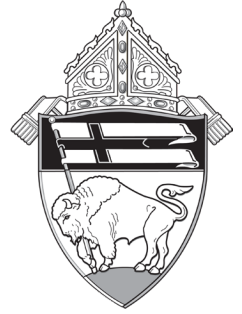




A Pastoral Letter to the Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Buffalo

Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger,
Apostolic Administrator
First Sunday of Advent, 2020



My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

God calls you each by name! “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you” (Jer. 1:5). God’s call to Jeremiah is personal, sanctifying and missionary. Knowing, choosing and sending – this is God’s loving action in your life. You are made by love and for love.

To say his call was “prophetic” does not mean Jeremiah could predict the future. The call of a prophet is to be a messenger, an ambassador for God’s loving plan in the world. The mission of every baptized Christian is prophetic: to accept being called by name, sanctified, and sent into the world to announce the “good news,” or gospel, of God’s mercy-giving love.

To be “missionary” is to be touched by God’s holiness and sent forth, to break away from fear of change, to grow beyond our comfort zones (“we’ve always done it that way”) and to abandon ourselves, daring to move into a future of what God dreams for us. This is life in the Holy Spirit, the love between the Father and the Son, who joins us together as members of the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the master of relationships, revealing through our connectedness our true personal identity, our unique role in this communion of life and love which we call the Church.

Church is not so much a place we go to as a name for who we are, living our daily lives together as family. A family is wherever and whenever you knock on the door, they will take you in. Families grow and welcome new members. My favorite definition of church or parish is a “family of families” – and a family for those without family.

As your spiritual father during this time of transition, I invite you – all of us – to consider, reflect on and renew our family relationships. None of us is an island. If God is calling us each by name, then each of our

lives has a meaning and a purpose for God. God lives in us and among us.

None of us got here alone. Whoever our birth or adoptive parents may be, whoever fed and nurtured us, rocked and cradled us, dressed, taught and carried us around in our formative years, we were always part of something larger than ourselves. Those of us with warm memories of our family of origin, parish or catholic education often want to share that experience with others. Those whose memories may be tinged or scarred by painful experiences, or sinful patterns of abuse, still hope for healing and reconciliation. Toward this end, every parish and school must become an oasis of peace. As we share our stories and trust prayerfully in God’s presence among us, we discover something of what those two travelers on the road to Emmaus did, while discussing, even questioning their experience of Jesus. Suddenly he shows up, unrecognized at first. He stays – and enlightens their hearts and minds - “*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*” (Lk 24:32)

The Church is born in the shadow of the Cross. What appears at first appears to be the end is only the beginning. We come to such points in our lives, when old ways seem to collapse. We may feel at a dead end, that our best hopes and expectations have been defeated. There and then the Lord encounters us, only to open up another door – the door to his heart and to a new life of hope in him. If we look back, like Lot’s wife, we will wither and die. If we enter the heart of Jesus with trust, we will have life to the full. “*Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it*” (Lk 17:32-33).

We stand now at such a crossroads. Many of us in the Diocese of Buffalo have cherished memories of how things once were. With all the headwinds in recent years, however, we may wonder if our best days are past. For others, there is disappointment and regret

over missed opportunities, misguided choices or the misuse of resources. There is pain, particularly among the survivors of abuse, and anger towards those who did not protect them, church leaders in particular. These feelings are shared, in different ways and degrees, by laypersons and clergy alike, who feel betrayed by peers or by leadership, abandoned and often judged or dismissed, swept under a wave that casts suspicion on anyone who loves the Church, believes in its mission and devotes their lives to it. How Jesus himself must have experienced such anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane and throughout his passion, feeling in his earthly body the suffering that would also beset his Mystical Body, the Church. United with Jesus in his sufferings, we cannot abandon the Church, which St. Paul also identifies as Christ's beloved spouse.

To turn away from the Church is to neglect our family, indeed, to turn away from Jesus himself who is forever bonded to us. In a beautiful passage of Scripture, following a hymn of praise describing how God has glorified Christ, setting him over all the powers of heaven and earth, and made him to be our Savior, St. Paul writes: "*And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head of all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way*" (Eph. 1:22-23). Could Christ's intimate and unbreakable bond with us be made clearer?

