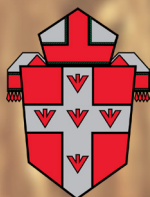


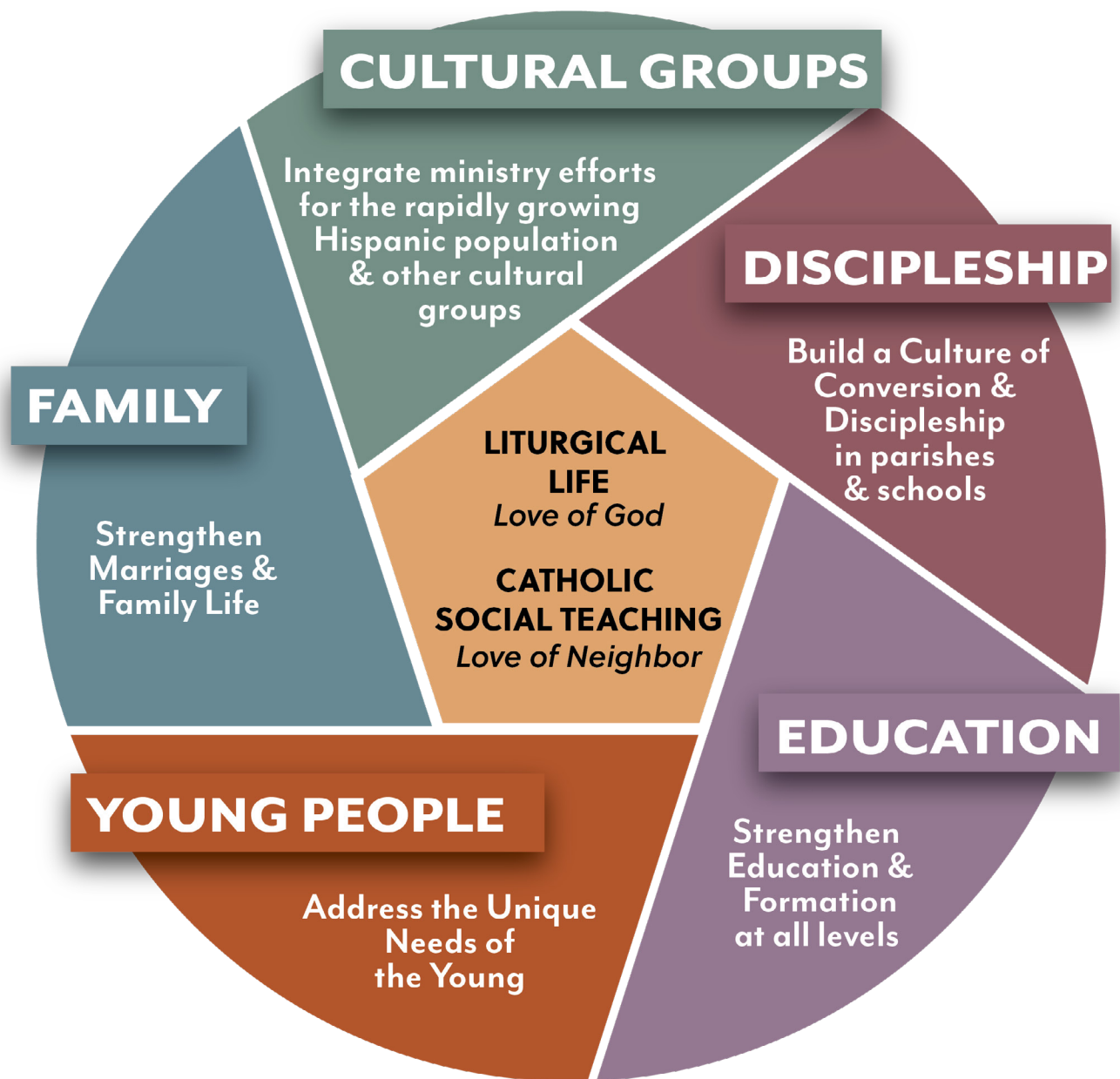
VISION 2030

*A Pastoral Plan
for the
Archdiocese of Oklahoma City*

Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley
Archbishop of Oklahoma City

December 8, 2019





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The Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Introduction

The journey of the past two years has been a fruitful one as we have engaged in a process of pastoral planning for our archdiocese. As we have focused on building a culture of conversion and discipleship, it has allowed me many opportunities to reflect on my own conversion.

I have shared this story a number of times in various settings. Permit me once more to share a few highlights, not to hold myself up as a model or exemplar, but rather to draw you into the exercise of “gratefully remembering” your own moments where the Lord has touched your life, entered your heart and left you changed, transformed.

When I was a junior in college at the University of Kansas, I was involved with a group called The Integrated Humanities Program. The IHP conducted a study abroad trip to Ireland for a semester. I was really eager to go with more than one hundred of my friends. I imagined it would be a four-month-long pub crawl through twenty-six counties. However, the first week we were there changed everything. We were spending half of our time on a little island called Inishbofin on the west coast of Ireland. We’d not been there a week when some of our buddies were out exploring late one afternoon.

It was February, the sun was setting, and they climbed on rocks to get a better view of the seascape and the island. These young men were from Kansas; they didn’t know anything about the ocean, and certainly didn’t know anything about tides. Later that evening we were in the pub and some others from our group told us that Rick and Ed never came back. They didn’t come back that evening, and the next morning there was still no sign of them. I went off to the local parish church, Saint Colman’s, to go to morning Mass. Immediately after Mass, I went to the sacristy and told the parish priest that we were worried about our friends.

When I relayed to the priest what had happened, he recognized the danger of the situation and called the Coast Guard. They called every fisherman who had a boat, whatever could navigate or float the waters. I spent that whole day with this young priest, Father Martin O’Connor, who was only two or three years ordained. We scoured the rocky coast of the island looking for our friends. By the end of the day, we were coming to the conclusion that they may never be found. A couple of days later, surprisingly, their bodies were recovered. They had fallen into the sea and both drowned, one trying to rescue the other, apparently because one of them had slipped and fallen.

This was a profoundly unexpected event for a 20-year-old who had been looking forward to a carefree semester of “pub crawling.” I was five thousand miles from home, away from my parents; I had nowhere to turn. One evening, I did something I’d never done before. I went and knocked on the rectory door. I grew up around priests; my mother was a parish secretary, but I never sought out priests, other than in a confessional when necessary. But, during that difficult time, I went and spent a couple of evenings talking with Father O’Connor. Those visits led to a general confession and solidifying an ongoing process of conversion.

Looking back, it was that encounter with Father O’Connor at such a vulnerable moment, when I was coming to grips with my own mortality because of the death of close friends, that the Lord began to sow the seeds of my vocation. It was at that moment that I began to be inspired by the life of this young priest, and began to understand why priests are called “Father.” For the first time, I began to think, “Well, maybe God is calling me to be a priest.” I was nowhere near ready for seminary at that time, but the whole experience was a profoundly significant moment, and ultimately led to my vocation to the priesthood.

Over the years, I can recall one situation after another where I was a “Father O’Connor” to someone else whom

the Lord brought across my path – not always young men like myself at that time, but also married couples, people struggling with loss and illness, people hurting, needing counsel or ministry. My life has been filled with moments of grace when I had the distinct privilege of doing for another what Father O'Connor did for me, facilitating a moment of encounter with our Lord that leads to conversion and transformation.

A good friend was with me on that trip to Ireland, and the whole experience had a similar impact on his life as well. We later both became priests, and then bishops. He is Bishop James Conley from Lincoln, Nebraska. Years later, the two of us made a pilgrimage back to Ireland. While we were there, we looked up Father O'Connor and invited him out to dinner. He had no idea that both of us had become priests, let alone bishops. Imagine his joy at seeing the impact his actions all those years ago had on the two of us, and how that impact played out over the years.

The crux of conversion is this moment of encounter. As I reflect on our archdiocese, and prayerfully discern where God is leading us, I realize that this is the desire of my heart. As I said in my most recent Pastoral Letter, "The deepest desire of my heart is to see the Church of central and western Oklahoma flourish as a community of faith that nurtures and raises up fervent missionary disciples." I became a disciple like that because of what I encountered on that trip so many years ago. It is my greatest desire to see that story repeated over and over again throughout our archdiocese in the lives and hearts of our people.

Section I: Where do we go from here?

