



Office of the Bishop

Strengthening Faith in a Challenging World

Pastoral Letter Promulgating *The Way: Youth to Young Adult Initiative*

“For the one who has, more will be given, and from one who has not, even what little he has will be taken away.” -Mark 4:25

This statement of Jesus has particular relevance to the gifts that come from *God—faith and grace* among them. Much like a second language or friendship, if certain gifts are not reinforced, used, or increased, they are eventually lost. For example, one can attend a language immersion school and learn a new language. However, it will be lost over time if that language is not used and practiced. Likewise, if we do not connect with our friends regularly, we drift apart, and the friendship evaporates. Religious faith is similar.

A Concerning Trend

It is no secret that religious belief across America has declined for over 50 years but has decreased at an unprecedented rate over the past two decades. According to a 2020 Pew Research Center study, 64% of Americans identified as Christian in 2020, down from 90% in the early 1990s. This was the first time a poll found less than half of Americans belonging to a church. In recent years, the disturbing trend of people who leave religion completely and claim no religious affiliation has skyrocketed from 16% in 2007 to 30% in 2020.

Our diocese is no exception. In 1976, over 87,000 people participated in Mass each week. As of 2018 that number has dropped to below 45,000. But that’s not the whole story. Based on the population growth rate in our diocese since 1976, we should see well over 110,000 Catholics at Mass each week. So, in reality, we are ***missing almost 69,000 Catholics***.

There is a similar decline in reception of the sacraments. In the 2001/2002 school year, almost 2,000 children were baptized in our diocese. Of those, only a little over 1,000 went on to be confirmed as teens. This downward trend continues in subsequent years. That means almost half of our baptized children don’t receive the Sacrament of Confirmation in their youth. This calls for a remedy.

The Challenge

We are at a critical moment. It is time to reevaluate our approach to formation and disciple-making within Catholic institutions and families. Our mission is to ensure that our youth become devoted disciples of Jesus Christ and continue the journey toward heaven in their adult lives. I am concerned that many do not see how serious the challenge has become. The influence of secular culture presents unique challenges to families, especially in the critical years in which parents hand on the Faith to the next generation so that this precious gift from God is not abandoned.

The Vision and Goals

The impetus for what I announce and promulgate with this letter arose from the *Visioning Process* we embarked on over five years ago, which yielded our guiding vision, *One Family: Restored in Christ, Equipped for Mission*. Under the priority, *Growing God's Family*, is the concrete goal to “Craft a Comprehensive Youth to Young Adult Initiative by November 2022.” While the unexpected challenges of COVID delayed this goal, I am happy to share the outline of where we will be going in the coming years.

The Irreplaceable Role of Parents

Challenges are not met so much with programs but with people. The transmission of faith is accomplished from person to person. This personal aspect is especially relevant in the context of family, which is the *domestic church* in our Catholic understanding. The family forms the most basic cell of the Church. As a small society of faith and love, every family member has rights and duties. The pinnacle of Christian parents' responsibilities, which they promise to fulfill on the day of their child's baptism, is to educate and raise their child in the Catholic Faith. Indeed, one of the Catholic Church's foundational principles for religious education is that parents hold the primary place as educators of their children. All the other resources the larger Church community provides—the parish school, religious education programs, and youth ministry—are meant to supplement what happens in the child's family, not replace it.

Empowering Parents

With the irreplaceable role of parents in mind, this new initiative supports more direct involvement of parents in their children's ongoing Christian education and spiritual growth. The hope and expectation are for this to contribute to the ongoing spiritual development of parents as well. God delights when the family grows together, each member contributing to the holiness of the other. Research shows that children who grow up discussing faith within the family are more likely to practice their religion ten years after they leave home. More than any other factor— a family that regularly discusses faith has the most influence on children continuing to practice their faith.

The Importance of Encounter and Memory

Knowledge is essential in the life and growth of every disciple. Jesus promised, “*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free*” (John 8:32) and “*Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ*” (John 17:4). But the knowledge of which Jesus speaks is more than mere intellectual knowledge. Christianity is not a philosophy or a set of beliefs, but encountering a person, the divine Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, who took flesh and became man. Jesus reveals God to us, and he reveals to us what it means to be fully human. We follow a real person and truly share his very life. We can say, “Jesus Christ is not just an important part of my life; he *is* my life.”

Being a disciple of Jesus is more than knowing things about him—it is knowing him and living in him. St. Paul describes this beautifully, “*It is now no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; I still live my human life, but it is a life*

of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). We don’t think our way into heaven. We have a share in heaven if we have Christ fully alive in us: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

All this is to say that religious education must be more than an academic exercise in which we complete a set of classes. We need to know teachings and understand our faith, but we also need to know Jesus Christ. This “knowledge” comes from encountering Jesus and his authentic love for us personally.

