

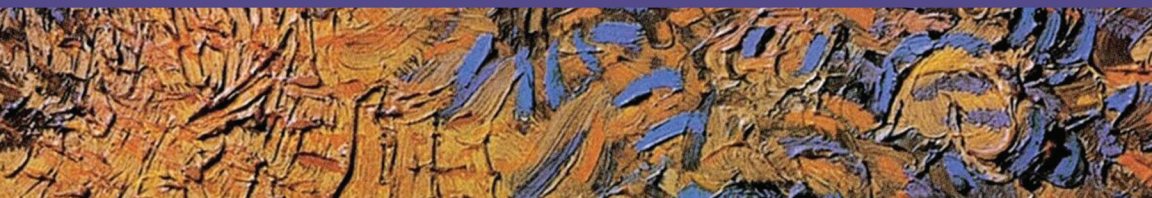


Go Make Disciples!

Building a Culture of Conversion and Discipleship
for the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City



Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley
Archbishop of Oklahoma City
January 25, 2019



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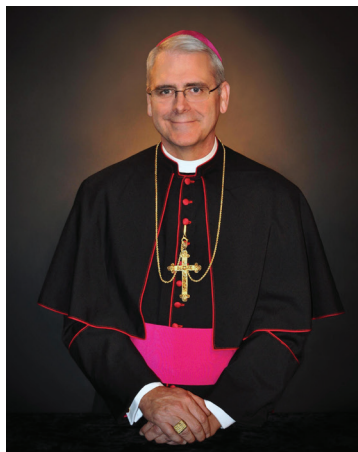
Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley
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January 25, 2019
Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

Preface

***“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and
our Lord Jesus Christ!” (Gal. 1:3)***

It is with great joy I write you once again, the people of God in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. It has been five years since the publication of my previous pastoral letter, “Go Make Disciples.” Much has happened in the past five years, and there is much to celebrate.



The purpose of this pastoral letter is to refocus the vision and consider what the Lord has been doing in our archdiocese and where the Holy 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. After five years, we have greater clarity and alignment in our mission.

“Go Make Disciples” set out three overarching goals – New Evangelization, Hispanic Ministry and Faith Formation.

We established an office for the New Evangelization and restructured the chancery to combine evangelization, catechesis and formation into a new secretariat that is aligned for greater collaboration and clarity of direction.

We have strengthened faith formation throughout the archdiocese, building on a solid foundation of education and catechesis established by the dedication of countless religious sisters and brothers, priests, lay teachers and catechists who have served tirelessly for generations.

One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the tremendous momentum with our Hispanic Ministry. We acknowledged five years ago that we faced a challenge with the burgeoning Hispanic populations in many of

our parishes. This strategic priority led to an expansion of our Hispanic outreach and plans to build a beautiful shrine and church honoring Blessed Stanley Rother that also will help us minister to the growing Hispanic population.



We celebrate these accomplishments and acknowledge the undeniable signs of God's grace and favor. We never would have accomplished these things without his divine assistance. God always takes the initiative. He awaits our response.

When we cooperate with God's grace our efforts bear fruit. Disciples – and the things they do in the world – are the “good fruit” coming from “good soil” that we read about in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew chapter 13.

We see countless examples of this good fruit throughout the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. The core of this good fruit is strong Catholic families, in which parents are striving to raise children to be missionary disciples. The family is the first cell of society and of the Church, and one of the most important institutions for us to invest in and protect. As Saint John Paul II reminds us, the family is the “domestic church.”

As we bear fruit, we must share it with our brothers and sisters. We have many examples of Catholics sharing their faith through works of mercy. Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City is recognized nationally for the ministries and assistance provided to Oklahomans in need throughout the archdiocese. Sister BJ's Pantry is another shining light in our midst, serving more than 400 homeless and hungry men, women and children every week with food, clothing, hope and friendship.



In Okarche, The Center of Family Love, inspired and supported by the Knights of Columbus, has prospered with a commitment to serve the needs of the intellectually disabled and vulnerable adults through residential programs,

a new Blessed Stanley Rother Chapel and vocational centers. And, there are many more examples.

