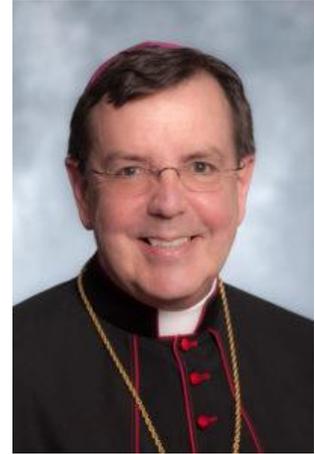


# UNLEASH THE GOSPEL

This is a collection of 20 articles published in *The Michigan Catholic* by Archbishop Vigneron in which, in bite-sized chunks, he helps us break down and understand his Pastoral Letter, *Unleash the Gospel*. The Archbishop is leading all Catholics in the Archdiocese of Detroit to become “joyful missionary disciples.”



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## **Laying the Groundwork for ‘Unleashing the Gospel’**

**August 25, 2017**

*“When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim” (Acts 2:1-4).*

Jesus Christ makes all things new! He himself is at work to renew his Church in the Archdiocese of Detroit. He is pouring out his Holy Spirit anew so that every member of the Church may be formed and sent forth as a joyful missionary disciple, so that the Gospel may be unleashed in southeast Michigan.

Just as in the Upper Room at Pentecost, it is the Holy Spirit who transforms Christ’s disciples from ordinary people into Spirit-filled evangelizers. Before the coming of the Spirit, the early Christians did not seem a particularly impressive group of people. They had good reason to be filled with fears, concerns, and feelings of inadequacy as they contemplated the awesome task Jesus had given them: to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. They were still struggling to comprehend the events of recent days: the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord. But when the Spirit fell upon them, their hearts were set ablaze with the fire of God’s love and they could no longer keep the good news of Christ to themselves. They went out from the Upper Room overflowing with the joy of the Gospel. Through their witness, the Gospel was unleashed in Jerusalem and from there throughout the ancient world.

Today no less than two millennia ago, there is no limit to what the Lord can do in our midst. His part is to clothe his Church with “power from on high” (cf. Luke 24:49) for the accomplishment of her mission. Our part is to give him our wholehearted “yes” — to let ourselves be transformed, guided, and sent forth by the Holy Spirit, who is the “principal agent of evangelization.”

Over the last three years we, God’s family in the Church of Detroit, have already been experiencing a spiritual renewal as we have prepared and strategized for a missionary transformation of the Archdiocese. It began in March of 2014 with my announcement of a year of prayer for a new Pentecost. During that year the whole Archdiocese was united with Mary, the Twelve, and the other disciples in the Upper Room, praying for and expectantly awaiting a new coming of the Holy Spirit. People from all over the Archdiocese began to tell me of signs that this prayer is being answered. In 2015-2016 the “Come, Encounter Christ!” missions held around the Archdiocese with Eucharistic adoration, spirited music and preaching brought many into a renewed encounter with Jesus. In April 2016 the Amazing Parish Conference provided a powerful impetus for local parish leaders to reimagine and fortify the mission-centered focus of our parishes. Throughout 2016 parishes across the Archdiocese hosted “parish dialogue gatherings,” in which parishioners freely expressed their hopes, concerns and suggestions for the Church in Detroit.

A profoundly significant step along this itinerary was the Mass for Pardon on Oct. 7, 2016, in which I came before God with my fellow priests and hundreds of lay people to repent on behalf of the Archdiocese for the sins committed over the generations by our bishops, priests, lay ministers, institutions, and all the faithful — sins that all too often had become embedded in our Church culture. Asking and receiving God’s forgiveness for the failings of the past enables us to move forward with new hope and courage.

Finally, the archdiocesan-wide Synod 16, held Nov. 18-20, 2016, was an historic occasion during which representatives from all corners of the Archdiocese — clergy, religious and lay people — gathered to pray and reflect together on what will make the Church in southeast Michigan a joyful band of missionary disciples. The Synod was the ignition spark that is to set the Archdiocese ablaze. Its goal was nothing less than a radical overhaul of the Church in Detroit, a complete reversal of our focus from an inward, maintenance-focused church, to an outward, mission-focused Church.

This pastoral letter is to serve as the charter for implementing the fruit of Synod 16. The letter includes a statement of our foundational convictions (Part 2), an explanation of the basis in Catholic teaching for the Church’s missionary focus, and a reading of the “signs of the times” in our part of the world (Part 3). Parts 4 and 5 are the heart of the letter. Part 4 is a series of 10 guideposts, each with some specific markers, to guide our implementation of the Synod. Part 5 lists the specific propositions and action steps that, following the recommendations of the Synod, we will take in order to become a missionary Church. Finally, in Part 6, I reaffirm that unleashing the Gospel is the work of the whole Church in the Archdiocese empowered by the Spirit of the risen Lord, and I describe how I aim to lead us in this mission in my remaining years as Archbishop.

## **Proclaiming Christ in Both Word and Deed** **September 7, 2017**

*It is [Christ Jesus] whom we proclaim, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone perfect in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).*

The Synod’s foundational conviction is that the Church in the Archdiocese of Detroit is resolved to obey the Holy Spirit and be made by him a band of joyful missionary disciples.