What does a family then do when it experiences betrayal and hurt? What does a family of faith do when any of its members are hurting or lost or disconnected? Members turn to the Lord in prayer for healing and reconciliation, reaching out to one another, seeking comfort, assurance and the embrace of unconditional acceptance and love. In this conscious, deliberative decision to turn to God and embrace one another, the family – each member of the family – listens, forgives and prays. And the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ hears and heals.

So, where do we start? Exactly where we are, accompanying one another, as the two men on the road to Emmaus. Where will we go? Wherever the Holy Spirit leads us. And we can be sure that this path will take us outside of ourselves, yes, even our comfort zones. But the Church is also most itself when its gaze is outside itself, not hiding its light under a basket but shedding it on the world, particularly those darkest

places, the margins of our communities. The Church exists for evangelization, that is, spreading the Gospel.

Remember the Holy Spirit that drove Jesus into the desert to fast and pray and to be tempted by Satan, is the same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. It is this Holy Spirit that Jesus breathed upon the Apostles, empowering them to heal and forgive sins, entrusting to them the sacramental life of the Church, and sending them off into the four corners of the world, while remaining united in the one Spirit.

This empowering Spirit is upon each and every one of us, through Baptism and Confirmation, teaching and reminding us of all that Jesus taught his disciples. We possess this power, in ways unique to each, yet oriented towards building up the Body of Christ, here and now, wherever we find ourselves.

The renewal initiative that we have begun – or what one may call a reorientation of ourselves as Church, a *communio in missio* or "communion with a mission" – is what we are called to do together. It isn't about my church or your church, the diocese or any of our parishes, or the vision of any one particular bishop or parish or movement. It's about building up together his Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, what he is calling us to be and to become.

The renewal begins by asking Jesus, personally, what part he wants each of us to play. We seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we embark on a process of listening, forgiving and praying together, guided by some of our dedicated leaders, laypersons and clergy, who will help us construct a roadmap for renewal, by which we will learn to grow, discover and navigate together, bringing out the best in one another.

Our mission will be collaborative - lay persons and clergy, persons in consecrated life, whatever our age or personal circumstances. We will work together to take stock of our resources, human and material, with a particular eye and ear for who may be most in need at this time, whom we may not have included, those left at the margins. A lot of people are suffering in the wake of this pandemic and the sociocultural challenges in our nation. Many are grieving over the loss of loved ones and cherished friends. At the same time, we need to show a particular sensitivity to those affected by the evils of various forms of abuse, racism, domestic violence and addictions.

Along this journey together as families of faith, seeking the good of all members, while ever attentive to those most in need of our attention and support, we will challenge one another to envision new ways of using and sharing our resources, reaching beyond parish boundaries, sharing experiences and learning from best practices. A recent Instruction from the Congregation for the Clergy (The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community #16) suggests some models that might be appropriated in different regions of our diocese. Our Renewal Task Force will suggest others that might be examined, tried and implemented.

What we are envisioning here is not a program or a plan for closing or opening, expanding or contracting current parish structures. Families do not grow, blend and harmonize like corporate mergers and acquisitions. In the course of time, circumstance and needs may suggest the wisdom of sharing or repurposing a building, a particular space, or personal talents and abilities in innovative and creative ways, realigning schedules for Masses, sacramental formation, schooling alternatives, social ministries, and administrative models. This is more about growing together organically, from the grassroots, rather than following some imposed blueprint for reconstruction or consolidation. It is a growing process rather than a prefabricated program. The ultimate goal is for all parish families to be and remain vibrant communities of faith, focused on their evangelizing mission. At the heart of the renewal, however, must be a commitment to conversion, which leads to holiness, not just self-preservation. “[A]s he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written ‘Be holy because I (am) holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Holiness is the object of our call to the knowledge and love of God. It requires in us a desire and an openness to listen and discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit, speaking to us as we walk together. It also demands hearts ready and willing to forgive every day. We have sinned and we need to admit our failures and shortcomings. We will continue to make mistakes and must be willing to impart and receive fraternal correction, in accordance with the Scriptures. We cannot remain static. *Ecclesia semper reformanda* - the Church must always be reformed. Everyone must have a mind and a heart open to be changed.