The seeds of faith we have sown are producing an increase in the number of young men discerning their vocation in the seminary, and deacon candidate classes increase with every cycle. Through the new Catholic Conference of Oklahoma, we are making a meaningful impact on public policy issues that are important to Catholics across the state in coordination with the Diocese of Tulsa.

Years of prayer and dedication were rewarded in September 2017 with the beatification of Oklahoma's own Blessed Stanley Rother. This momentous occasion marked a new chapter in the life of the Church in Oklahoma and attracted Catholics and non-Catholics from around the world to celebrate the life and witness of the first U.S. martyr and first U.S.-born priest ever beatified.



As we grow in faith, our changing ministerial needs must be addressed as well. To address these shared archdiocesan needs and parish needs, we have launched the first archdiocesan capital campaign, “One Church, Many Disciples.” Parish after parish has exceeded their financial goals and made plans to strengthen multiple ministries that will benefit many generations to come. The campaign has been so successful, that in August, I established a

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new challenge goal that at the time of this letter we have every hope of reaching. We certainly have experienced God's favor.

As I reflect on our abundant blessings, I am aware of our struggles and scandals as well. We are living through a time of crisis in our beloved Church due

to recent revelations of sexual abuse and the abuse of power, and violations of trust by members of the clergy, the very men in whom we should be able to recognize the loving image of Christ the Good Shepherd. Such an evil betrayal understandably provokes anger, confusion and sadness. In these times when our faith may be shaken, we must turn to God and humbly rededicate ourselves to repentance and the pursuit of holiness. God has not abandoned us. He will always be faithful, even when we are not.

With all of this as the backdrop, I call on us as an archdiocese and as the Body of Christ to a renewed commitment to authentic discipleship. We give thanks for the abundant harvest that God has brought forth in our archdiocese. It is my prayer that we continue to advance in a direction that bears abundant fruit in the coming years, even “thirty, sixty and a hundredfold.” I call you to be disciples and go make disciples! This is why we are here! This is our mission.

Disciples on “the Way”

Discipleship is a way of life! Like life itself, it is a journey filled with rich blessings and difficult challenges. Bearing good fruit over the course of this lifelong journey is our goal. The fruit we bear glorifies God. As we grow closer to Jesus Christ throughout our lives, we experience the full breadth of this journey with all its texture and depth.

The journey, or the way, is an ancient image for discipleship and the Christian life. In fact, it was an early way of describing the Church when disciples were referred to as members of “the Way” (Acts 19:23). Over the course of the past few years, I have had the privilege of walking sections of the Way of Saint James, or the Camino de Santiago, several times. The Camino, which has become popular in recent years, is a network of ancient pilgrim routes reaching across Europe and culminating at the tomb of Saint James the Greater in Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain.



Pilgrims have walked “the Way” for centuries. It was during a pilgrimage along the Camino this past August that I began to conceive this pastoral letter.

Each time I make this journey, it affects me profoundly. As I walk my camino, I pray for the grace and wisdom to persevere faithfully in the way the Lord has chosen for me as I lead the archdiocese as a successor to the apostles. We all are pilgrims on a journey, a camino, to heaven. We navigate a path marked with hills and valleys, over smooth and rocky terrain. We find strength for the journey through prayer, the sacraments, the Scriptures and the community of believers that encourages us and centers us in Christ’s love.

As Catholics, we never walk alone. This past summer as I trekked more than 180 miles from France over the Pyrenees and into Spain, I often was buoyed by the encouragement of local farmers, shopkeepers and fellow pilgrims with their friendly “buen Camino!” Such kindnesses kept us going when we felt we had nothing left. The journey of discipleship presents many challenges and benefits from the same encouragement of fellow pilgrims.

As Catholics, we never walk alone.

For early Christians, the Way (the Camino) was more than a physical path or place on a map. It was the path of discipleship and a way of life. Still today, it is a path given to us by Jesus Christ along which he leads and accompanies us. As always, our path of discipleship requires us to learn from him and follow his example.