In "Go Make Disciples: Building a Culture of Conversion and Discipleship" ("Go Make Disciples 2019"), I announced that I would be participating in a series of listening sessions throughout the archdiocese. The goal of these listening sessions was to receive feedback on pastoral priorities that had been identified. We have been engaged in a process of listening and discerning the future direction of the archdiocese for more than 18 months. These listening sessions were the last phase of this process. The regional gatherings and listening sessions are now complete, and the validation and affirmation of the pastoral priorities has been overwhelming. It is clear that the Holy Spirit has put these priorities not only on my heart, but on the hearts of the clergy and faithful throughout the archdiocese.

Pastoral Priorities

I heard the need for our parishes, missions, and schools to become places that bring us to a personal encounter with our Lord. These institutions do not exist for their own sake, but for the purpose of initiating and sustaining people on the path of discipleship. **As an archdiocese, we need to move from maintenance to mission. We must build a culture of conversion and discipleship in our parishes and schools.**

At the listening sessions, I consistently heard a desire to receive more guidance from the Church on how to be better parents and raise holy children. Parents want to know how to make the home a school of missionary discipleship, a "domestic church." We cannot leave the faithful at the mercy of those forces that wish to destroy the family. **We need to strengthen marriages and family life.**

I heard a desire that teachers, catechists, and all those called to positions of leadership in the Church would have

readily available ways to further their education and training. Education in the faith must not be limited to the immediate preparation to receive the sacraments. Our relationship with the Lord must be characterized by a lifelong growth in knowledge and love of Him. **We need to strengthen education and formation at all levels.**

I heard a constant concern for our young people: How are we to engage them? How are we to educate them? And most urgently: how do we keep them from leaving the Church? We need to involve them in our task of making disciples. We must help them to realize how urgently the Church needs their gifts. We need to better understand the barriers they encounter, the differences among them and the challenges they face. **We need to address the unique needs of the young.**

I heard a call for our parishes to be places where the cultural divisions of our world and our archdiocese are transcended. As missionary disciples, we must not be content to remain comfortable. Like the apostles, we must be ready to learn the language and customs of other cultures in order to share the Good News.

We need to integrate our ministry efforts for the rapidly growing Hispanic population and other cultural groups.

Finally, I heard an admonition that the **liturgical life of our Church** and our **Catholic social teachings** should be central to our efforts in all these areas of pastoral activity. **The love of God**, especially as it finds expression in the sacred liturgy and personal prayer, and **the love of neighbor**, as expressed in our Catholic social teaching and corporal works of mercy, provide the general context in which we will pursue these five priorities. In that sense, loving God and loving our neighbor are simply “who we are” and “what we do” as Catholics.

This love of God and love of neighbor may be thought of as special “lenses” in relation to the pastoral priorities. They show us two areas of vital importance for each priority. The ancient adage of the Church applies here: *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. The way we pray will affect what we believe and how we live out our faith. In other words, we cannot hope to develop these various areas of pastoral emphasis without renewed attention to the beauty and power of the liturgy and sacraments. Improvement in any of these five areas finds an objective measure in our increased zeal as a Church to serve those most in need.

Section II: Building a Culture of Conversion and Discipleship

In “Go Make Disciples 2019,” I called for us as an archdiocese to move in a direction of building a culture of conversion and discipleship for all our parishes and schools. I am convinced that this is an important shift that must take place for us as a Church. I do not want to rewrite the Pastoral Letter here, but still want to make clear the connection of this new Pastoral Plan with what I have already said. Allow me to establish that connection by emphasizing the four key words in the title: **build, culture, conversion and discipleship**. What do we mean when we say these words?

Build

In order to build, we must consider both what is to be built, in this case, a culture, and the way in which such a culture might be brought about, or as Jesus taught, we must count the cost: “For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build, and

was not able to finish” (Luke 14:28–30).

We must count the cost, and ultimately, we must be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to do the building. It won't be easy, and there is not a quick way to do this building. But, far more importantly, the work does not just depend on us.

As Pope Benedict said during the Synod on the New Evangelization, “The Church does not begin with our ‘making,’ but with the ‘making’ and ‘speaking’ of God. In the same way, the Apostles did not say, after a few meetings: now we want to make a Church, and that, by means of a constituent assembly, they were going to draft a constitution.

No, they prayed, and in prayer they waited, because they knew that only God himself can create his Church, that God is the first agent: if God does not act, our things are only ours and are insufficient; only God can testify that it is he who speaks and has spoken. Pentecost is the condition of the birth of the Church: only because God acted first are the Apostles able to act with him and make what he does present.”

It is God and his Holy Spirit who will do the building. But, we must cooperate with his grace and movements and align our activity with what he is doing. This is why I have been praying ever since my installation as your archbishop for a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our archdiocese, and indeed for a new Pentecost for the new evangelization here in Oklahoma. I have regularly invited my brother priests, our deacons and all the lay faithful to join me in this prayer and continue to do so.

We must **build . . .**

Culture

Many dictionaries define the word culture as “a way of life.” A culture is a driving force, and often will predominate an environment like a parish or a school. Cultures can be good, positive and rightly focused. They also can be bad, negative, and off target. You may have heard the oft-used cliché, “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Companies in the secular realm try to implement new strategies all the time, but if they don't deal with the needed culture shifts to support the new strategies, the new ideas will go nowhere.

When we talk about building a “culture” of conversion and discipleship, it is exactly this dynamic that we are addressing. “A new evangelization” and all that it calls for in the Church (new ardor, new methods, new expressions – Saint John Paul II), will never be possible unless we deal with the culture shifts that need to happen to support it.

The 20th century Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper's short work, “Leisure, the Basis of Culture,” can be helpful in coming to understand what culture really is. Leisure, for Pieper, is not mere rest from work, but the foundation and necessary condition of a society's culture, its vitality and growth toward perfection and fulfillment. All authentic culture, he then argues, is rooted in and reaches its fulfillment in religious worship, of which the source and summit is the Eucharist. Emphasizing the beauty of the liturgy is a critical part of this cultural shift.

I want to draw our attention to several points I made in my recent Pastoral Letter:

“An age of moral relativism has pervaded the Church as well as secular society and has led to great confusion. In the midst of that confusion, the basic path of conversion can be lost or misunderstood. It will be critical for us to return to an intentional focus on this path, and to create a culture of conversion and discipleship in our Church. The Parable of the Sower discussed earlier provides a helpful framework to advance this kind of culture” (“Go

Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 22).

“The Church in our archdiocese must become a place where the path of conversion and discipleship is clearly marked and easy to access. We need to ensure that our parishes and schools are places whose primary task is to foster an encounter with Christ and assist all to navigate the path of discipleship” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 22).

We must **build** this kind of **culture . . .**

Conversion

The heart of conversion is a relationship. God invites us into a personal encounter with him, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “Ultimately, God desires to be in relationship with us. Our relationship with God has the potential to be the closest and most intimate relationship of our human experience, deeper and more intimate even than a family or spousal relationship” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 16).

“God loves each of us and desires to pursue such a relationship with us. He invites us to make room for him in our daily lives. Such a relationship of intimate friendship with the Lord begins with an authentic encounter with him and with his love. Pope Francis wrote, ‘I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them. I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.’ If you have not experienced this encounter or have grown distant from it, I urge you with the Holy Father to let yourself experience it anew! This encounter leads to relationship, and the relationship is explored, in all its richness, through the gift of Christian prayer” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 17).

That relationship leads to personal transformation. “Our aim must be to help more people prepare the good soil in their hearts, and to give their hearts more fully to the Lord in the process of conversion and personal transformation” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 22).

And, there is a clear path to this process of conversion. “As that culture of conversion develops, our task is to provide clear paths that foster growth and discipleship. The path of conversion is not a great mystery . . . Our culture stresses radical individualism so strongly that we mistakenly can assume that the path of conversion is unique for each person. However, it is both possible and helpful to identify the common elements of the way of conversion, so more people clearly can recognize the path they are meant to follow” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 22).

To understand more clearly the path of conversion, the document pointed to the method Christ used in evangelizing his own disciples: “We look to Jesus, the Master who personally formed His apostles and disciples, as the model of evangelization. Christ gives us the method: ‘Come and see’ (Jn 1:46), ‘Follow me’ (Mt 9:9), ‘Remain in me’ (Jn 15:4), and ‘Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations’ (Mt 28:19). The method includes encounter, accompany, community and send. This method is formation for missionary discipleship. It leads the believer to become a disciple and from there for the disciple to become a missionary” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 23).