We must provide for and encourage opportunities during childhood for these encounters and the powerful memories that accompany them. The Holy Spirit accomplishes these encounters when we make room for them and seek them. Through these encounters, our children enter into friendship with Jesus and fall in love with him.

Remembering and Building Memories

Jesus urged his disciples to “remember” events and the things he told them, such as at the Last Supper when he gave them the gift of the Eucharist. We often recall where we were and what we were doing when something profoundly important happened. God uses our memories of him and his grace to fortify our lives in faith as we grow and age. This initiative creates moments to allow God to bestow good experiences and memories on our children, which they can carry through life.

Why this is Important: The Salvation of our Children

We read in the Bible the good news of salvation: “*You can depend on this as worthy of full acceptance: that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners*” (1 Tim 1:15). The Scriptures elaborate in different places on how Christ accomplishes our salvation: through faith (Jn 3:15; Rm 10:9-11), through baptism (Jn 3:5; 1 Pt 3:21; Tit 3:5), through good works of love (Mt 7:21; Mt 25: 31-46; Jn 14:21; Phil 2:12-13); through frequent reception of the Eucharist (Jn 6: 53-58); by avoiding serious sin and by extension, going to regular confession (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5: 19-21; Eph 5: 3-6; Rev 22: 12-16; Mt 25: 41-46; Jn 5: 28-29); and through final perseverance as a Christian to the end of one’s life (Mt 24: 13-14; Phil 2: 12; 2 Tim 2: 11-12; Heb 6: 4-6).

The essential thing in life, the ultimate goal, is life with God and those who love him in heaven. Not meeting this goal is an utter, eternal tragedy. God is mercy, but it is presumptive to conclude that God will save us without our consent and cooperation. God’s love is so great that he allows us to choose him (and heaven) or something less. The parable of the Prodigal Son in Saint Luke’s Gospel (Lk 15:11-32) illustrates this perfect balance of freedom and mercy. The prodigal son was allowed to leave, make a disaster of his life, and choose sin and the suffering that always goes with it. It was only after turning back (repentance) that he encountered the salvation of the Father’s mercy. So it is with each person. God chooses us, and God lets us choose—love requires both.

The years of youth are a precious time to introduce our children to the God who loves them and help them respond in freedom and faith. By proposing the Catholic Faith in a compelling way, as a choice that will enrich and deepen their lives, we nurture a deep and abiding relationship of faith, hope, and love that will carry them through life with all its storms and winding paths. Ideally, this is done in both the family context and parish/school religious education.

Enhancing What We Already Have

The following plan does not discard what families and parishes are already doing. The dedication and commitment of many parents and teachers in forming our children in the faith is praiseworthy.

We also see the fruit of this work in so many of our children as they grow into maturity and live as disciples of Jesus. Rather, this plan seeks to provide a clearer, more integrated path that uses what is in place but enhances and provides more order so that parents can be more engaged in the religious life and education of their children.

What follows is not complex. For any plan to be effective, it must be understandable, achievable, and have adequate resources. I believe we have those ingredients in place. However, I am desirous of providing more resources so that we are as effective as possible in forming our children for this life and for the life to come. For example, I plan to gradually increase our capability for families and children to make spiritual retreats. Additionally, we are developing parent resources for intentional conversations around integrating faith and daily life.

Future Steps and Gratitude

I wish to thank you, parents, for your generosity in allowing God to gift you with a child and for asking God to bestow the supernatural life of grace upon your child at baptism. I hope this new plan will help you follow through on the promises you made at your child's baptism to help your child grow that gift of faith to full maturity and to "keep the flame of faith alive" in your child's heart. Your Church is committed to helping you with this critical responsibility.

I also thank our priests, deacons, and many lay employees and volunteers who are so generous in teaching, serving, and providing a witness with their lives so that our youth can know Jesus, love Jesus, and serve and live for Jesus. Ultimately, all we do in the Church is for that goal.

Gratefully Yours in Christ,



James V. Johnston, Jr.
Bishop of Kansas City-St. Joseph
+ All Saints -November 1, 2023

Main Features of The Way: Youth to Young Adult Initiative

- The time for ordinary reception of the Sacrament of Confirmation will be 6th grade.
- A comprehensive approach will integrate existing formation for the Sacraments of Initiation and the Sacrament of Penance with the role of parents.
- Retreats and other faith experiences will emphasize encounter with God and the value of memory.
- Support will be provided to equip parents for fruitful conversations with their children.
- Guidance will be given to parents regarding ages and stages of development in faith and discipleship.
- Intentional efforts to bridge gaps between stages of development and stages of life will assist youth in navigating their way towards adult faith.
- Formation at key moments will support youth as they approach, discern, and commit to their vocation.