The Christian faith summons believers to a lifelong process of continuing conversion to Jesus Christ – to a full and sincere adherence to his person and a decision to walk in his footsteps. Faith springs from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ who seeks our commitment to live as he lived.

In this way, we, as believers, unite ourselves to the community of disciples and appropriate the faith of the Church (GDC, #53).

Beginning with this pastoral letter, we are charting a path that will guide us forward by stages for many years to come. Over the next 12 years, we will strive to make more clear this path of missionary discipleship in the

Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. We will strive to engage and welcome others to join us on the way, to share our camino. The unique way of life that Christ offers us ought to propose an attractive invitation for others.

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.

Good soil, bearing good fruit

We see Jesus in the Gospels inviting others to become his followers, teaching them to be disciples. These lessons are Scriptural schools of discipleship. We find one such Scriptural school in Matthew chapter 13, which is the Parable of the Sower, an appropriate meditation for us on the theme of discipleship.

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I encourage you to pause and read this passage (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23). Pay particular attention to the setting. The story begins with Jesus inside a house. He leaves the house and sits near the sea to teach those who crowded near to listen to him. Such a large crowd gathers that he climbs into a boat to avoid being pushed into the sea. From his place in the boat he continues to teach the gathering crowds along the shore.

The parable begins, “A sower went out to sow.” We hear that some of the sower’s seed falls onto the hard-packed path, and birds come and devour the seed immediately. Some seed falls on rocky ground and since there is little soil, the seed cannot put down roots. The plants spring up quickly, but without roots they die. Some seed falls among thorns. The thorns grow alongside the plants and choke them off. Finally, some seed falls on good soil and brings forth grain – some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold and some thirtyfold.

This is a relatable parable for us in the red dirt country of Oklahoma since many of us are familiar with farming, gardening and planting; working with various types of soil. Jesus explains that the seed is the Word of the kingdom, the Word of faith. The seed sown on the hard path represents those who hear the Word, but don't understand it. Perhaps their minds are dulled by distraction or their hearts are hardened. When the birds come, who represent the evil one, they steal the seed before it can take root in their hearts. The rocky soil represents the one who hears the Word of faith and

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immediately receives it with joy, but having no depth of heart, the Word cannot take root. When trial and persecution come, the new growth withers. The seed sown among thorns is similar. The seed of faith takes root, but it grows alongside the thorns, which choke it and prevent it from bearing fruit. The thorns represent “the cares of the world and the delight in riches,” a reality many can relate to.



Finally, some seed falls on good soil. This represents those who hear the Word of God and receive it in faith. The amount of fruit this good soil produces varies; some thirty, sixty or a hundredfold. Jesus does not explain this aspect, but we can draw some conclusions. Fruitfulness in farming or gardening depends on a variety of things – the seed, the soil and the weather. Even good soil needs to be cultivated and cared for, nourished and watered. We could think of this as a certain receptivity in the soil or of the heart. How well does one dispose oneself not only to the seed of faith, but to all else that God provides to help with the growth – spiritual nourishment, the watering of grace, the fellowship of other believers?



Ultimately, fruitfulness depends on weather conditions. A serious drought can destroy an entire crop. These external conditions also are factors in spiritual fruitfulness. There is an obvious need for grace and God's movement for growth to occur. But, there also can be a certain aridity in the life and environment of a parish or school or home that makes spiritual progress difficult or, at times, impossible.

There are several key points in this parable that teach us about discipleship. A key to understanding what this passage teaches us about discipleship is to take note of the various people who gathered to hear Jesus. Who are the people to whom Jesus is speaking? Matthew's Gospel develops three major groups: first, the Pharisees and the Sadducees (the religious leaders); next, the "crowds;" and finally, the disciples. The religious leaders typically were present wherever Jesus traveled and taught. Often, they became his antagonists. The disciples, close followers of Jesus, accompanied him, learned from him and were attached to him. The "crowds," however, are a little more ambiguous. They are "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt. 9:36); "they

These varied soils are present in the hearts of each one of us.

see without seeing, and hearing they don't hear, nor do they understand" (Mt. 13:13). The crowds follow Jesus everywhere, but many never become disciples. They seem content to follow at a distance and hear his teachings and witness his miracles, signs and wonders as curious onlookers.