We must **build a culture of conversion . . .**

Discipleship

“The deepest desire of my heart is to see the Church of central and western Oklahoma flourish as a community of faith that nurtures and raises up fervent missionary disciples. Our task is to prepare good soil to receive the seed of faith” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 8). The whole purpose of my new pastoral letter was “to refocus the vision and consider what the Lord has been doing in our archdiocese and where the Spirit is leading us over the course of the next few years. Our fundamental vision to ‘go make disciples’ has not changed. We are called to be disciples; called to pursue holiness and mission; called to become saints. We are still called to evangelize, to be witnesses, and to live authentic lives as missionary disciples” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 3).

The entire Pastoral Letter develops the richness of this proposition and invitation from our God – to respond to his call and live lives of authentic discipleship. The parable of the sower provided a scriptural school of discipleship for us, where Jesus could “invite us to become his followers and teach us to be his disciples” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 8). “Every person, by virtue of their baptism, is called to the pursuit of holiness. This pursuit is the path of discipleship, and fruitful discipleship is rooted in good soil” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 15).

It is the responsibility of every disciple, and indeed of the Church herself, to help till more good soil. “Indeed, the primary work of the spiritual life is to cooperate with God’s grace and cultivate the good soil in our hearts to rid ourselves of those things that compete, distract and hinder our receptivity to God’s life-giving Word. The more good soil in our hearts, the greater our capacity to bear fruit for the Kingdom. Bearing fruit is the evidence of authentic discipleship” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 11).

And, bearing fruit ultimately leads us to embracing the mission of the Church. “As they get to know and love the Lord, disciples experience the need to share with others their joy by proclaiming Jesus Christ, not just with words, but also through service to those most in need. This is what it means to build the Kingdom of God and to be a missionary disciple. ... We become missionary disciples when we take our encounter with Jesus Christ out into the world” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 25; “Living as Missionary Disciples,” pg. 17).

We must **build a culture of conversion and discipleship.**

Section III: Strategies – Tools and Practical Steps to Pursue Building a Culture of Conversion and Discipleship

The call to conversion is not simply an invitation to learn to act or think in a new way, but a summons to do so through a personal relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. As disciples, we are called to learn from our master who shows us his infinite love and mercy. In turn, we are called to live our lives for Christ and to bear his light in the world. It is not difficult to glance at our culture and notice the darkness that has crept in. Christ came to dispel such darkness and through our baptism, we are called to participate in this great mission of sharing the Good News.

Each one of us – regardless of age, sex, ethnicity or vocation – have the right and duty to share the gospel message. This is the task of evangelization: to make Jesus known because he desires to be one with us and to be the center of our lives. It is possible to know a lot about Jesus, but not know Jesus. In other words, we can know many facts about his life but not have encountered him personally, as I did on that trip to Ireland so many years ago. When we say “yes” to Christ, we embark on a lifelong journey of discipleship.

Discipleship is about relationship with Christ and our brothers and sisters. We are called to accompany each other along the path to Christ. Our Church is blessed with numerous tools and resources to help awaken and inspire hearts for initial and daily conversion. This section recommends such tools and resources to help you begin or enhance a culture of conversion and discipleship in your communities. These tools and resources are just that and are never meant to replace the necessary role of relationships and authentic community.

I have asked my staff to vet and organize several viable tools and resources that could be engaged to assist our parishes and schools in building this culture of conversion and discipleship. The Secretariat for Evangelization and Catechesis, and specifically the Office of Parish Leadership Engagement, has secured a number of organizations that can help us. I have asked them to share how these tools and resources can be accessed in the coming months.

The Office of Parish Leadership Engagement exists to facilitate relationships between parishes and archdiocesan offices and to assist in fostering rich, deep relationships with Christ in all our parishes and schools. The office supports and encourages parishes and their teams by providing coaching, training and additional resources so that parishes and schools may become vibrant communities of missionary disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Each parish is unique in size, demographics and charisms. Therefore, no one program or tool will fit the needs of all. Parishes may also find themselves at different stages of the evangelization process. With this in mind, parishes are encouraged to choose from one of three access points for building a culture of conversion and discipleship: **evangelization tools and programs, parish visioning and planning support, or organizational health and development.** Let us consider each one individually.

Access Point One: Organizational Health

Just as the life of a parish is complex, so too is the role of the pastor. Parishioners often want the pastor to possess a certain level of understanding, skill, or talent in theology, spirituality, and scripture as well as communication, leadership, and management. The reality is that no pastor, not even the best one, can run a parish on his own. Every pastor needs a leadership team, a special group of people who are collectively committed to helping him make the parish vibrant. A healthy organization is one that is unified in its vision and mission, one that is based on

trust and good communication – especially in times of conflict, and one that embraces accountability and results. A healthy organization is necessary to accomplish the task of bringing more people to Christ and his Church.

Archdiocesan Resources:

Secretariat for Administration and Finance

One of the goals of the archbishop is to make the resources of the pastoral center available to assist our parishes. The vicar general, chancellor, director of human resources, communications and finance have multiple resources to assist pastors and their leadership teams in building healthy financial and organizational structures.

Amazing Parish

Amazing Parish helps parishes build an effective leadership team and improve the organizational health by providing the tools a parish needs to transform their communities—moving from maintenance mode to mission communities that are truly alive. Amazing Parish bases fruitfulness on the foundation of three common building blocks:

- A reliance on prayer and the sacraments: These expressions of faith are outward signs of a dependence on God and a deep need for his grace in our lives. The focus is on the fundamental role that prayer and the sacraments have in an Amazing Parish.
- A commitment to a healthy organization: Amazing Parish walks leaders through the fundamentals of forming and supporting a leadership team with tried and true methods to achieve organizational health and effective leadership.
- A passion for evangelization and discipleship: The parish is designed to be the center of evangelization and discipleship for our Church. Amazing Parish teaches strategies and methods to help parishioners become missionary disciples.

Amazing Parish offers thirteen online training modules for you to use. AP Online is designed to walk parish leaders and teams through videos and exercises, giving them the tools they need to build an amazing parish. AP Online is made available to you free of charge. Each module takes 45-60 minutes and is accompanied by a study guide to help you and your team navigate through the trainings and exercises.

Amazing Parish Conference offers a practical and one-of-a-kind experience for parish leaders to receive first-hand organizational health training. The conference experience is also an opportunity for personal and spiritual renewal with daily Mass, confession and Eucharistic adoration.

The Amazing Parish Conference offers a workshop-style format so pastors and parish leadership team members can work side-by-side to learn what a real leadership team looks like, how it operates, and how it can best serve its parishioners. By the end of the conference, participants not only will have gained a lot of knowledge and insight, they will have a clear, practical vision of what leadership can look like at their parish and how to implement it once they get home.

Access Point Two: Parish Visioning and Planning Support

Transforming a culture is no easy task. There are multiple small steps in planning, organizing, and implementation that go into successful evangelization. These steps require a skillful team to prayerfully create realistic plans, communicate those plans, and engage the right people to make the plans a reality. Partnering with a professional service can help you prepare parish leadership teams and parishioners to live out their roles as missionary disciples.

L'Alto Catholic Institute

L'Alto Catholic Institute exists to help parishes meet the challenges and opportunities of the New Evangelization head on by helping them “Win, Build and Send” missionary disciples. Parish partnerships are at the core of what they do as an apostolate. It represents a substantial commitment by L'Alto to roll up their sleeves and work intensively, side-by-side, with parish communities to implement a strategic process for forming missionary disciples.

When a parish discerns that they want to partner with L'Alto to help grow the parish's fruitfulness, L'Alto becomes a de facto department of evangelization, assisting the parish until they are well on the way to becoming a hub of missionary discipleship. This is realized over a nine-month partnership. They work with the parish's leadership to provide a lens and desire for evangelization and the skills to make it a reality.

This partnership provides:

- Three on-site visits;
- 18 virtual consultations;
- Supplemental online training.

Divine Renovation

Divine Renovation believes that there are three keys to parish renewal: the primacy of evangelization, the best of leadership principles and the power of the Holy Spirit held together by the celebration of the Eucharist. Divine Renovation inspires and equips parishes to move from maintenance to mission. This is accomplished through events, resources and hands-on coaching, all designed to help parishes make and form missionary disciples.

- The podcast and video series cover topics such as team building, prayer, preaching, sacraments, and ministry, all through the lens of moving from maintenance to mission;
- The Divine Renovation Network provides members with access to a behind-the-scenes glimpse at what it looks like to be a missional church;
- The library of action-oriented resources as well as a series of live leadership sessions featuring leaders, coaches and priests provide concrete examples of how to do things effectively.

Leadership coaching is available to members of the Divine Renovation Network at an annual fee. This is an intensive program and we encourage you to carefully consider entrance into this coaching program. Leadership coaching is designed to accompany you as a pastor as you move your parish from maintenance to mission.

