and life of our “diocesan ecclesial family” which is composed by our parish families. This **discernment process for parish collaboration** will be a multi-year process and begin by the spring of 2022.

Furthermore, if we wish to strengthen our communities of faith, we must engage our hearts in prayer and worship. For what creates an authentic community of faith is not simply the acceptance of a shared set of beliefs, proclaimed each Sunday in our common recitation of the Creed. **A parish is more than a collection of persons but an organic, diverse family created by grace, founded upon divine truth, united in common worship and mission. It is an engagement of the heart that creates a sense of family, belonging and a desire to give back to those around you.** It is this engagement of the heart that I invite you to reflect upon for there is a role to play, sometimes very simple, for each of us in this work. For example, it does not require special training to learn the names of those who sit near us at Mass and address them by name each Sunday. We offer such hospitality in our homes. Why can't we do the same in our parish homes? Such hospitality can easily lead to friendship, a sense of belonging and touch the human heart.

Engaging the heart also involves engaging the power of beauty in everyday Christian life. For example, I remember as a young boy that I was fascinated by the beauty of the stained-glass that marked my boyhood parish church. I vividly recall the beauty of the chant and hymns sung at Mass, the smell of incense and the silent whisperings of people during Mass. I still recall the times when I would visit Church with my parents and teachers to attend novenas, the Stations of the Cross and other prayer services. All these are experiences of beauty that left a lasting imprint on my heart. These memories illustrate only a small portion of the patrimony of beauty that our Church. **The time has come to unlock the power of beauty to engage human hearts and to create a sense of belonging that runs deep within us.**

To this end, I am delighted to announce the creation of the **Sacred Heart Guild**, an institute that will provide opportunities for everyone throughout the Diocese to experience the many facets of the beauty of our Catholic faith. These initiatives will include sacred music, chant, the history and meaning of church architecture, literature and poetry. The Guild will revive our diocesan youth choir, as well as provide choral training for those who wish to learn chant. It will provide opportunities for pilgrimages for people of all ages, allowing them to

journey to sacred places within driving distance of our Diocese and throughout the world. Finally, a central task of the Guild will be the promotion of Eucharistic adoration as a privileged way by which the heart of adorers can be engaged directly by our Lord. More information regarding the work of the Guild will be available in the coming months.

Above all else, the principal act of Catholic worship is the **celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass**. Each community of faith, joined as part of the Mystical Body of Christ, realizes its full purpose, identity and mission each time we gather to worship the Lord and participate through grace in His Death and Resurrection. **We must work towards offering the celebration of every Mass and every sacrament in a manner that evokes a deep sense of reverence, beauty, and personal participation from all in attendance.** We will also offer new ways to study the rich beauty of the Sacred Scriptures, grow in personal prayer, and offer opportunities for anyone who wishes to sit before the Lord in prayer in order to encounter Him in the depths of our hearts. While there has never been a time in the life of the Church when this has not been a priority, it is now of paramount importance if we wish to transform our communities of faith into spiritual homes for all.

It is from such renewed communities that we will go out in mission to invite others, one person at a time, to encounter our Lord. Our **diocesan ambassador program**, begun earlier this year, has graduated over 100 persons who are working with their pastors to support fellow parishioners, invite back those who have not yet returned to Sunday worship and engage Catholics who have ceased practicing their faith. They join the work of our **parish Synod delegates** who are listening to the faith stories of people in our communities, in order to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit regarding the ways we can live authentic Christian faith in our complex and confused world. Pray that their efforts will bear great spiritual fruit. A second class of ambassadors will begin training in the new year.

Finally, communities of faith must enjoy the work of competent, trained and engaged leaders, both clergy and lay, who are committed to serve their people generously and faithfully. The **Institute for Catholic Formation** offers online formational courses to assist current leaders, as well as train those who wish to become leaders in their parish and school communities. I ask that all in leadership avail themselves of these opportunities for personal formation.

### **C. Third Task: Building “Bridges of Faith” and Serving the Poor**

During my homily at my installation Mass at Saint Theresa in Trumbull, I made a reference to our common need to build bridges amongst ourselves and with our neighbors, co-workers and all people of good will. **In the eight years that have passed, I have often returned to this poignant image in my personal prayer, in part because the need to create such bridges has grown in urgency.** For just as the Apostles sought to create bridges to those around them, so too the time has come for all disciples of the Lord to do the same.

In the months ahead, you will hear exciting news about diocesan initiatives to serve young adults, whose numbers are growing in our diocese. We will soon have the formal launch of **“The Bridge”** which will be a series of initiatives aimed at welcoming, engaging and forming young adults in the life of the Church. “The Bridge” will provide college age young people and

graduates mentoring opportunities with successful Catholic business women and men who will assist them as they begin their professional careers. These mentoring relationships will also provide the tools by which interested young adults can work with me to address some of the local social problems that affect people throughout our Diocese.

In order to assist couples and families, the diocese is also sponsoring a **family missionary formation** program sponsored by *Paradisus Dei*, an ecclesial movement whose headquarters is located in Houston, Texas. This training program will feature weekly online formation sessions over the period of one year, beginning in August, 2022. Its purpose is to strengthen the spiritual and personal life of couples, while giving them the tools they will need to assist other families who are seeking spiritual assistance. Couples interested in this formation opportunity are asked to contact my office directly for more information.

**We must also continue to support, strengthen and expand the life-saving work of Catholic Charities of Fairfield County, whose various ministries help feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, offer healing to those suffering in body and mind and assist the newly arrived in our midst.** In addition to the current work already being done by Catholic Charities, there are additional initiatives being planned to serve our elderly, immigrants, and young people which I look forward to sharing with you in the coming months.

## **Conclusion**

Allow me to conclude by offering a deep word of thanks to our priests, deacons and parish lay leaders who have worked tirelessly and at times heroically during these difficult months of the pandemic. **As I traveled the Diocese during these past 21 months, I have seen firsthand the courage, generosity and dedication of many, for which I am most grateful.** Also, our pastors have shown themselves to be true spiritual fathers to their people, standing with them in times of anxiety, fear and even isolation. I am deeply grateful for your continued generosity and support of the Church's life and mission on every level. It is assistance that is needed now more than ever.

For over fifty years the Church's Magisterium has been inviting us to engage in the work of missionary discipleship. Such work begins with an authentic personal life of faith, as well as the transformation of local faith communities into vibrant spiritual homes for its members. The three tasks that I have described in this exhortation lay the foundation for the launch of effective missionary discipleship throughout our Diocese. What remains is our individual decision to ask the Lord what part He wishes you and I to play in this mission. It is a question that each of us must ask and answer for ourselves.

**In my 34 years of priestly ministry and 15 years of episcopal ministry I have never had a greater sense of hope for our Church than I now have.** It is a hope which trusts that the Lord will keep His promise and empower us to renew His Church, one step at a time.

As we celebrate the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, let us turn to Our Lady and ask for her intercession and prayers. For just as she was a source of

deep consolation and encouragement for the Apostles, she will offer the same strength to us, her children.

Join me in taking the first steps out of the Upper Room and let us be prepared for the wonders that God can do through you and me.