We can discern a link between these various groups of people and the various types of soil in the parable. The Pharisees and Sadducees represent the hard path. They don't understand Jesus or what he is trying to do. He

doesn't fit their preconceived notion of a savior or of righteousness, and therefore their minds and hearts are closed off. The seed cannot penetrate the soil.

The rocky soil and the thorny soil both represent the crowds. The members of this group accept the seed of faith, but for various reasons are never able to put down roots in their lives. Their hearts are divided and full of obstacles. The seed begins to grow, but with no strong root system, it can't last.

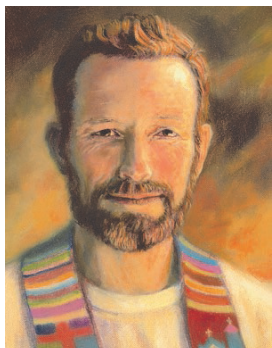
Finally, it is the disciples who can be compared with the good soil. Their hearts are open and receptive to the seed of faith and they have embraced it, even the difficulty and suffering that may be required.

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to cooperate with God's grace.*

The Parable of the Sower lends itself to this interpretation with the different groups of people representing the various types of soil. However, there is the danger that we fail to recognize that these various conditions are all present in each of our hearts. These varied soils are present in the hearts of each one of us. In our hearts, we all experience hardness. Sometimes our hearts are rocky ground or the thorny soil. All of us face temptations and distractions. There are things that divide our hearts and compete for our allegiance and diminish our fruitfulness.

But, we all have good soil as well, and we are invited to constantly cooperate with grace to expand our receptivity to God's Word in our hearts. Indeed, the primary work of a 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.

The whole parable, ultimately, is about bearing fruit. Throughout the history of our Church, there are faithful stewards who have become great saints, bearing remarkable fruit over the course of their lives. One of our own,



Blessed Stanley Rother, is counted among them. We have witnessed his beatification and, God willing, we may witness his canonization. Saint Augustine encourages us with the words, “In one the fruit is more, in another less; but all will have a place in the barn.”

Obstacles to fruitfulness: the world, the flesh and the devil

The Council of Trent admonished the faithful in the 16th century with advice that is every bit as relevant today: “Let those who think themselves to stand, take heed lest they fall, and with fear and trembling work out their salvation, in labors, in watchfulness, in almsgiving, in prayers and oblations, in fasting and chastity for, knowing that they are born again unto a hope of glory, but not as yet unto glory, they ought to fear for the combat, which yet remains with the flesh, with the world, with the devil, wherein they cannot be victorious, unless they be with God’s grace.” What shape do the world, the flesh and the devil take in our efforts to live fruitful lives as missionary disciples?

The Parable of the Sower speaks of the seed sown among thorns as the “cares of the world and the delight in riches.” Busyness, distractions, even our legitimate responsibilities that we have for our homes, our jobs and our families can become mounting distractions that choke off the Word of faith and make it unfruitful.

These days, the “noise” we constantly experience can diminish our capacity for faith. Television, streaming technology, social media, sports, tasks at home and work are not bad in themselves, but if we do not temper them with restraint, they can dominate our lives to such an extent there is no capacity for solitude and reflection.

There is an ever-increasing secularism in our culture that is a daunting challenge to people of faith. It can be characterized as a practical, if not a theoretical, atheism. We may not ever deny the existence of God, but on a day-to-day basis, we act as if he does not exist or have any claim on our lives, our choices, our time or our resources. Eventually, this secular mentality (which acts as if this world and its concerns are all there is) can cause even good faithful Catholics to question and doubt what they believe. It is not uncommon for Catholics to face open challenges to their beliefs, a situation experienced even more often by young people.