This means that the Archdiocese, following the call of Pope Francis, is resolved to undergo a “missionary conversion,” a change in our culture, such that every person at every level of the Church, through personal encounter with Jesus Christ, embraces his or her identity as a son or daughter of God and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is formed and sent forth as a joyful missionary disciple. For families this means that every family embraces its role as the domestic church and, in connection with other families and single persons, actively seeks the spiritual and social renewal of its neighborhood, schools and places of work. For parishes and archdiocesan services it means the renewal of structures to make them Spirit-led and radically mission-oriented. For everyone in the Archdiocese it entails making one’s relationship with Jesus and alignment with his will the central guiding principle of every aspect of life. This missionary conversion entails a strikingly countercultural way of living grounded in prayer, Scripture, and the sacraments; unusually gracious hospitality; a capacity to include those on the margins of society; and joyful confidence in the providence of God even in difficult and stressful times.

### **Catechetical Exposition**

*“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” (Matthew 28:19-20).*

The missionary conversion to which the Lord calls us is new, yet it is also a return to the roots of our identity as the Church of Jesus Christ, manifested to the world on the day of Pentecost. It is the Church becoming young again! It is a reawakening to our foundational calling, applied in a new way to the specific circumstances and challenges of our time.

**The Missionary Nature of the Church:** The very last words Jesus spoke to his disciples before he ascended into heaven were the commission to evangelize all people: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). This mandate defines the Church for all time. As Blessed Pope Paul VI wrote, “Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.” Evangelizing is therefore a responsibility not only of bishops, priests, and religious, but of every individual Christian.

Evangelization is, very simply, proclaiming the good news of Jesus to those around us. This proclamation is to be both in word and in deed. If we share the good news of Christ’s love in words only, not demonstrably living what we preach, people will rightly suspect us of hypocrisy, and we may even give Christianity a bad name. On the other hand, if we share the good news in deeds only, people will not learn of the One who is the source of the joy and divine love we carry

within us. Those around us are thirsting for the Gospel, the words of eternal life, even if they do not realize it. How can we fail to share generously what we have freely received?

Over the centuries, as the Church became accustomed to existing within almost entirely Christian societies, it became all too easy to lose sight of Christ's mandate. Parishes and dioceses slipped almost imperceptibly into a mode of maintenance rather than mission. Many Catholics came to think of evangelization as a special calling, primarily for priests and religious in the foreign missions. But in the last half century, even as the western world has become increasingly secularized and countless people have abandoned the faith into which they were baptized, the Church has been ringing out a call for all Catholics to awaken to their baptismal identity as missionary disciples. All are being summoned to engage in a new evangelization — a renewed proclamation of the good news of Christ to the people of our time.

The term “new evangelization,” coined by Pope St. John Paul II, takes account of the fact that the Church in our time exists in a vastly changed situation. It is not that the Gospel has changed, but that we are called to a renewed effort that is “new in its ardor, methods and expression.” The new evangelization is directed not only to those in distant lands who have never heard the Gospel, but to those around us in our own post-Christian society. The new “mission territory” is our own neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and even our own homes.

## **Reading the Signs of the Times in Southeast Michigan**

**September 21, 2017**

Synod 16 was an occasion for representatives from every part of the Archdiocese to listen to each other and discern together “the signs of the times” in southeast Michigan. The Synod participants noted the many opportunities for unleashing the Gospel. Our local Church is rich in lay involvement; there is a wide variety of flourishing movements, ministries, and initiatives. In the half century since Vatican Council II, we have been responding to the Council’s call for lay participation in the life of the Church (the primary focus of our last Archdiocesan Synod, in 1969). We are ready now to build on that foundation. If our first response was to change our way of thinking about ourselves as the people of God, our response now is to make use of the fruit given in these past five decades in order to go outward with the Gospel. Our internal renewal is for the sake of mission.

In our civil society as well, there are many signs that our communities are ready for renewal. There is a recognition that we are in a new social situation, a readiness to move beyond the way we have always done things and to think about new ways.

At the same time the Synod participants recognized the many challenges facing the Archdiocese of Detroit. For several decades the number of practicing Catholics has been in steady decline, a significant factor leading to many painful closings and mergings of parishes and schools, which has in turn caused more people to drift away in discouragement or frustration. The number of active priests has also dropped considerably. In the last half century our metro area has suffered from urban blight, economic decline, racial tensions, family breakdown, substance abuse, and crime. The Archdiocese covers a wide range of geographic and demographic settings — inner city, suburban and rural — each with its own unique characteristics and needs. These multiple challenges have contributed to a widespread pessimism regarding the possibility of authentic renewal.

Some might say that the Archdiocese of Detroit is a most unlikely setting for a large-scale revitalization of the Church. But is it not in the most unlikely settings that the Lord loves to show forth his divine power? Our acknowledgement of our own spiritual poverty is precisely what can lead us to rely wholly on God. Then it becomes clear that success belongs to Him alone and not to any human ingenuity. If we have become spiritually dry, we need not fear. Dry wood is perfect for being set on fire!

We also recognize that Catholics are not the only ones who are seeking to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ in southeast Michigan. We honor and support the efforts of our brothers and sisters in other Christian communions to bear witness to Christ. God is at work in them, and there is much we can learn from their evangelistic fervor. Wherever possible we should work together with them to bring the light of Christ into our city and region, although without ceasing to proclaim the fullness of Catholic teaching. As Pope Francis affirms, because the disunity among Christians is a counter-witness to the Gospel, commitment to unity is “an indispensable path to evangelization.”