You will meet with your coach intensively for the first couple of months (nearly every week) as you get to know each other. After the first few months, coaching relationships move to bi-weekly meetings, often one with the pastor and coach and the other with the pastor, senior leadership team and coach. You also will be enrolled in a pastor cohort, meeting online with other pastors on the same journey.

With the help of the Divine Renovation team you will:

- Establish and communicate a vision for your parish;
- Build a balanced leadership team;
- Launch or improve your evangelization programs;
- Create a healthy and thriving volunteer and staff culture;
- Launch Connect Groups;
- Discover ways to increase giving and commitment of parishioners;
- In short, you will change the future of your parish.

Evangelical Catholic

Evangelical Catholic inspires, trains and supports leaders to launch and drive dynamic movements of evangelization in their communities. Through contractual relationships with parishes, Catholic campus ministries and local organizations, EC staff provide personalized consulting services and robust resources to launch movements of evangelization driven by deeply evangelized lay leaders. This partnership provides:

- Evangelical Catholic coaches ministry leaders to help identify and address the barriers they face, from staff availability to lack of a strong strategic vision, by providing practical solutions and helping ministry leaders implement them. EC also helps you train your staff and laity. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, these faithful believers become people who can engage and form new believers and disciples, able to live the essential mission of the Church every day of their lives.
- Parishes have access to a customized, complimentary online training system. A multitude of articles and videos teach and reinforce essential elements of evangelization and discipleship formation and training, help users apply what they learn, and provide a structure to implement in parishes and campus ministries.

Access Point Three: Evangelization Tools and Resources

Social media and internet technology have given us vast opportunities to proclaim the Good News to a very diverse audience, but we must not forget the human element. Pope Benedict XVI said in his message for the forty-fifth World Communications Day: “The Gospel demands to be incarnated in the real world and linked to the real faces of our brothers and sisters, those with whom we share our daily lives. Direct human relations always remain fundamental for the transmission of the faith!” The following evangelization tools and resources are carefully crafted on the foundation of personal encounters with one another and with Christ.

Alpha for Catholics

Alpha for Catholics provides ten basic sessions to introduce the faith to people who do not attend church, to inactive Catholics who are loosely connected and to reinvigorate Catholics who may not have experienced the kerygma (the initial proclamation of the Good News). Alpha takes people on a journey often leading to a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. It enables people to ask their questions, share ideas, build friendships and experience the love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The gathering environment is designed to be friendly and nonthreatening so that participants can explore the faith. A simple meal helps to gather people together. After the meal, a short talk is given – either live or played as a video. The talks, which explore the big issues around faith, are designed to engage and inspire conversation in small groups. The role of the host (leader) is to help build trust and friendships. They facilitate discussion, inviting guests to share openly and honestly, without any criticism or judgment. The groups often develop into small

Christian communities within the parish. In addition to the ten sessions, the program includes a one-day or two-day retreat.

This resource provides:

- Online leader and team training and support;
- Promotional material to invite people to join;
- Free online video-based teachings for sessions;
- Materials in twenty-three languages;
- alpha.org/catholic

Catholic Christian Outreach

Catholic Christian Outreach is designed to help parishes establish a multiplying movement to form missionary disciples of Jesus. CCO parish consultants will meet with you regularly, to coach and consult with you as you work to transform your parish from maintenance to mission. The CCO Faith Study Series has been designed to proclaim the Gospel, equip the faithful and commission them to become missionary disciples. These printed materials are used in a small group setting and allow for a relatable and dynamic proclamation of the Catholic faith. This resource has five series composed of six to ten sessions each. The first series, DISCOVERY, is kerygmatic in content. The following three series (SOURCE, GROWTH and TRUST) form participants in the life of discipleship.

The final series, COMMISSION, forms participants as missionary disciples who will, in turn, form their own small groups. This resource offers:

- Coaching and consulting;
- Materials in English, Spanish and French;
- Affordable and newly designed printed materials;
- cco.ca/parish

ChristLife

ChristLife is an evangelization process developed in a relational way to make missionary disciples. ChristLife is designed to be repeated and become the “core curriculum” for evangelizing and forming adults as missionary disciples. Once a person discovers Jesus, begins to follow him, and learns to share him, they want to invite more people on a life-changing adventure with Jesus Christ.

There are three essential series: Discovering, Following and Sharing. Each series includes a seven-week experience and a one-day retreat in the Holy Spirit.

It is crucial to help participants move from being “consumers” of the ChristLife process to “providers.” Getting involved in service to others through the ChristLife process is one of the best ways to grow spiritually.

Beyond running the courses, the hope is that participants build genuine relationships with one another to support the journey of discipleship. Ongoing small groups are a great way to support participants beyond the ChristLife courses. Small groups should be formed in a way that encourages participants to continue putting into practice what they learned through ChristLife.

This resource offers:

- Team training resources;
- Parish training days;
- Series One is available in Spanish; Series Two and Three are being translated.

Conclusion

No two parishes look the same. A new parish has different needs than an older, established one. A rural parish has different concerns than an urban parish. A parish with a school identifies different areas for growth than a parish without a school. Your own parish's specific needs, strengths and challenges change over time. As we embark on this journey of building a culture of conversion and discipleship, you may be questioning which access point and resource is right for your parish.

Proverbs 24:3-4 reminds us: "By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established; by knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches." To assist parishes in determining the appropriate tool or resource, the Office of Parish Leadership Engagement will be assisting and supporting parish leadership teams through the process of assessing and understanding the needs of the parish. A thoughtful, constructive assessment will help determine the current condition and areas for growth so that efforts toward forming a community of missionary disciples are fruitful beyond measure.

Section IV: An Invitation to Imagine – the Expression of Building a Culture of Conversion and Discipleship In and Through Other Priority Areas

Though we are putting an emphasis on building a culture of conversion and discipleship as our lead step, that does not mean we are ignoring the other priorities that have been identified. In the coming months and years, we also will be addressing the other priority areas and the unique lenses of love of God and love of neighbor.

I would liken the path forward to a stage play. When you go to see a play, there is much activity and movement on the stage, but your attention is frequently drawn to what is most important with a spot light. In this first term, we are putting a spotlight on building a culture of conversion and discipleship in all our parishes and schools. But, there will be much other activity going on at the same time in the other priority areas.

As an archdiocese, we must prayerfully discern how the Holy Spirit is guiding us to address these pastoral priorities. But, this also must be an effort of prayer and discernment at the individual parish and school level. I invite you to imagine! **What will it look like for your parish community or your Catholic school to address the pastoral needs that we all have identified? How are those efforts seen through the unique lenses of love of God and love of neighbor? How will you plan and strategize to meet these growing needs in the coming years?**

Once again, I have asked my staff at the archdiocese to pray and discern how we will address these needs at the archdiocesan level. I asked them to share some of those plans with you here. My hope is that our efforts at the archdiocese will be a source of inspiration and guidance for our parishes, schools and other Catholic organizations. However, I also desire that our archdiocesan offices be a service to you, helping provide clarity of direction as well as proven tools and resources for effective implementation.

Office of Marriage and Family Life Ministry

The pastoral priority for the **Office of Marriage and Family Life Ministry** is to strengthen marriages and family life for Catholics in the archdiocese.

“Disciples – and the things they do in the world – are the ‘good fruit’ coming from the ‘good soil’ that we read about in the parable of the sower in Matthew Chapter 13. The core of this good fruit is strong Catholic families, in which parents are striving to raise children to be missionary disciples” (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 4).

Building a culture of conversion and discipleship in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City necessarily means building such a culture in our families. As Saint John Paul II said: “As the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world.” The family must become a source of encounter with the Lord. It must be a place in which discipleship is modeled by fathers and mothers. Yet, fulfilling this lofty mission presupposes the permanence of the marital bond and the fidelity of the spouses.

Archdiocesan Resources:

The establishment of a culture requires both time and intentional effort. However, we can take heart, for the Lord does not abandon us, but gives us the assistance of the Holy Spirit in this effort. Our archdiocesan initiatives for

this three-year term are thus primarily aimed at: 1) removing some of the major impediments to the grace of the Sacrament of Matrimony; and 2) putting in place structures that support marital discipleship. Specifically, here are four of the ways in which the archdiocese will offer support:

- Formation of the Free to Love Task Force, an archdiocesan advisory committee on issues of sexual morality such as pornography, cohabitation, contraception, etc.;
- Recruitment of Natural Family Planning teachers in all regions of the archdiocese, especially Spanish-speaking teachers and teachers in a variety of methods;
- Assist in the establishment of an annual Oklahoma Catholic Marriage Conference;
- Promotion of initiatives supportive of marital discipleship such as Domestic Church, Worldwide Marriage Encounter and Retrouvaille.