This is the “world” the Scriptures speak about. Saint Thomas Aquinas clarifies that the world tempts us in two fundamental ways. “First, with an excessive and intemperate desire for the goods of this life. The second way is the fears engendered by persecutors and tyrants.”

Properly integrated passions are what move saints to great and heroic actions!

If the “world” is a challenge to a life of fruitful discipleship, so is the “flesh.” The “flesh” places an excessive value on our own comfort and ease. It leads to laziness especially in our spiritual disciplines: skipping Mass, neglecting prayer, a lack of a spirit of penance and generosity.

In our flesh, we also can experience intense temptations from food to entertainment. These are what are referred to as our passions. The passions often have a negative connotation, but they play a powerful role in our spiritual growth as disciples. We are meant to master our passions, and to do so is part of the internal integration and freedom to which Christ invites us through the process of conversion. Properly integrated passions are what move saints to great and heroic actions! This freedom is at the heart of the Gospel message. Not mastering our passions, however, is settling for a certain



kind of slavery to them. Disordered passions can develop into deep-seated patterns of sin. Gone unchecked, they can develop into compulsive addictions, habitual manipulation of others and selfish indulgence. This is far from the freedom Christ offers each of us; the freedom that he won for us on the cross.

In contrast, the Catechism provides some beautiful language. By virtue of our faith and baptism, we share in the offices of Christ (priest, prophet and king). As kings, “to reign is to serve him, particularly when serving the poor and the suffering, in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder. The People of God fulfills its royal dignity by a life in keeping with its vocation to serve with Christ. . . . What, indeed, is as royal for a soul as to govern the body in obedience to God?” (CCC, #786). As true disciples, this is how we are meant to live. “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

One would be foolish to go too far down the path of discipleship without acknowledging our enemy, the devil. Saint Ignatius of Loyola referred to him as the “enemy of our human nature,” precisely because his common tactics are to lead us away from what we were created for and what will bring us true and lasting happiness: heaven. One of his biggest temptations is to convince us that God is deceiving us and doesn’t really want our happiness. The devil reasons with us that God is depriving us, cheating us of what we deserve. This temptation goes back to the Garden of Eden and is at the heart of the Fall.

Saint Thomas Aquinas explains, “The devil proceeds most cunningly in tempting us. He operates like a skillful general when about to attack a fortified city. He looks for the weak places in the object of his assault, and in that part where a man is most weak, he tempts him. He tempts man in those sins to which, after subduing his flesh, he is most inclined. Such, for instance, are anger, pride and the other spiritual sins.” For this reason, those who have responded to the Lord’s call and set out on the path of discipleship, the camino, are summoned to pursue virtue and character as integral to their call to holiness. It is all aimed at growing in wisdom and strengthening ourselves, so not to leave ourselves vulnerable to the exploitation of the devil, “the enemy of our human nature.”

Continued growth as a disciple calls for an understanding of the enemies and dangers we will encounter along the way, so we can protect ourselves against them. The Parable of the Sower captures the effects of these enemies as Jesus talks about the rocky soil, and the soil filled with thorns. This soil limits fruitfulness and can prevent it altogether. 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.

Tilling good soil

“Therefore, in the Church, everyone, whether belonging to the hierarchy or being cared for by it, is called to holiness” (LG, #39).

For fruitful discipleship to be a reality in our parishes, schools and homes, it requires intentional effort. The good soil needs to be cultivated and tilled. 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. In addition to dealing with these enemies to our holiness, we must cooperate with God’s grace to till the good soil in our hearts. What are the things that God provides for our growth in the spiritual life and in our pursuit of holiness?

First and foremost, God provides us his grace. Grace is literally “God’s life” at work within us, sanctifying us and healing us, perfecting us and elevating us to participate in God’s divine life. This grace is given to us first at our

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baptism, and it is the same grace we receive every time we receive any of the Sacraments from the Church. “God brings to completion in us what he has begun, ‘since he who completes his work by cooperating with our will began by working so that we might will it’” (CCC, #2001). In other words, we can’t receive God’s grace, without grace! God always takes the initiative. God always is assisting us, even providing for our response.