# Understanding the Roots of the Crisis

October 5, 2017

The roots of the present crisis of faith go far beyond the boundaries of our local Church. For the last several centuries the western world has been gradually abandoning its Christian foundations. As John Paul II candidly wrote in 2001, “Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a ‘Christian society’ which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone.” Pope Benedict XVI gave a similar diagnosis: “The real problem at this moment of our history is that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings...” Even among those who affirm that God exists, many are living a “practical atheism” — that is, they are living as if God did not exist.

Underlying the rejection of Christian faith at a deep level are often false or pseudo religions, belief systems based on profoundly misguided assumptions. Many people hold these beliefs unreflectively, not aware of their underlying premises. Some of the most common false religions today are the following.

**Scientific fundamentalism.** Scientific fundamentalism is a belief that all questions about human existence and the world can be answered by experimental science. The universe is regarded as a closed system in which everything can be explained by the laws of physics, chemistry, biology, and evolution. God, if he exists at all, does not intervene in the world. Anything that cannot be proven scientifically is assumed to be false or at least unimportant. In reality, such a belief attributes to science a role that is far beyond its competence, since there are vast domains of existence that experimental science cannot account for, including ethical goods, aesthetic values, love, friendship, sacrifice, knowledge, and even science itself.

**Moralistic therapeutic deism.** This term was famously coined by two sociologists to describe the amorphous set of religious beliefs to which many American young people subscribe. This belief system is moralistic in that it emphasizes moral behavior, vaguely defined as being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, and so on. It is therapeutic in that it envisions God as on call to take care of problems that arise in our lives, but not otherwise interested in us nor holding us accountable for our choices. It is deistic in that it views God as having created the world but not personally involved in it. Such views fall far short of the Christian understanding of God, who does hold us accountable, who gave his Son for us to save us from the devastating consequences of sin, and who desires to be deeply involved in our lives.

**Secular messianism.** Secular messianism is a politicized version of Christianity that makes the Gospel subservient to a human agenda. It comes in various forms (both liberal and conservative), but in every case it reduces Christianity to a program of social progress in this world. Such an outlook has lost sight of the eschatological vision of the Gospel — the fact that what we believe and do in this life has eternal consequences, because the world as we know it will one day come to an end and Christ will return as the Lord before whom every knee will bow (Phil 2:9-11).

All these false answers to the deepest questions of life are not reasons for discouragement but for hope, because they show that people are hungry and searching for truth even if they are knocking on the wrong door. As St. Augustine wrote, “O Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our

hearts are restless until they find rest in you.” The absence of God in our culture has not quenched the thirst for God in the human heart. It has only misdirected it. Every human being, even if they are not aware of it, longs to be known and to be loved unconditionally. Everyone yearns for authentic happiness. Everyone wants to be secure in their identity, to be fulfilled as a human being, and to matter to others in some way. God himself has placed these desires in the human heart, and they can ultimately be fulfilled in Christ alone; anything less will fail to satisfy. That is why we who belong to Christ can never cease to propose him to those who do not yet know him. Jesus Christ is the desire of the nations, and his Gospel is the answer to the deepest aspirations of the human heart.

## **Seeing and Changing our Bad Habits**

**October 18, 2017**

At Synod 16 many frank discussions were held in which the participants discerned and evaluated together the present state of the Archdiocese of Detroit. The discussions brought to light what might be called the “capital vices” and “core virtues” of our local Church — those bad habits and good habits that affect our witness to Christ. A look at these good and bad habits will help us identify both what has to change and what we are called to become.

Our bad habits are those attitudes, misunderstandings, or deceptions that hold us back from unleashing the Gospel. Five of these stood out in particular at the Synod.

**A worldly notion of the Church.** Too often the Church is viewed, even by Catholics, as simply a human institution, and the Catholic faith as merely a lifestyle enhancer. In this outlook the Church’s value is based primarily on its contributions to society, whether in education, health care, advocacy, or service to the poor. The priest is seen as a kind of ecclesiastical civil servant. When this outlook prevails the Church’s mission can become captive to human plans, and the clarity of our witness to the Gospel is compromised. Cardinal John Henry Newman observed that perhaps one of the reasons Christ’s disciples in a particular time and place seem to escape being persecuted is that they have conformed themselves to the thinking and behavior of their society. They “have taken the world’s pay, and must not grudge its yoke.” What is lacking in such a worldly mindset is a humble recognition that the Church belongs to Christ as his body, his beloved bride. It is Christ who directs the mission and activity of the Church and who will bring her without fail to her final destiny. All of us, clergy and laity alike, are servants of the Lord who will one day render an account of our service to him.

**Spiritual lethargy.** The second vice is closely related to the first. If the Church is viewed as a human institution, then it is easy to become overwhelmed by the challenges that face us. The feeling that we have to carry the burden of a struggling Church contributes in turn to weariness, discontent, and defeatism. It may seem as if we are pushing a rock up a steep hill and getting nowhere. Where there has been such lethargy, dear brothers and sisters, let us repent! It is a little like a marriage that has become stale: it is time to “return to our first love” (cf. Rev 2:4), to go through a “marriage encounter” between ourselves and Jesus — or perhaps to fall in love with him for the first time. If our ardor has cooled, let us ask the Lord to touch us once again with a burning ember from his altar (cf. Isa 6:6) that we may be rekindled in our zeal for him.