The Office of Marriage and Family Life seeks to be a resource to help parishes and schools assist families in establishing a culture of conversion and discipleship. Every parish and school should engage staff and key leaders with critical questions around this area of pastoral need: How can we more effectively support parents and families? Is there at least one concrete initiative that might be put in place during the next three years? For our Catholic schools, is there a creative way that the school community can more intentionally draw parents into the formation experience of their children? How can our schools foster a greater culture of family life and integrate families better into the school community? How can parishes and schools more effectively collaborate in these efforts?

There is an urgent need for the accompaniment of families at the parish level: families cannot flourish in isolation. Some ideas for consideration might include establishing a marriage ministry or couples' date night with childcare each month, a father/son or mother/daughter initiative, a reading group for family life issues or an ongoing family service opportunity. A parish also might consider doing work "on the front end" by revisiting its approach to marriage preparation.

Parishes might consider making formation in discipleship a part of the preparation process, mandating training in Natural Family Planning for each engaged couple or moving to a "sponsor couple" model of marriage preparation that draws engaged couples into the life of the parish prior to the wedding.

Office of Parish Leadership and the Office of Catholic Schools

The pastoral priority of the **Office of Parish Leadership and the Office of Catholic Schools** is to strengthen education and formation at all levels.

Critical to a culture of conversion and discipleship is the presence of leaders, teachers and mentors. Teachers, catechists and lay volunteers all need to be equipped through a process of education and formation in the context of accompaniment and community so that they can be effectively sent as missionary disciples themselves.

Our Catholic schools also help build a culture of conversion and discipleship by providing an environment for growth and formation with our Church's youngest disciples. Our schools likely have the greatest capacity through the amount of time in the classroom to accomplish this task.

School communities offer welcoming environments for Catholics and non-Catholics alike and have been a catalyst for many conversions for both students and their families. Our teachers need to be equipped to present the

Church's teachings, allowing those teachings to resonate in their students' hearts.

Archdiocesan Resources:

The Blessed Stanley Rother Institute was created by the archdiocese to provide programs and resources for the adult faithful, parents, catechists, teachers, and deacons to better understand the teachings of the church and the process of conversion and discipleship. The institute seeks to empower the faithful in their evangelization, catechetical and pastoral efforts through key partnerships with organizations outside the archdiocese. For more information about the following partnerships, please contact the Office of Christian Leadership Development.

- **FORMED** from the Augustine Institute is an online platform of rich Catholic media content. The platform includes Catholic films, audio dramas, group studies and electronic books that also are available on the platform's smartphone app. FORMED.org is a powerful evangelization and catechetical tool which has been made widely available throughout the archdiocese.
- **The Catechetical School** is a parish-hosted adult faith formation program that teaches the Catechism of the Catholic Church through a two-year curriculum. This program is provided through a partnership with the lay division of Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver. The curriculum is similar to what already is available in the archdiocese through Escuela San Juan Diego in Spanish.
- **The Catechetical Institute** is an online platform for providing catechist formation and certification with world-class instructors and ongoing local mentors, offered through a partnership with Franciscan University of Steubenville. The Catechetical Institute provides catechists and teachers throughout the archdiocese with the education and formation to succeed whether they are volunteers, parish or school staff.
- **The 2nd Degree in Theology Program** in affiliation with Newman University in Wichita, Kansas, offers college-level courses in theology to candidates for the permanent diaconate as well as lay students through night classes at the Catholic Pastoral Center and several other parish sites throughout the archdiocese. Students who have previously earned a bachelor's degree can earn a second bachelor's degree in theology from Newman University.
- **Our Office of Catholic Schools** builds on the great legacy of the past to develop a new strategic plan that addresses the unique needs and challenges of our schools and helps them move into the future. The fundamental mission of our schools is to raise up missionary disciples. The Office of Catholic Schools partners with pastors, parish leaders and our school communities to help review the factors that affect the viability, vitality and vibrancy of each school. The new strategic plan for Catholic schools will support the unique needs of our schools and provide a framework so that they can more effectively fulfill their mission.

The new initiatives listed above offer many resources for the leadership of the parish or school to assist the faithful at the many stages of their Christian journey. As the process of conversion and discipleship is always ongoing, it will prove beneficial for parishes and schools to devote significant time and energy to the continuing formation of those who are most effective and perhaps most overworked in their ministry efforts at the parish or school.

It might prove wise to offer periodic early release of students or a suspension of classes altogether to provide for the intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation of the staff and volunteers involved with the teaching.

The resources also provide many opportunities to offer adult formation and faith enrichment at the parish or

school. Small group studies, parent groups, men's and women's groups and Advent and Lent studies are just a few examples. Both FORMED.org and the Catechetical Institute platform have an abundance of studies and courses that could be used for such purposes.

Office of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Evangelization and Discipleship

The pastoral priority of the **Office of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Evangelization and Discipleship** is to address the unique needs of the young.

The unique needs of the young can often be a moving target. The rapidly changing needs and potential greatness of each young person are cause to constantly reexamine and renew our efforts to evangelize young people. Families, parishes, schools and our entire archdiocese need to address the needs of young people considering the principles and overall path of discipleship.

An encounter with Christ is rooted in the sacraments, surrounded with intercessory prayer, inspired by the Holy Spirit and formed by authentic Catholic spirituality. The process of accompaniment is inherently a catechetical one requiring solid catechetical principles. Community for young people should include peers, mentors and focus on building up the family. The ultimate desire is to send them on mission to serve and help build the Church, both in our archdiocese and beyond.

Archdiocesan Resources:

Creating a culture of conversion and discipleship for young people and their unique needs is a critical task that is the work of the entire Church. It is intimately linked with the other pastoral priorities. Knowing it takes disciples to make disciples, we do not look to a single program or initiative to address this need, but seek to create a culture of conversion and discipleship among leaders.

Youth evangelization:

The Office of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Evangelization and Discipleship is tasked with being a resource through consultations developing resources and compiling outside resources that align with a vision for youth evangelization. The office already has engaged with various parish leaders to advise, train and support their efforts to serve young people and has plans to increase these efforts.

Youth ministry summits:

Each month, leaders in youth evangelization come together in regional areas to collaborate, learn best practices and grow as leaders.

Our Lady of Guadalupe Summer Youth Camp:

Each summer, more than one thousand young people spend at least one week at our Catholic summer camp. This has produced tremendous fruit in the lives of many young people. We also have the advantage of hiring almost one hundred young adults from around the archdiocese and forming them as leaders in their Catholic faith.

Collaboration with Catholic schools:

With Catholic schools being one of our greatest potential assets for discipleship formation, the work of youth and young adult ministry has a close collaboration with our Office of Catholic Schools, particularly with our high school theology departments and campus ministry programs.

Missionaries:

Young missionaries from the archdiocese and throughout the country come together to serve in various roles in parishes, colleges, high schools and community organizations. This is done with local missionaries and through collaborative efforts with organizations such as: FOCUS, Christ in the City, NET, Catholic Heart Work Camp and Totus Tuus. These young missionaries are a great example of what we desire for all our young people to dedicate themselves to missionary service.

Events:

Each year, multiple events are held to support parish efforts. Our goal is that each event be the fruit of collaboration and a source of encouragement for each parish involved. Examples include: The National Catholic Youth Conference, Young Adult BBQ, Oklahoma Catholic College Student Conference, March for Life and FOCUS' Student Leadership Summit and national SEEK Conference.

Your parish or school:

Like young people, each parish and school has its own needs and strengths. Youth ministry is the response of each parish or school to the unique needs of their young people. Youth evangelization could look differently at every parish or school. Parishes and schools are asked to form a team of adults to develop a strategic plan to evangelize young people and address their unique needs. It is important that these efforts are not the work of one person or a small isolated group. Any plan should aim to involve the entire parish or school community. Though not an easy task, we must put forth a concerted effort and allow the Holy Spirit to adapt our efforts to make us more fruitful. As plans are developed, it is important to use the path and principles of **Encounter, Accompany, Community and Send** as the guideposts for pastoral planning.

Office of Hispanic Ministry and Cultural Diversity

The pastoral priority for the **Office of Hispanic Ministry and Cultural Diversity** is to integrate ministry efforts for the rapidly growing Hispanic population and other cultural groups.