This divine life that God pours into us through the Sacraments of our Church is the sustaining force of discipleship and the spiritual journey.

The reality of our fallen human condition is that we are cracked and broken vessels. We leak the grace that is poured into us like water flowing through our fingers. In his mercy God provides the means for us to return to the well and be refilled again and again. We can receive his grace every day through the Eucharist at daily Mass. When we have been wounded by the sinful choices that weaken or destroy his life within us, we have the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If we desire to pursue holiness and to live as a disciple, why would we neglect to take advantage of all that God has provided for our assistance?

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and with his love.*

In addition to his grace, God extends the invitation to relationship. His Church is not a sterile and distant reality, not merely an institution. It is a family. “Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life: by Baptism, the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As an ‘adopted son’ he can henceforth call God ‘Father,’ in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church” (CCC, #1997). 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.

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’ ” (The Joy of the Gospel, 3). 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. “This mystery (the mystery of faith), then, requires the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it, and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer” (CCC, #2558).

This gift of prayer is fueled by God himself through the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit was sent to us as the advocate. He is the one who “leads to a life of prayer,” is “the master of prayer;” he is “the source of all holiness;” he “converts the human heart ... reveals the Father ... and reveals Jesus Christ” (CCC, Index). The Holy Spirit also is the source of grace that allows us to pursue virtue, resist vice and to grow incrementally into the men and women we were created to be.

Since my installation as archbishop nearly eight years ago, I have not ceased praying for a new Pentecost leading to a New Evangelization in Oklahoma. I am convinced of the crucial role the Holy Spirit plays in assisting in the work of evangelization and the life of every disciple. It is my prayer that each one of us will more fully embrace a relationship with the third person of the Trinity and will be blessed with a fuller outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

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Our guide through this process is found in his word, the Sacred Scriptures. The Letter to the Hebrews says, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart”

(Hebrews 4: 12). Frequent reading of the Scriptures is indispensable for a disciple. It is through a frequent prayerful reflection on the Scriptures (*lectio divina*) that we put on the mind and heart of Jesus.

The Sacred Scriptures, coupled with tradition and the teaching magisterium of the Church, make up what is called the deposit of faith – the divinely revealed and preserved teachings, beliefs and doctrines entrusted to the Church. Study of God’s Word, learning the teachings of our faith and allowing one’s life to be patterned after Christ through this revealed truth is integral to the process of transformation that is at the heart of discipleship.

“Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father, ‘that all may be one ... as we are one’” (John 17:21-22) opened vistas closed to human reason alone, for he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine persons, and the unity of God’s sons and daughters in truth and charity.



The world, the flesh and the devil might tempt us to think we are made merely for the selfish pursuit of our own passions and desires. But, divine revelation shows us that we are made for much more. We are created in God’s image and likeness to give ourselves to others in a self-donating love patterned on the life of the Trinity! This rich experience of community and communion is fundamental to authentic discipleship.

God pours out his grace for us and offers divine assistance for our response. “God’s free initiative demands man’s free response, for God has created man in his image by conferring on him, along with freedom, the power to know him and love him. The soul only enters freely into the communion of love.

God immediately touches and directly moves the heart of man. He has placed in man a longing for truth and goodness that only he can satisfy. The promises of ‘eternal life’ respond, beyond all hope, to this desire” (CCC, #2002).

Responding to the call to holiness

One of our most life-altering discoveries when we embrace the call of discipleship is to recognize that all time belongs to Christ. How do we use our time as good stewards of such a precious gift? Are we willing to give the Lord our best, or just the leftovers? The person who says he never finds time for prayer, obviously has never made time for prayer. Going to Mass, frequenting the Sacraments, spending time in prayer, taking time for fellowship with other believers, spending time in study of the Scriptures or Church teaching, serving the poor, lifting up the lowly, the corporal works of mercy, etc., are all ways we can use the gift of time in the pursuit of holiness rather than merely for what we desire. It is a life-giving sacrifice.