Finally, and most fundamentally, we have to pray. No community, no family, will stay together without these three: listening, forgiving, praying. For our family of faith, nothing is more essential than prayer in all its forms. This includes, first and foremost, participation in the Holy Eucharist, weekly, if not daily. It embraces all of the sacraments as well, particularly the sacrament of Penance, on a regular basis. The Liturgy of the Hours, lectio divina, personal prayer, Eucharistic adoration, and the recitation of Rosary are all tried and true ways of praying that pastors must encourage even as they accompany their people in the learning and the practice.

We might close by remembering the famous words of Venerable Father Patrick Peyton, also known as the “Rosary Priest,” who said, “the family that prays together stays together.” Three prayers for our ‘Mission of Renewal’ accompany this letter for use at Mass, family and school gatherings, or in personal meditation. All three may be said together as one prayer, separately, or in any order. The important thing for all of us to do is to keep asking the Lord to help us to listen, to forgive and to pray with and for one another. In doing so, we will discover together his ongoing plan for our spiritual, fully human growth, and the wellness of our families, especially our family of faith, the Church, in all its forms throughout our diocese and in all of its regions.

Jesus calls us each by name, accompanying us as we walk together, saving us through one another, in each of whose hearts his Holy Spirit lives. We are all connected in one body, his body, his Church. That is why we take care of one another. And in doing so, we build up the Body of Christ, “*the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way*” (Eph. 1:23).

May our Lord bless each and every one of you and place in your hearts that same Holy Spirit who “scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2:10), so that every person you encounter may find in your heart the love and peace and mercy in the Sacred Heart of Jesus himself.

Lovingly in the heart of Jesus,

Bishop Ed

+Edward B. Schaeferberger

Prayer To Renew Our Mission

Holy God of love and mercy, living in our hearts, sanctify and transform us.

Unite and form our minds, hearts and spirits in accord with your holy will.

As Jesus calls us friends, may we encounter and accompany one another as family, searching out and embracing especially any of your loved ones whom we have overlooked, wounded or driven away.

Forgive us, heal us, renew us!

As we trust in you, who have chosen us and called us each by name, may we entrust ourselves to one another as family. As a communion of disciples of Jesus Christ, we accept our mission to proclaim the joy of the Gospel to everyone we meet.

May your love for each and every one of us dispel the seeds of doubt, fear and division sown by the Evil One, raising us up as strong and courageous witnesses to your holy presence among us.

We thank you for creating and calling us. We embrace the mission you entrust to us. And we pledge, with your grace, to let your light shine on the world that hungers and thirsts for your Word.

Amen.

Prayers along our Mission of Renewal

A

Holy God of love and mercy, living in our hearts, sanctify and transform us in our mission of renewal.

Unite and form our minds, hearts and spirits in accord with your holy will.

As Jesus calls us friends, may we encounter and accompany one another as family, searching out and embracing especially any of your loved ones whom we have overlooked, wounded or driven away.

Forgive us, heal us, renew us!

B

As we trust in you, Loving God, who has chosen us and called us each by name, may we entrust ourselves to one another as family. As a communion of disciples of Jesus Christ, we accept our mission of renewal to proclaim the joy of the Gospel to everyone we meet.

May your love for each and every one of us dispel the seeds of doubt, fear and division sown by the Evil One, raising us up as strong and courageous witnesses to your holy presence among us.

C

We thank you for creating and calling us. We embrace the mission you entrust to us. And we pledge, with your grace, to let your light shine on the world that hungers and thirsts for your Word.

Amen.

Will you commit to be part of this effort to enliven our Catholic faith in the Diocese of Buffalo?

Please respond by sending me an email at BishopEd@buffalodiocese.org

*or through regular post at:
Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger
Diocese of Buffalo
795 Main St.
Buffalo, NY 14203*