**Status quo mentality.** There can be a kind of institutional hardening, a resistance to change. We may consider that certain institutional forms, customs and practices have carried us in the past and we do not want to put in the effort to reform them. Pope Francis speaks of “the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’” Instead he urges all local Churches to “be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities.”

**Fear.** The fourth bad habit can sometimes be more hidden. We can be subtly influenced by a combination of fears: fear of taking risks, fear of failure, fear of losing control, fear of going beyond our comfort zone. But yielding to fear keeps us in spiritual bondage (cf. Heb 2:15). How often Scripture tells us, “Fear not!” How often the Lord assures the fearful of his steadfast love

and his help (cf. Isa 43:1-2). We must choose not to be guided by fear. Whenever we become aware of fears and anxieties influencing us, we can bring them before the Lord in all honesty and ask him to replace them with apostolic courage.

**A complaining attitude.** A common temptation in reaction to problems is to lament that we no longer have the power or prestige we once had. We don't have as many priests, as many resources, as much money, as much support. Like the Israelites in the desert, we can take on an attitude of "murmuring," finding fault with God and others. But complaining leads only to discouragement and paralysis. God thinks we have enough, because we have him. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

## Good Habits Will Fuel Our Transformation

November 1, 2017

Our good habits are those dispositions of mind and heart that we must take on in order to become a radically mission-oriented Church. They are in fact a participation in the mind and heart of Jesus. “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus ...” (Phil 2:5). The following good habits are particularly crucial to the cultural change we are seeking to effect in the Archdiocese.

**Docility to the Spirit.** Throughout Acts it is evident that the Holy Spirit was the initiator, guide, and driving force of the Church’s evangelizing mission. So today the new evangelization can only be carried out through a radical openness to the leading of the Spirit: preceding every initiative with prayer for his guidance, constantly allowing ourselves to be led by him, and obeying his promptings and inspirations.

**Apostolic boldness.** A quality that stood out among the early Christians was their boldness in proclaiming the Gospel, even in the face of hostility and persecution (cf. Acts 4:29, 31; 28:31). They did not hesitate to proclaim Jesus as the one Savior whom God offers to the whole human race, and to call their listeners to repentance and conversion. Their boldness was not a human personality trait, but a result of their intimate union with Christ (cf. Acts 4:13).

**A spirit of innovation.** The rapidly changing cultural situation in which we find ourselves requires that we think in new and creative ways. We need to be willing to jettison some old structures that no longer work and to experiment with new ones. As St. Paul tried different missionary strategies in different settings (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23), so we need to be innovative, flexible, adaptable, unafraid to make mistakes, and willing to learn from the good ideas of others.

**A spirit of cooperation.** There can be no competition in the body of Christ, because we have one Lord and one united purpose (Eph 4:1-6). The whole Archdiocese has embarked on the new evangelization together, and any victory for one is a victory for all. As Christ’s apostles had to put aside rivalry and learn to work as a team (Lk 9:46-48), so we are called to a spirit of generous cooperation and sharing of resources.

**Confidence in God.** St. Thérèse teaches us the way of spiritual childhood, which is the way of simplicity and utter confidence in God. We give the Lord the best of our effort, but it is he who will bring the increase. We can trust in him, for the renewal of the Archdiocese of Detroit is not our work but his divine work in which we are cooperating. “Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth” (1 Cor 3:7).

**An attitude of gratitude.** The best antidote to discouragement is to praise God continually for who he is and to thank him for what he has done. “We thank you, God, we give thanks; we call upon your name, declare your wonderful deeds” (Ps 75:2). Gratitude puts us in a right posture before God and opens us to his further work in our lives.

The prophet Ezekiel, who lived in a time of trouble and discouragement not unlike our own, was given a vision of God’s people as a vast plain filled with dry bones.

“[God] asked me: Son of man, can these bones come to life? ‘Lord GOD,’ I answered, ‘you alone know that.’ Then he said to me: Prophesy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life.” (Ezekiel 37:3-5)

As your shepherd, exercising the prophetic office of Christ, I speak in the name of Christ to you, the Church of Detroit: “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! The Lord is breathing his Spirit into you to bring you to life! He is awakening you to what Christ came to give you, the fullness of life that comes from knowing him and receiving the free gift of his salvation. He is renewing his Church in her identity as God’s beloved people, the bride of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, sent forth to transform the world in the light of the Gospel.”

## **A New Evangelization Needs a New Pentecost**

**November 14, 2017**

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).*

Synod 16 has definitively set the Church in Detroit on the path of the new evangelization; we are living in our own time the Gospel mysteries of the Great Commission and Pentecost. What Scripture reveals about the Holy Spirit’s activity in the evangelizing Church is not only a challenge and a guide, it is what the Lord is continuing to do in our midst.

After giving his disciples the Great Commission, Jesus told them to “stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). As the first evangelization could not have taken place without the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, so the new evangelization cannot be accomplished without a new Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is God’s love poured into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5), revealing to us the Lordship of Jesus and our own exalted identity as beloved sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit is the “new wine” of divine life (cf. Lk 5:38; Acts 2:13). It is he who fills Christ’s disciples, then and now, with a compelling zeal to go forth and announce the good news of salvation.