In relationship with Christ, and guided in prayer by the Holy Spirit, the spiritual journey calls us to pursue and cultivate virtue. This necessarily involves the tempering of vice. The light of God’s love will reveal our imperfections to us, especially areas of objective sin. “Sin is an offense against reason, truth and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity” (CCC, #1849-1850).

God pours out his grace for us.

This is the definition of all sin. We cannot pick and choose what we would define as sin, and then make exceptions for other things. “Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become ‘like gods,’ knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus ‘love of oneself even to contempt of God.’ In this proud self-exaltation, sin is diametrically opposed to the obedience of Jesus, which achieves our salvation” (CCC, #1850).

Sin will undermine our pursuit of holiness and will cripple us as disciples. A disciple cannot be a true follower of Christ while remaining indifferent to the growth and spread of sin. The path of discipleship involves addressing areas of objective sin in our lives and rooting them out through the power of the resurrection.

Sin has social and societal effects as well. We are witnessing firsthand the destructive force of sin when we fail to acknowledge and repent of sin: disintegrating marriages and families, exploitation of children and the vulnerable, pornography, indifference to the poor, violence and racism and demonizing others who are different than ourselves.

Many of us struggle with patterns and habits of sin in our lives. As Pope Francis likes to remind us, the Church is not an enclave for the saved, but a “field hospital” for sinners. The Church exists to accompany sinners along the path of healing, forgiveness and freedom. If you struggle, I encourage you to accept the grace that is available to you; accept the friendship and support of other believers and take the risk of being transparent about your struggles with others who can walk with you and help you. You do not need to be bound in sin any longer!

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In addition to rooting out sin, the path of discipleship calls us to detach from those things that hold us back in the pursuit of holiness. In the same way we are willing to sacrifice our time, the disciple seeks freedom from attachments to the things that the “world” values: money, possessions, simple pleasures. These are all goods, and the free and proper use of such goods ought to help order our lives as missionary disciples. We must not be enslaved by them. Detachment and self-denial involve suffering and a share in the Paschal Mystery. Accepting our sufferings and disappointments and joining them to those of Christ is a real participation in his suffering (Col. 1:24) and a foundational principle of the Christian life.

“On the cross, Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the ‘sin of the world,’ of which illness is only a consequence. By his

passion and death on the cross, Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion” (CCC, #1505). We can participate with Jesus in his redemptive suffering on the cross.

Finally, I would like to address a word to parents: raise holy children – teach them what it means to be disciples by showing them through the witness of your own life! Cultivate holy family life and holy marriages. Be vigilant in protecting your children from all that could harm or corrupt them, and in your effort to pass on the faith to them. Be witnesses to your faith and do not shrink from sharing your faith with others, especially your own families. Be compelling witnesses to the truth by being faithful to the duties of your state in life, whatever they are. Be willing, be courageous!

*Be witnesses to your faith and do not shrink
from sharing your faith.*

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!

Where do we go from here?

There is greater clarity today in our call to go make disciples than there was five years ago. This call to personal holiness and missionary discipleship is our path into the future. I invite every Catholic to embrace this summons. And, I call on my priests, deacons, religious and staff of the archdiocese to lead us during this next year to a clear articulation of a pastoral strategy for how to pursue and foster this identity as missionary disciples.

A number of pastoral priorities already have been identified. I need your input and feedback to refine and implement them. In the coming year, I have asked my staff to organize a number of listening sessions. I will participate in these as I am able. I want to hear from our people the desires of their hearts for our Church.

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. Our challenge is to clearly articulate this path, so that we can come to a shared understanding of the way of discipleship. One of the greatest challenges we face today is that we can no longer assume we are on the same page. Opinions vary widely on any given topic. There are cultural, language and generational differences that often prevent us from hearing and understanding one another. 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. 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.

The Church in our archdiocese must become a place where the path of conversion and discipleship is clearly marked and easy to access.