Our archdiocese is one of growing diversity, with the Hispanic Catholic population making up more than half of our Church. Asian and Pacific Islanders also are growing at a rapid rate, while African Americans and American Indians continue to be a significant part of our local church.

Meeting the pastoral needs of this growing diversity is a challenge that will require a rethinking of our ministry efforts across the board. The structures of the past will no longer allow us to efficiently and effectively meet the needs of our people. Every office in the archdiocese needs to be retrofitted to serve the entire Church of the archdiocese, with all cultural groups included.

There needs to be more concerted efforts to understand and assess the practical needs of individual families and parishes, particularly those with higher percentages of various ethnicities. The archbishop has said, "Our parishes and schools must become easy places to meet Jesus and help people navigate the path of discipleship." This path of discipleship and our catholicity invite us to share and celebrate the love and welcoming that are central to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Archdiocesan Resources:

The celebration of our cultural diversity and more effectively meeting the pastoral needs of our many diverse cultural groups will require a dedicated focus in the coming years. The archdiocesan offices desire to serve and

meet the needs of pastors and leaders of various cultural groups throughout the archdiocese. Our office serves as an advocate and catalyst for greater emphasis on the unique needs of the Hispanic population and other cultural groups across all departments.

Consultation:

The Office of Hispanic Ministry and Cultural Diversity primarily serves as a resource agent to parishes and movements through consultations, needs assessment, developing materials, training and formation opportunities, and compiling outside resources that align with the overall vision for evangelization and discipleship.

Internal advocacy:

The office serves in an advocacy role to help the various offices throughout the archdiocese more fully understand the pastoral needs of the various cultural groups and assist with developing strategies to more effectively meet those needs.

Translation services:

The office assists with translation to help various offices in the archdiocese more effectively communicate with their constituencies. This includes, but is not limited to, the Sooner Catholic and Oklahoma Catholic Radio.

Collaboration:

The office assists and facilitates collaboration with the various Hispanic and other cultural group lay movements already present in the archdiocese as well as collaboration with and accessing resources both regionally and nationally.

Leadership development:

One of the greatest ways we will meet the ongoing and growing needs of the Hispanic population and other cultural groups will be to foster and help raise up leaders for the future – future priests, deacons, parish leaders, teachers, catechists, youth ministers, etc.

Your parish or school:

In the same way that the archdiocese as a whole is re-evaluating its services and offerings in light of shifting demographics, every parish and school must consider similar questions and changes. How aware are you as a parish of the demographic makeup of your parish community? Are there various cultural groups that have moved into the area of your community and been left unnoticed? Is your parish currently aware of and meeting all the pastoral needs of those in your community, particularly those needs of various ethnic groups? Are there emerging needs of new families that are not yet on the radar of your parish leadership?

Our office seeks to assist with addressing these kinds of questions and many others as parishes and schools strive to be culturally sensitive and aware, and more effectively meet the unique pastoral needs of your community.

Section V: The Intended Fruit

As this document draws to a close, I want to refocus our attention on how I started, with my own conversion story. I shared my own story, as I said, to stir your thoughts and memories of your own story. How has God touched your life? How has he drawn you into relationship with him? “Remembering” that encounter is at the heart of conversion. I have grown in many ways and have experienced significant transformation over the course of my life since those days when I was only 20. The grateful remembrance of that time has been a constant source of consolation for me and has inspired many other conversion moments for me over the years.

There is a great power in personal stories that help bring the power of the Gospel to life. In all these efforts to build a culture of conversion and discipleship, this is a principle that would be good for us to keep in mind. In that vein, I wish to share some other stories that begin to put flesh on all that we are talking about. What does a culture of conversion and discipleship look like in the lives of real people? What are the tangible fruits that we are hoping to see in the next several years as we pursue these efforts? What does evidence of fruitful discipleship actually look like? These are all questions that are important for us to ponder and even wrestle with. I believe looking to real life stories is one way to help us understand more clearly what we are aiming for.

A Culture of Vocation: A Father and a Mentor Help Lead a Young Man to His Vocation

A man who later became a holy priest credits two people as heavily impacting his spiritual development: his father and a layman who was commissioned by his parish priest to mentor the young men in the parish.

He remembers his father as a “man of constant prayer” at night, and early in the morning he would find his father on his knees silently praying. Father and son read the Bible together and prayed the rosary. He recalls that his father’s leadership “directed me toward becoming a true worshiper of God. We never spoke about the priesthood, but his example was in a way my first seminary, a kind of domestic seminary.”

At age 20, this young man was introduced to a mentor of his. The parish now only had one priest, but having a vibrant youth ministry was important to them. The parish priest commissioned a holy man to start forming a group of young men who could continue the parish’s youth ministry in the absence of clergy. The young man, under the leadership of his mentor, started one of the first small groups.

The mentor commissioned several other young men to also lead groups. This young man, along with his peer leaders, received instruction, direction and a great witness from his mentor. He was drawn to his mentor’s ability to “shape souls” by showing how religious truths were not “limitations” but rather the means to form “a life through mercy that becomes a participation in the life of God.”

The mentor’s impact was rooted in his personal example just as much as his formal teaching. The young man observed that his way of life “proved that one could not only inquire about God but that one could live with God.”

That young man’s early formation at home and in discipleship from a mentor led him to become a priest, then later an archbishop, and ultimately the saint we know as Saint John Paul II. His father was Karol Wojtyla Sr., and his mentor was Jan Tyranowski. There are some unique similarities between his story and mine. By age 18, Karol

Wojtyla had lost his only brother and his mother to illness. When he was 20, his father also died of a heart attack. That event propelled him to seek the support of his parish priest, and ultimately led to his connection with Jan Tyranowski. It was a time of grief and loss that led him to seek the support of others, and fortunately there were adults in his life who could point him to Christ and to his faith.

The steady, consistent faith of his father, and then the guiding presence of a mentor who later in his life exemplified some of the same traits, provided a culture of conversion and discipleship for young Karol. Like Father O'Connor in my story, I'm sure Jan Tyranowski was overwhelmed and overjoyed at the fruitful results of his efforts many years later as the young man he mentored became the pope!

Stories of personal conversion help paint a picture of what we are hoping for parishes and families in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. They are meant to inspire and remind us of the power of encountering Jesus.

“An exchange of joy”

A diocesan priest has a shepherd's heart for his people, leading him to make confession more accessible for parishioners:

It was the Year of Mercy, and we were approaching Lent. One of my key leaders shared a statistic with me from The Pew Research Center that Ash Wednesday was one of the most highly attended Mass days of the year, right behind Christmas and Easter. He also explained that the statistics showed it was the most attended Mass by fallen away Catholics. He challenged us not to preach to the normal Sunday crowd but to the lost sheep, the “prodigal sons.”

Honestly, my heart broke for those we've lost. In prayer with our team and discussion with my associates, we decided to offer confession before Mass on Ash Wednesday and every Sunday Mass during Lent. Before each Mass, I gave a brief announcement excitedly inviting folks to come to confession. We were blown away by the response. The lines were full Sunday after Sunday. Rather than being apprehensive of confession, our parishioners have embraced it as the source of the life-giving grace and forgiveness that Christ intended it to be.

One Christmas, a parishioner relayed this story to me: “I got to Mass a little late, our infant was fussy and I got in an unnecessary argument with my wife. I felt deflated. Here I was, entering into Christmas Mass right after being a jerk. When you made your announcement about the confession reminder, I was happy to already be standing in the back, and so ready for God's grace. When I came out of the confessional, I was prepared to truly enter into the Christmas liturgy. I returned to my spot, and there was a family by me who were either visitors or hadn't been to Mass in a long time. One of the daughters said, “Are you going to go?” to her sister, who replied, “I don't know, I'm scared.” I handed her my examination of conscience guide and said with a smile, “It will be okay.”

Like a beautiful ripple of grace, every member of that family of four went to confession before Christmas Mass. The father went last, and as he approached the confessional, I saw his wife and his daughters exchange smiles in unison, an exchange of joy. God's unconditional love, what a beautiful Christmas present.

“We’ve been able to be more honest with ourselves”

A diocesan priest cultivating the good soil of his own interior life and the interior life of his staff:

Admittedly, over the years, I have struggled with my vow to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. I don’t always pray them from my heart. Honestly, sometimes I feel as if life as a parish priest leaves little room for prayerfulness. I’ve also noticed a need for increased prayerfulness with my parish staff, and this same sense of busyness among them.