The transformation caused by the Spirit was most visible in the apostle Peter. Before Pentecost, Peter had left everything to follow Jesus and was earnestly seeking to live by his teaching. But his ability to fulfill his apostolic mission was compromised by his own fears and failings. He vehemently resisted Jesus’ prediction of his passion, which seemed senseless to human reasoning. Then after boasting of his loyalty to the Master, he came face to face with his own weakness and cowardice. But after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter was filled with an unshakable inner conviction of the truth of the Gospel and a love that compelled him to share that good news with all who would listen. Even under persecution, his evangelical boldness and joy were uncontainable (Acts 4:12-13; 5:40-42). It was because of such a transformation in Peter and all the members of the Church that “The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly” (Acts 6:7).

For the Church in Detroit, reliving the Gospel mysteries means that we continually return to the Upper Room, asking for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit on us and on the whole region. We seek to bring every member of the Church, insofar as possible, into a personal and life-transforming experience of the Holy Spirit. Recognizing that we cannot give what we do not have, we continually seek to be refreshed in God’s presence and filled again and again with his love, so that it is his own love we are giving away.

### **Acts 29**

The book of Acts ends in chapter 28 with Paul under house arrest in Rome, still boldly preaching the Gospel. Luke ends without finishing the story because the story of the Church’s mission continues in every age. We are living the 29th chapter of Acts! The ecology of the New Testament by which the Gospel was unleashed in the ancient world is the ecology of the Church today. It thus includes the same elements of repentance and faith; signs and wonders.

## **Repent and Believe in the Gospel**

**November 30, 2017**

Just as when Jesus himself began the work of evangelization, so today the good news involves both a call to repent and a call to believe: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:14-15).

To repent means to “change one’s mind” — to make a life-altering decision to turn away from sin and toward God. There is no true offer of the good news that does not also call for repentance. And calling people to repentance requires that we speak of sin and its consequences, including the ultimate consequence of eternal separation from God. The apostles’ preaching always included this summons: “Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19). To speak of repentance is not fashionable today in a world that prefers to ignore sin, yet we who belong to Christ can testify that repentance is the way to forgiveness and freedom. It is the key that unlocks the mercy of God! The call to repentance is always addressed to ourselves first, since all of us are continually in need of deeper conversion.

To be effective in today’s context, our proclamation and teaching must contextualize the moral demands of the Gospel, showing why they are not arbitrary limitations on our freedom but the perfect plan of our loving God for human flourishing. We must provide our pastors, catechists and others with practical help and a systematized approach to presenting Christian morality. In particular, priests and deacons need training and resources for successfully preaching on the “hard topics.” Our presentation of the Gospel’s demands must be pastorally wise, meeting people where they are at and avoiding “truth bombs” that will only turn them away. It must honestly engage the culture, looking for “seeds of the Word” — partial truths and inklings of the Gospel even where mixed with error and confusion.

To believe means to accept the free gift of salvation that God gives us in his Son, which far surpasses anything we could deserve or accomplish (cf. Eph 2:3-10). Our life in Christ is always a response to God’s initiative. Grace comes first; our part is to receive. “The life of the Church should always reveal clearly that God takes the initiative, that ‘he has loved us first’ (1 Jn 4:19) and that he alone ‘gives the growth’ (1 Cor 3:7).”

The invitation to believe in the Gospel is always personal: it is not a moral program but the offer of communion with a person, Jesus. “Heart speaks to heart,” as Cardinal John Henry Newman put it. The invitation is effective if it is made by a joyful disciple, one who has found joy in responding to the Lord’s demands. The evangelist presents the challenges of the Gospel not as the word of a superior to an inferior, but of a friend to a friend. Relationships are key to this whole process. We prepare the ground by first establishing trust, and then we offer accompaniment to the sinner along the challenging road to life in Christ.

Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:5-42) is a paradigm of evangelization. When the woman came to the well for her daily task of drawing water, Jesus engaged her in conversation, showing that he cared for her as a person. He spoke to her of “living water” that would quench her deepest thirst. As the conversation went on, he exposed areas of sin and woundedness in her life, implicitly calling her to repentance: “you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” Yet looking into his eyes, she saw no

condemnation, only a love and mercy she had never experienced before. By the end of their encounter she forgot all about her bucket, because she had now drunk of the living water—that water that is the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:37-39). Because of that encounter the woman herself became an evangelist. She ran back to her village, exclaiming to everyone who would listen, “Come see a man who told me everything I have done! Could he possibly be the Messiah?” Her message was neither eloquent nor complete, yet it was spectacularly effective. The joy of her new life was evident to all who saw her. This formerly isolated, outcast person was now forgiven, healed and reconciled to God. So powerful was her testimony that, as a result, the entire town came to faith in Jesus (Jn 4:39).