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. Though each person's experience is deeply personal, the path has not changed throughout the ages. I emphasized in "Go Make Disciples," "We must be clear that the call to holiness is not a license to indulge in a privatized and individualistic spirituality. On the contrary, it is a radical call to communion."³ 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 can clearly recognize the path they are meant to follow.

In July 2017, key leaders from throughout the archdiocese joined me in Orlando for a National Convocation of Catholic Leaders. In many ways it was a prelude to the extraordinary V Encuentro that took place in Dallas in September 2018. Both focused on the call to form missionary disciples.

In Orlando, we spent time focusing on this path of conversion and discussing what it would look like to foster a culture of discipleship in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City. At that gathering, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a new resource called “Living as Missionary Disciples.”

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.”³⁴

This is a good articulation for us of this path and offers us a common vocabulary and understanding of the process for how we can explain it to others. I would encourage us as an archdiocese to utilize and study this resource, so that we can come to a better understanding of this path of conversion and become more adept at leading others through it.

The first stage of this path is **Encounter**.

“This personal encounter is the key event in the life of every disciple that changes the direction of life as we see happen so often in the lives of the disciples recounted in the Scriptures. Meeting Jesus Christ changed everything.”³⁵



I have spent much time over the years reflecting on my own experiences of encounter with the Lord, and how this encounter ultimately led me to my vocation to the priesthood. I have shared that encounter numerous times, which has been powerful for me as it calls to mind my own relationship with Christ and what he has done in my life.

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Pope Francis sums it up well, “It is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him; not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly; not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it; and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to.”⁶

The second stage is **Accompany**. The personal encounter with Christ leads one to a “lived” relationship with him and growth in consistent prayer. This is the response to the encounter. Just like with any human relationship, when you encounter another, you are drawn into relationship with them. This response often needs accompaniment.

“Being a disciple is a challenge. We cannot live a life of discipleship alone. We need others to model lives of discipleship and accompany us as we grow in the spiritual life and experience ongoing conversion. Similarly, as missionary disciples, we are called to love and accept all people in a way that invites each person to a deeper relationship with Christ and a greater alignment of their lives with his teachings.”⁷ It is in this stage of accompaniment that one is formed and catechized in the great riches of the content of our faith.



The third stage of the path to discipleship is **Community**. Evangelization invites someone not only into relationship with Jesus, but also into relationship

with everyone else who is in relationship with him. This is the community we know as the Church, which is brought together by the unique work of the Holy Spirit.

“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.”⁸ As we grow in understanding, we are constantly encouraged in living out those beliefs by the community of other believers.

*Help us to say our own “yes”
To the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
To proclaim the Good News of Jesus.*

Finally, the fourth stage is **Send**. As I said in “Go Make Disciples,” “Holiness and communion lead necessarily to mission. We cannot separate the call to holiness and communion from the universal call to mission, that is, to the work of evangelization. ‘Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.’”⁹ God’s desire for all disciples is to draw them into his mission.

“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.”¹⁰

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 and our archdiocese.

*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)

+ Paul S. Coakley

Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley

Archbishop of Oklahoma City

January 25, 2019

Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul

End Notes

1. St. Augustine, Sermon 23 on the New Testament; www.newadvent.org/fathers/160323.htm, accessed 8-25-18
2. The Catechetical Instructions of St. Thomas Aquinas, The Catholic Primer (2004), pgs. 114-115.
3. Most Rev. Paul S. Coakley, Go Make Disciples (Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, 2013) 11.
4. USCCB Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, Living as Missionary Disciples (USCCB, Washington DC, 2017) 9.
5. Living as Missionary Disciples, 9-10.
6. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation The Joy of the Gospel (24 November 2013) No. 266.
7. Living as Missionary Disciples, 15.
8. Ibid, 16. Includes Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation The Joy of the Gospel (24 November 2013) No. 117.
9. Go Make Disciples, 12. Includes, Pope Paul VI, On Evangelization in the Modern World, No. 14; Includes Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation The Joy of the Gospel (24 November 2013) No. 117.
10. Living as Missionary Disciples, 17.