There is a lot going on, but we’re lacking a mission focus. I recently invited key leaders of the parish staff to pray morning prayer daily with me in the chapel. I’ve asked us all – starting with me – to commit to a holy hour in Eucharistic adoration each week. I’ve given my staff the freedom to use an hour during their work day for prayer as often as once per day. The effect has been that I feel more authentically engaged with my staff and our work is increasingly becoming the fruit of our prayer life. It feels like we’ve moved from a dysfunctional family full of problems to a tight-knit one where we speak openly and respectfully even when we’re disagreeing. We’ve been able to be more honest with ourselves and each other about which efforts are fruitful and which aren’t.

I credit this all to our new prayerfulness together. The prayerfulness and openness in meetings are new territory for some of my staff, but it’s so worth it! It has become clear to me that for the parish to be rooted in Christ, we as staff and leaders must set the pace of prayer. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

“I felt an incredible warmth and sense of peace”

A school teacher experiences the love, warmth and witness of the faith through teaching at a Catholic school and ends up converting to Catholicism:

While attending a public university in Oklahoma, I hit the lowest point in my life. I was lost, confused, depressed, fragile, completely broken and had no direction in my life personally, professionally or spiritually. Through the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, it was during this time that the university placed me at a Catholic school for my student teaching. That warm August morning when I walked in the front door of the school, I immediately felt a very special presence. Walking through the halls, meeting the lovely ladies in the main office, interacting with the students, visiting with the teachers and just “soaking in” the loving environment, I felt an incredible warmth and sense of peace.

After completing student teaching, I stayed and have taught at this wonderful “city on a hill” for several years, and the special presence of love and mercy that I felt on my first day remains with me today. The genuine love and compassion that the community exhibits daily have enveloped me, helping me to heal my wounds and broken spirit, instilling in me Christ-like mercy, love and justice, and helping me to become not only a better teacher but, more importantly, a better person.

Over the years, I have attended multiple Masses, taken part in many service projects and witnessed the incredible kindness and love of the Catholic school community. Through these experiences, witnessing how Catholics live out their faith to serve others, and living their lives as a true testament to Christ, I came closer to joining the Catholic Church. I began graduate school at a Catholic university.

Surrounded by incredibly loving, kind and supportive Catholics – my classmates and professors – I was deeply touched and inspired at how these phenomenal people lived out their lives as true witnesses for Christ. The special spirit that permeated everything and everyone at the university really “sealed the deal” for me and helped me to realize that the Catholic Church is where I belong. After completing RCIA, I was baptized, confirmed and received First Communion during the Easter Vigil of a local parish and joined the Catholic Church with several colleagues and students present to celebrate with me.

I am deeply appreciative to everyone who had an impact on me to help me find my way home to the Church. My decision to join the Catholic Church is a testament to the positive impact that Catholic schools have on students and teachers alike.

“This was my moment of full surrender”

A young wife and mother accepts God’s will, crediting the good soil of young adult ministry, discipleship, small groups and good confessors:

As a young married couple, we were seeking more community, so we popped into a young adult group. The community was beautiful, but it seemed to be missing something. Having found my faith again deeply in college and spending time with FOCUS missionaries during those years, I saw this as an opportunity to start a women’s Bible study and engage these other young adults in discipleship. I challenged my husband to do the same. The whole experience was really life changing. The work of the Holy Spirit was palpable. We both were blessed to share with others what we had been blessed to receive during our college years through the efforts of those FOCUS missionaries.

Fast forward a number of years. We still felt like something was missing in our marriage. I started to feel increasingly convicted about using birth control. My mom had encouraged me to get on the pill when I was just 16. Even though I had been through a lot of discipleship, and was now leading a discipleship group, this was one area of my life that was still a struggle for me. In my heart, I knew this was a sin toward which I was turning a blind eye. Ironically, about the same time, my husband was feeling convicted about it too. He confessed the sin during confession at the men’s conference and after discussing it in spiritual direction, he brought it up with me. I was defensive at first, but my husband and Christ were gentle and loving about it.

After some discussion, I shared the thought in my heart, “I know being open to children and God’s plan and timing for them is the only thing I’m not trusting God in.” This was my moment of full surrender to Christ’s lordship. The next week I shared my conviction with my good friend from our Bible study. We left that coffee date with me committed to going off the pill and she committed to scheduling an appointment to remove her IUD. We both now practice Natural Family Planning and have growing families.

There has been a watershed in grace ever since. I now have two young boys. God is giving me the opportunity to mirror his unconditional love to them. I’m so grateful for all that we have experienced – friends who are missionaries, authentic Christian community among married and singles, the archdiocese’s investment in discipleship, wonderful confessors and spiritual direction and like-minded families to encourage us. We feel prepared to truly form and disciple our children, and we hope and pray their hearts will be docile to Christ’s love.

“Walking with the couples as they try and fail ...has been an amazing experience”

A diocesan priest reflects on the fruit that good marriages can bring to the life of his priesthood, and to the life of the parish:

When I was asked to serve as a spiritual director for one of the Domestic Church circles within our archdiocese, I was initially skeptical. I had not heard of the term aside from Church documents, and while the idea of it was interesting, even desirable, I doubted it could become a reality. For those who are unaware of what this movement entails, a “Domestic Church circle” is a group of married couples who have mutually promised to support each other in creating an environment within their respective families that is based on things such as individual prayer, couple’s prayer, family prayer, and daily scripture reading. I decided to take the leap, despite my reluctance, at least to come to have a better perspective as a pastor on how I might help married couples and those discerning the married state.

Throughout my time with my Domestic Church circle, I have come to understand the necessity of intentionality among every member of the group. Walking with the couples as they try and fail and stand up again with the assistance of their brothers and sisters has been an amazing experience. I have grown close to them not only as a priest to the people he serves, but as a friend and companion on the road to holiness. My own vocation as a priest has been amplified by the examples of persistence and diligence offered to me by the couples. From witnessing simple prayers before meals with the group to hearing one of their children excited to “see Jesus” in the Eucharist at Mass, my own desire to live out my vocation has been galvanized. My Domestic Church circle has shown me how, in order for there to be a Church of evangelization that is alive with faith and ready to be sent out proclaiming the Good News, it must exist first in the source of our human experience, which is the family.

I am grateful that I listened to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and said “yes” to being part of this amazing movement within our archdiocese. Through this, I have seen a commitment to prayer and scripture in marriages blossom, which has fostered a beautiful unfolding of sacramental graces within these marriages and families. I continue to see its effect on the parenting of the couples and the forming of the next generation of the Church – both in the development of their children and in the lives of those with whom they interact.

Any skepticism I may have had regarding Domestic Church circles has vanished. This experience for me has given me great hope for the future of the Church, of our Church here in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, because of what Domestic Church offers us as a family of faith. I pray that it becomes a movement reaching every parish, so that each parish family may come to learn what it means to be a family from the example of the domestic churches found within them.

“They had something I didn’t”

A mother and parish staff member encounters Christ in a personal way and moves from intellectual appreciation to passionate mission:

I was a cradle Catholic who had never considered leaving the Church, though I went through ups and downs in Mass attendance as a young adult. In the process of parenting four children and wanting to better understand my faith so I could share it with them, I came to love the Church and her teachings. This led to participation in RCIA as a sponsor, frequent Bible studies and increased involvement in the life of the parish. I thought I was in a great place, spiritually!

Then, as RCIA coordinator at my parish, I attended a conference that opened my eyes to what I was missing. The conference participants had a wonderful intellectual grasp of Church teachings, but what really stood out to me was their love for Jesus. It was very obvious that they had something I didn’t. A Holy Hour at that conference, where I truly encountered Christ as a person who loved me, changed everything. From that moment, I was focused on finding ways to lead others to the same experience.

I was blessed to be part of an archdiocesan discipleship group that investigated tools to help leaders accompany participants through a process of encountering Christ, getting to know the Holy Spirit, developing the heart and habits of a disciple and equipping them to do the same for others. I know now that Christ’s great commission, to go and make disciples, is for everyone. It is my responsibility to lead others to Jesus and to accompany them as they come to know and love him, so that they can go out and make disciples themselves.

My priorities have changed so much over the past six years that I am now leading my seventh discipleship group and coordinating the initiative at my parish. My time, my energy, everything I have, is a gift from God, and I am overjoyed to be able to use those gifts to help others find the peace and freedom that I have found in Christ’s love.

Encounter, Accompany, Community, Send

Hopefully, you can see the fruits of conversion and the path to discipleship in your own lives. I spoke of this path in my Pastoral Letter: **Encounter, Accompany, Community, Send**. Ultimately, all conversion tends to follow this path. The encounter moment is typically connected with another person who helps facilitate the experience. Father O'Connor was that person for me. The encounter is with the person of Christ and the presence of God, and it begins a process of transformation within. When we encounter the power of God, we can't help but be changed.