### **Signs and Wonders**

Jesus proclaimed the Gospel not only in words but in healings, miracles, signs and wonders that visibly demonstrated the message: in him the kingdom of God had truly become present (Lk 9:11; Acts 2:22). When he commissioned his disciples to continue his mission, he commanded them too to preach the Gospel both in words and in deeds of power (Lk 9:1-2; 10:8-9; Jn 14:12). “They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs” (Mk 16:20). Often it was these signs that moved the hearers to believe the Gospel (Acts 8:6; Heb 2:4). So today we look for the proclamation of the good news to be accompanied by signs and wonders that visibly demonstrate God’s love and convince people that Jesus Christ is truly alive. We have been given a prison-shaking Savior, a deliverer who sets captives free! Signs, small and great, are a normal part of the Christian life. Our focus is not on the signs themselves, but on the risen Lord Jesus to whom they point. “By the power at work within us [he] is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20).

## **With Eyes Fixed on Jesus**

**December 14, 2017**

*“Let us ... persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” Hebrews 12:1-2*

The task of evangelizing is to propose Jesus Christ as the Savior whom God the Father offers to every human being. The new evangelization is not a membership drive, nor is it an effort to shore up a code of conduct. Rather, it is a love affair. All are invited to encounter Jesus and let their hearts be captured by him.

### **Encounter with Jesus**

Evangelizing aims to lead others to life-changing encounters with Jesus, with the result that he becomes the Lord of one's life. An encounter is a person-centered form of contemplation; it is two people being present to each other with no utilitarian purpose. For some people the encounter with Christ is a cataclysmic “Damascus road” kind of experience; for others it is more gradual. In either case, encountering Jesus is like meeting the person you are going to marry: you are overwhelmed by this encounter and cannot imagine going forward in life without that person. The Christian life becomes not just one but a series of encounters with Jesus, especially through prayer and the liturgy, which continually deepen our relationship with him.

Preaching and catechesis in our local Church must foster such encounters, especially by explaining our love relationship with Christ as the purpose of the liturgy. Whenever possible we should invite people to respond to Jesus by surrendering their lives to him, and give them concrete opportunities to do so.

For many of us, even for clergy, there is need for a renewed encounter with Jesus. In the time of the prophet Hosea, Israel needed such a rekindling of their romance with God, so God promised that he would allure them into the desert and speak tenderly to them: “I will espouse you to me forever: I will espouse you in right and in justice, in love and in mercy; I will espouse you in fidelity, and you shall know the LORD” (Hos 2:21-22). Whenever we feel spiritually fatigued, arid, or battle-worn, it is this return to our first love (Rev 2:4) that lifts us up again and revives our hearts. “We need to implore his grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence. Standing before him with open hearts, letting him look at us, we see that gaze of love which Nathaniel glimpsed on the day when Jesus said to him: ‘I saw you under the fig tree’” (Jn 1:48).”

### **The kerygma**

The “kerygma” is the New Testament word for the simple, radical, countercultural and joyful message of the Gospel — that “initial ardent proclamation by which a person is one day overwhelmed and brought to the decision to entrust himself to Jesus Christ by faith.” After two thousand years of development of doctrine, we are used to focusing on the need to transmit Catholic teaching on faith and morals in its fullness. This is indeed essential, but it does not come first. The proclamation of the kerygma must precede catechesis, because people are ready

to receive the Church's doctrine only after they have heard the kerygma and responded in faith. As Pope Francis has reminded us:

“The kerygma ... needs to be the center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal. ... On the lips of the catechist the first proclamation must ring out over and over: ‘Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.’ This first proclamation is called ‘first’ not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways. ...”

The kerygma is often described in terms of four essential elements: (1) the loving plan of God for human beings; (2) sin and its devastating consequences, especially separation from God; (3) God's answer to our predicament in the sending of his Son for our salvation; and (4) the response this gift calls for from every person: to repent of our sins, believe in Jesus and be baptized, so we can be filled with his Holy Spirit and live a new life in his family, the Church.

It is essential for all preachers and catechists to learn the art of proclaiming the kerygma and to reflect on how to make all their preaching and teaching more kerygmatic. The kerygma can be proclaimed effectively only by a firsthand witness, one who has met the Lord personally and can speak of what he is doing in one's own life. Priests and deacons, in particular, should consider how to make use of opportune moments to preach the kerygma, especially to those who are not practicing the faith — occasions such as weddings, funerals, parish social events, baptismal preparation for parents, and sacramental preparation for children and families.

### **Testimony**

Personal testimony has an indispensable role in evangelization. Testimony has a unique power to touch hearts, since it is almost impossible to ignore the witness of someone who has encountered Jesus personally and whose life has been transformed by him. The townspeople of the Samaritan woman at the well came to faith in Jesus because of her testimony, which eventually led them to encounter him themselves (Jn 4:39, 42).

There is a wide variety of appropriate occasions for the giving of personal testimonies, not only in church but also in less formal settings; for instance, at the end of Mass, during times of informal prayer, in catechetical settings, RCIA programs, marriage preparation, small groups, Bible studies, etc. There is need for prudent discernment of whom to invite to give testimony, and it is wise to have them practice and receive guidance beforehand.

## **The ‘Word Made Flesh’ Must Live in Our Parishes**

### **December 29, 2017**

*“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).*

By the Holy Spirit’s descent upon the Blessed Virgin Mary, the eternal Word has taken on flesh: the invisible God is now able to be seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, even touched with our hands (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). So in this age of the new covenant the Creator communicates himself to us through the created means he himself has chosen. In our efforts to unleash the Gospel, we proceed with the firm conviction that the Holy Spirit brings about life-changing encounters with the Lord Jesus in his Mystical Body the Church, particularly in fellowship with one another, in Sacred Scripture, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and most especially in the Holy Eucharist.

### **The Communion of the Church**

The Church is the context given by God in which we encounter Jesus Christ. Although it is common for people today to say they are “spiritual but not religious,” or that they believe in Jesus but not in the Church, in truth there can be no relationship with Jesus that does not include his Church. God relates to his people not as isolated individuals but as a people, a family, united with one another in deep bonds of love (Eph 4:1-6). We learn to give and receive God’s love in and through our relationships with one another. As St. Augustine taught, when we say “amen” before receiving Holy Communion, we are saying “amen” not only to Christ the head, but to all the members of his body. So profound is this communion that it endures beyond death: we have fellowship not only with the members of the Church on earth but with the saints in heaven, who are cheering us on and helping us draw closer to Christ (cf. Heb 12:1).

Pastors and other leaders should reflect on how to deepen the experience of communion among their parishioners. Do some people attend Mass in isolation, not knowing or being known by others? Do some have the impression that relating to God is sufficient and relating to others in the parish is unnecessary? Are all aware of their responsibility to encourage and build up the faith of others? Do all recognize the need to forgive the offenses of others, to bear with their faults and failings, to avoid cliques and factions, to overcome social and cultural barriers, and to reach out to those who may feel lonely or neglected? Our parishes must be places where people’s “hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love” (Col 2:2).

One effective way to foster communion is to form well-planned small groups in which the members meet regularly for Bible study or faith formation as well as mutual support, encouragement, and growth in holiness. Social events can also go a long way toward building relationships. It is important to keep in mind that fellowship in the Church is not for its own sake, but is always centered on the Person of Christ.

### **Scripture**

Listening and responding to God’s word in the Sacred Scriptures must be at the heart of our efforts to unleash the Gospel. One who is in love desires to know more and more about the beloved. Since all Scripture speaks of Christ, immersing ourselves in the word is a way to deepen our initial encounter and grow in our relationship with him.

God's word is "living and active" (Heb 4:12); it renews our minds and changes us. The more grounded we are in Scripture, the more we are able to understand God's marvelous plan and to see the events in our lives with the eyes of faith. Through Scripture we learn to hear God speaking to us personally: "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them." As God's word is dynamic, so must our response be: we take the word to heart and apply it to our lives.

An evangelizing parish is one in which parishioners continually study, talk about, and pray with the Scriptures. To this end, parishes must make Bible study resources available, particularly to put the Scriptures in context for those who know them only through the readings proclaimed at Sunday Mass. Parishioners also need to be taught how to do *lectio divina*, reading Scripture in prayerful conversation with God. As Pope Benedict XVI stated:

"Since 'ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,' making the Bible the inspiration of every ordinary and extraordinary pastoral outreach will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation. For this reason I encourage pastors and the faithful to recognize the importance of this emphasis on the Bible."

### **Reflection question**

Is my parish a place where "hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love"? If not, what needs to change?

## **Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist: Renewal and Strength**

**January 11, 2018**

The Sacrament of Reconciliation was given to the Church by the Lord Jesus himself as the preeminent place for the baptized to respond anew to his call to repentance and to receive the Father's mercy. The renewal of this sacrament in our local Church is an essential part of our efforts to unleash the Gospel.

In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus reveals God's joy over returning sinners. The younger son, who insulted his father and wasted his inheritance, is reduced to starvation and decides to come home, hoping to be hired as a servant in his father's house. But "while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Lk 15:20). Before the young man even finishes his confession, the father commands that he be clothed in a robe, ring and sandals — signs of restoration to full sonship — and that a feast be held to celebrate. Such is God the Father's heart toward his lost sons and daughters.

A sign of a thriving parish community is a culture of sharing in the "joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Lk 15:7). This entails both clear preaching about the consequences of sin and generous availability and use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "[God's] mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" (Lam 3:22-23). For those who have fallen away from their faith and the Church, Reconciliation is an open doorway for return. No sin is unforgivable, and through the sacrament the Father's embrace and a fresh start await them. For those already practicing the faith, being cleansed of sin is crucial for opening themselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Just as the sins of each individual have a negative spiritual effect on the whole community, so even more the spiritual healing and forgiveness received through the sacrament cause grace to flow through the whole community.

### **The Holy Eucharist**

In the Holy Eucharist we reach the summit of our participation in the victory of Christ over sin and death — the triumph we proclaim in the new evangelization. In this Most Blessed Sacrament we have the source of our zeal and strength to unleash the Gospel.

Evangelization leads to the Eucharist, since the Eucharist is the fullness of communion with Jesus and his whole Church. On the other hand, the Eucharist leads to evangelization, since our ability to announce the Gospel springs from the passion and resurrection of Christ which is made present anew in the Eucharist. This is why the Latin liturgy traditionally ends with the words *Ite, missa est*: "Go, she is sent." At every Mass the Church — that is, all her members — are newly empowered and sent forth to bring Christ into the world. Through the Eucharist we become stamped with the pattern of Christ's own self-giving love so that we can reproduce that pattern in our own lives. Thus the goal of the liturgy is never just to receive the sacrament and go home; it is to become a living tabernacle through which Christ is made present to others. As Pope Benedict XVI stated:

"The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God's love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and

summit not only of the Church's life, but also of her mission: 'an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church.' We too must be able to tell our brothers and sisters with conviction: 'That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us'" (1 Jn 1:3).