As we experience that transformation, we need others to accompany us, and we need a community to share this new way of life. At some point, we experience the great blessing of taking the gift we have been given and sharing it with another. What we received freely as a gift, we give away as a free gift to someone else. The mantra of the Cursillo Movement rings true here, "Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ." Our faith is always fruitful – always inviting us to give it away, always prompting us to be generous in responding to the needs of others and always stretching us to make ourselves a gift to others.

In the coming years, as we focus on building a culture of conversion and discipleship, this is the primary fruit we should be looking for. An authentic encounter with Jesus leads to fruitfulness! It leads to personal change and ultimately inspires the desire to share faith with others. This was the driving theme of my Pastoral Letter, "Go Make Disciples, 2019," which stated:

- "The deepest desire of my heart is to see the Church of central and western Oklahoma flourish as a community of faith that nurtures and raises up fervent missionary disciples. Our task is to prepare good soil to receive the seed of faith" (Pg. 8).
- "Missionary discipleship is the fruit of good soil. If the goal throughout our archdiocese is to make more disciples, then we must address these kinds of obstacles, and do all we can to prepare good soil in our hearts" (Pg. 15).
- "Till the soil of your heart, be generous in your response to Christ. Say 'yes' to him and embrace the call to holiness. Be a disciple and accept his challenge to go and make more disciples!" (Pg. 21)

This past Spring at our annual Priests Convocation, I asked the priests what kind of fruit they are hoping to see in the coming months and years. These are some of the things they pointed to:

- Better Mass attendance;
- Return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation;
- All lay leaders have strong formation of faith;
- Greater outreach to the poor and marginalized;
- Catechists formed and articulate in their Catholic faith;
- Vibrant programming for young adults;
- Engagement with married couples;
- Faith formation within families becoming a reality;
- Active parishioners reaching out to the inactive (fallen away Catholics);
- Catholicity above individuality in faith;
- Better use of sacramental preparation for conversion;

- Greater culture of prayer;
- Culture of service to the poor, welcoming Christ in all that come to them;
- Lay initiatives of forming small groups of prayer and devotion in Church;
- Perpetual adoration is a reality;
- Liturgical formation and music are at their best;
- More vibrant and powerful liturgies at our parishes;
- More parish festivals/celebrations;
- Parents are engaged and evangelizing their children;
- Culture of vocation promotion and discernment;
- Leadership programs that empower leaders;
- English and Spanish cultures coming together as one faith community;
- Discipleship is a 24/7/365 way of life;
- Strong presence of missionary disciples;
- Unity and cooperation among language groups/cultures;
- Generous pattern of giving and support;
- Strong outreach to shut-ins;
- The “fallen away” are returning to Mass.

I also asked our Vision 2030 team to reflect on this question. This group has been working with me in the planning process over the past couple years. **What fruit should we be looking for in the coming months and years?** They broke down the fruit into areas of growth and conversion that we should hope to see in our parishes and schools:

Personal and Internal Conversion:

The first fruits of a culture of conversion and discipleship are the personal and internal conversions of more and more members of the parish. Though difficult to quantify and measure, this growth could be evidenced by many things:

- Daily Mass attendance increases;
- Percentage of parishioners in small faith groups increases;
- Number of parishioners in Bible and faith study groups increases;
- Percentage of parishioners active in ministry and outreach efforts increases;
- Increases in number of weddings and baptisms;
- Increased retention of newly confirmed youth;
- Confirmation class size as large as First Communion class size;
- Increase in mutual charity among parish leaders and parish staff;
- Increase in expressions of care for the poor and less fortunate;
- New authentic friendships are formed among parishioners;
- Parishioners personally invite others to join in sacramental life beyond Sunday Mass.

Growth in personal holiness:

As more and more parishioners respond to the call of missionary discipleship, there will be more visible signs of growth in personal holiness:

- Increase in Holy day Mass attendance;
- Longer confession lines;

- Serving the poor and less fortunate;
- Increased involvement with ministry to the poor;
- Increase in percentage of parishioners in adoration;
- Increased devotion and prayer before and after Mass;
- More parishioners give testimony to personal relationship with Jesus by how they live their daily lives;
- Evidence of greater joy in the hearts of parishioners;
- Stronger relationships among parishioners;
- Parents begin taking a more active role in the formation needs of their children, becoming the “primary educators” of their children;
- Increased number of vocations to the priesthood, religious life and permanent diaconate;

Outreach:

As more and more parishioners grow in their faith, and experience personal transformation, there will be an increased desire to share the gift they have received with others:

- Increased desire for expressions of Catholic social teaching and Corporal Works of Mercy in the local community;
- Greater desire to assist the poor and marginalized of our community – migrant workers, refugees, the homeless, etc.;
- Increased desire for evangelization and to share the faith with others;
- Increased integration of parish cultural groups;
- More young people involved in FOCUS and similar missionary work;
- Increased number of people taking missionary trips;
- More disciples who can be sent to begin the discipleship process anywhere, based on training available to them.

Expansion:

As parishes and schools on the path of conversion and discipleship gain traction through their efforts, certain characteristics will begin to emerge over time:

- Percentage of already registered families at weekend Masses increases, and more new families join our parishes;
- Increased percentage of registered families participating in formation programs and contributing regularly;
- RCIA class size increases;
- Retention of RCIA participants increases;
- Parishes and schools begin having a greater and greater impact in the local communities around them.

These lists are not meant to be comprehensive and are not meant to communicate any rigid pattern of conformity on personal or parish growth. They simply are offered to help paint the picture of what we are desiring. If we were to plant a garden – clear the field, till the soil, and plant all sorts of seeds, we would expect to see tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet corn, and watermelons springing up in our garden.

If we didn’t see any fruit, we would wonder what had gone wrong. The same principle is true of our efforts with Vision 2030. With all these concerted efforts to build a culture of conversion and discipleship, we should anticipate the emerging fruit that will result, and we should be waiting anxiously for it to appear!

In closing, I want to draw our attention to two important and critical “sources” for our efforts – The Holy Spirit and Mary.

“The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect

communion of the Blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the People of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time, creating a unity that is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony. Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures that the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church” (“The Joy of the Gospel,” pg. 117; “Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 25).

As we renew our commitment to this journey of conversion and discipleship, I entrust our archdiocese to Mary, the Star of the New Evangelization. As her appearance to Saint Juan Diego at Tepeyac became a wellspring of grace in the evangelization of the Americas, may her intercession today lead us to encounter Jesus anew. Under her spotless mantle, may she form us as his missionary disciples for the evangelization of our homes, our parishes, our schools and our archdiocese (“Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 25).

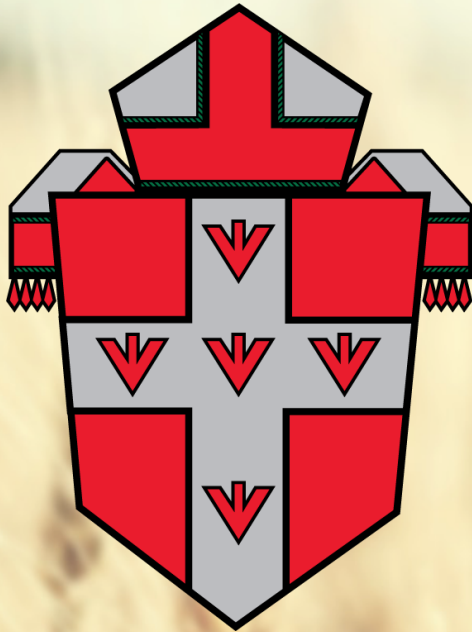
*Mary, Virgin and Mother,
You, who, moved by the Holy Spirit,
Welcomed the word of life
In the depths of your humble faith:
As you gave yourself completely to the Eternal One,
Help us to say our own “yes”
To the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
To proclaim the Good News of Jesus.
Star of the new evangelization,
Help us to bear radiant witness to communion,
Service, ardent and generous faith,
Justice and love of the poor,
That the joy of the Gospel
May reach to the ends of the earth,
Illuminating even the fringes of our world. Mother of the living Gospel,
Wellspring of happiness for God’s little ones,
Pray for us.
Amen. Alleluia!*

(Pope Francis, “The Joy of the Gospel,” “Go Make Disciples 2019,” pg. 26)



Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley
Archbishop of Oklahoma City
December 8, 2019
The Feast of the Immaculate Conception

Go Make Disciples



ARCHDIOCESE OF OKLAHOMA CITY