The members of our local Church need to be regularly rekindled in "Eucharistic amazement" by preaching and catechesis that helps to deepen their understanding and faith in this immeasurable gift and moves them to make a gift of self in return. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, since it brings people directly into the presence of Jesus, is a powerful means of revitalizing a parish and equipping it to transform the culture.

Parishes must also focus sustained attention on the quality of the Sunday liturgy experience, especially from the perspective of newcomers and newly returning Catholics. Do people who show up for Mass enter into a friendly, hospitable environment where mutual love is evident? Does the music help them to lift up their minds and hearts in worship of God? Does the preaching break open the word of God and help them apply it to their lives? Is there an atmosphere of faith in which people's attention is truly focused on the Lord? These qualities are not the responsibility of the pastor alone but of the entire congregation. If improvement is needed, let us strive for it with patience and perseverance.

## **There Can Be No Bystanders to Evangelization**

**February 8, 2018**

*“Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16).*

Christ calls every priest, deacon, religious and lay person in the Archdiocese to embark upon the new evangelization, to employ new methods and a new fervor in unleashing the Gospel. “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization.”

### **The Laity**

The special calling and privilege of the lay faithful is to bring Christ into the secular world. “Since the laity, in accordance with their state of life, live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ.” Their role is to transform every aspect of the culture through the Gospel — family life, education, government, business, the media, entertainment, sports, science, the arts. They do so both by “engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God” and by “revealing Christ by word to those around them.”

The engagement of every lay person, according to their gifts and state in life, is essential for the mission of the Church to be fulfilled. “Each member of the lay faithful should always be fully aware of being a ‘member of the Church’ yet entrusted with a unique task which cannot be done by another and which is to be fulfilled for the good of all.” Each one should reflect on how the Lord is calling them to bring the Gospel into their particular spheres of influence both through their deeds and their words.

### **Priests and Deacons**

The leadership of our priests and deacons in unleashing the Gospel is crucial for this mission; every pastoral work must make a contribution to the new evangelization.

As priests, we must resist the idea that we are ecclesiastical civil servants whose primary task is to maintain the organization. Rather, the organization is always at the service of the Gospel. Our role is to be spiritual fathers who bring God’s children to birth and nurtures them to maturity in Christ (1 Cor 4:15; Gal 4:19). We lead the sheep to green pastures where they can be fed, refreshed, and spiritually built up so that they themselves can then be sent out into the harvest.

A priest is a servant of the word of God. “The priest is first of all a minister of the word of God. He is consecrated and sent forth to proclaim the good news of the kingdom to all, calling every person to the obedience of faith...” Although a priest’s highest role is the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, it is preaching the Gospel that draws people to Christ in the first place and enables them to receive the full saving benefit of the sacraments. Priests and deacons need to be bold in proclaiming all the elements of the Gospel, not only those parts that people want to hear. Preachers need ongoing formation in how to do so with compassion, conviction and clarity.

## **Consecrated Life and Movements**

The Lord has raised up in our local Church men and women in consecrated life, as well as lay people who belong to ecclesial movements, so that they can employ their unique charisms in the new evangelization. We thank God for every religious order, congregation, society, and movement that is present in the Archdiocese, each with its particular gifts.

Consecrated men and women bear witness by their lives to the priceless treasure of Christ — “the pearl of great price” that is worth selling everything to attain (Mt 13:46). Their lives of prayer, service and self-sacrifice cause the fragrance of Christ to fill the atmosphere, so that others are drawn to him (cf. Jn 12:3; 2 Cor 2:14-15). Those in contemplative life are particularly indispensable to our local Church. If our mission is fruitful, it is largely because of their hidden prayers and sacrifices. Those in active apostolates make the good news of Christ visible and tangible to those they serve. I entreat all those in consecrated life to pray fervently and frequently for the success of our efforts to unleash the Gospel.

The ecclesial movements, many of which have sprung up since Vatican Council II, kindle fervor in lay people and bring fresh creativity and dynamism to evangelization. As John Paul II noted, “There is so much need today for mature Christian personalities, conscious of their baptismal identity, of their vocation and mission in the world! ... And here are the movements and the new ecclesial communities: they are the response, given by the Holy Spirit, to this critical challenge.” I invite each of the movements to reflect on how they can contribute, in accord with their specific charisms, to our archdiocesan effort to unleash the Gospel.

## **Youth and Young Adults**

The youth and young adults of our local Church have a particular call, which the Church wholeheartedly supports, to bring the light of the Gospel into southeast Michigan.

On the day of Pentecost St. Peter proclaimed, quoting the prophet Joel, that the Holy Spirit gives to both young and old the ability to prophesy (Acts 2:17) — that is, to speak God’s word under the influence of the Spirit such that it touches people’s hearts and brings conversion. We address our preaching of the Gospel to young people, but we must not forget that they themselves are also agents of the new evangelization. They have a unique ability to reach the people of their own generation, and they can help us think in new ways. We must make every effort to encourage, challenge, mentor, and raise up the young to take up their rightful roles in the mission of the Church, entrusting responsibility to them as appropriate. As Pope Francis wrote, there is an “urgent need for the young to exercise greater leadership.”