



December 2, 2007

To the People of God in the Diocese of Winona:

Promulgation of this pastoral letter, "Proclaim Jesus!" on the immediate future of our diocese comes at the beginning of Advent, a time of anticipation and preparation. During Advent, we reflect on the coming of Christ both His second coming and the Christmas event, Christ's Incarnation, when He took on the form of a man. In the Diocese of Winona, we also wait for the appointment of a new bishop. My time as your bishop is drawing to a close. The mandatory retirement age for a bishop is 75 and, God willing, I will reach that milestone in September 2008.

I have developed a vision for our diocese that will guide us until our new bishop is appointed and forms his own vision. I have met personally with nearly one hundred pastoral council representatives, heard from the priests in their deanery meetings and reviewed the replies of more than one hundred lay ministers and deacons. I have developed the initiatives and benchmarks that appear in this letter that I have titled, "Proclaim Jesus!" It's a very simple title, but it says much about us and about our church. The title reflects the call to discipleship that became ours at the baptismal font. It repeats the instruction of Jesus to evangelize, to bring the Gospel to all whom we meet. This letter, then, is a call to action, a call to bring Jesus and His message to our world. We want to be like the servants in the Gospel: when He came, the Master found them busy doing what was expected of them. (Luke 12: 40) You and I must be about the Master's business; this letter suggests how we might be successful in this task.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Bernard J. Harrington, D.D.
Bishop of Winona

INTRODUCTION

In 2002, I published “Alive in the Spirit,” a pastoral letter in which I set out a diocesan vision for the church in southern Minnesota, a vision that called us to strengthen our faith and to discipleship. Parish and diocesan staff members have worked to meet the benchmarks of “Alive in the Spirit.” Now, as we await my successor, it is time to refresh our vision, to set new goals, to be about our Master’s work.

By virtue of our baptism, we are “Alive in the Spirit,” we are believers in Jesus Christ. What does that mean for our lives? How will sharing the life of the Spirit shape the direction that our lives will take?

Jesus attracted many disciples to His ministry, many who believed that He was someone special and, yes, a few who believed that He was the One sent by Yahweh. Some were drawn by the miracles; some were drawn by His outrage at the injustice that He saw in the world and His support for the poor. Some recognized that Jesus was the Anointed One, the Messiah, the One promised by God. As Peter said, “Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6: 68) These believers we call disciples.

The life of a disciple was not easy. While some of Jesus’ teachings made him politically popular, some were very difficult to embrace. When Jesus said that, in order to gain everlasting life, His disciples would eat His Body and drink His Blood, many of the listeners left Him. (John 6: 66) Jesus also told them to take up their cross and follow Him. When He actually embraced the cross, the number of disciples shrunk dramatically. (Mark 14: 50-52)

As Jesus approached the time of his return to the Father, He gave the believers one final instruction: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28: 19-20) You and I are believers in Jesus; by virtue of our Baptism we are disciples of the Lord. How will we, in our corner of the world, obey Jesus’ last command?

The challenge from Jesus is to do more than believe. If we would be His disciples, we must do what the Father and Jesus have called us to do: we must live the life that He modeled for us, a life totally devoted to God and to helping others to become “Alive in the Spirit.”

Since I published “Alive in the Spirit,” many parishes have accomplished much of the vision that I described in that letter. We have seen much progress in evangelization, adult faith formation, the catechumenate and stewardship. As I approach the end of my service as your bishop, I seek again to establish a diocesan vision. This is a shorter-term vision, one designed to guide the diocese until my successor develops his own vision for our diocesan church. We will build on the work of the past five years as we prepare to take on even greater challenges in the future.

Because so many people told me that the benchmarks and initiatives in “Alive in the Spirit” were useful to them, I have chosen to adopt that same approach in this letter. Not all parishes will be

able to work on all of the initiatives. I invite the people of the parishes of the Diocese of Winona to embrace as many as are possible and to Proclaim Jesus!

I CALL YOU BY NAME

The church that Jesus gave us is a hierarchical church in which each person is called to a vocation, a distinctive way of life. Jesus Himself said to Peter, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.” (Mathew 16: 18) We now call Peter the first pope, and the apostles the first bishops. Chapter 6 of the Acts of the Apostles describes the ordination of the first deacons and, shortly afterward, the church began to ordain priests. But, at no point did the faithful lose their responsibility for working within the church founded on the rock to fulfill the instructions of Jesus. When He ascended, Jesus didn’t give one instruction to the apostles and another to disciples. He told all of them – and all of us – to bring the Gospel to the world and to bring everyone in the world to Him and to the Father.

As a church built on the sacraments, however, we need people willing to answer the call of Jesus to be priests who serve His people as exclusive ministers of three sacraments – Eucharist, Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick. As we know from experience, the number of men willing to embrace diocesan priesthood and serve the church as pastor of a parish is small and shrinking. But, our long drought of vocations to the priesthood is over; this spring I will ordain five young men to the diocesan priesthood. At the same time, we continue to ask the Father to send more workers into the vineyard, and we continue to pray that the men called to the vineyard will hear His voice and respond to His call. But, there is much more that we can do.

As part of “Fishers of Men,” the vocations summit of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the priests of our diocese reflected upon their vocation. We asked them to describe the important people and events in their decision to accept the invitation of Jesus to serve Him as a priest. By an overwhelming margin, the priests told us that they were attracted to priesthood not only because Jesus called them but also because they saw priests in their parishes who were happy and fulfilled as they lived out their vocation. We all seek a career that fulfills us, and priests are no different. How, then, do we as God’s people in the Diocese of Winona help our priests to be fulfilled as pastors?

Being a pastor of a parish is a major challenge. The pastor must, of course, be first and foremost a man of God and be Jesus to the people as he administers the sacraments and especially as he celebrates the Eucharist. But, he also is a teacher, a manager of an enterprise with personnel and budget challenges, a manager of physical plants all of which have roofs, boilers and compressors in various states of health, and a fund raiser for the parish and its ministry. Pastoring today is a far more complicated task than in previous decades. How do we help our priests thrive and live a fulfilled life and vocation under these circumstances?

The answer lies in each of us. We know that prayer works. I am convinced that the increase in vocations to the priesthood that we now see in our diocese is the result of intercessions during the Prayers of the Faithful and especially of Perpetual Adoration and Eucharistic Adoration. Beyond prayer, every disciple is responsible for the growth and strength of the church that Jesus

gave us. Each of us has skills and talents that we can make available to the church. The solution to relieving pastors of the tasks that tend to draw them down lies in using the gifts that God has spread throughout the parish community.

- Parishes will participate in the “Fishers of Men” Vocations Initiative through Parish Vocation Day in January 2008, and special vocations events in 2008 for sixth grade students and for sophomores.
- Parishes will promote vocations to the diaconate and to lay ministry, and welcome deacons and ministers to their special roles in parish ministry.
- Parishes will support parishioners who volunteer to place their gifts and talents in the service of the community by helping them to discern their gifts, and by embracing their work in support of the Kingdom.

PREACH THE GOSPEL – IN SEASON AND OUT OF SEASON

Evangelization -- spreading the Gospel -- the teachings of Jesus, is the essential mission of the church; it must be present in all of our parishes. “Alive in the Spirit” included an evangelization initiative and benchmarks focused on welcoming others, forming small faith groups and sharing the gift of the church’s social mission.

We spread the Gospel in many ways. As we live the Gospel, we demonstrate to others our faith in Jesus and in His teaching. As church communities, we form and organize people to bring the Gospel to neighbors who have never heard it or who need our help to live it. Jesus did exactly that when He sent His disciples, the people who believed in Him, into towns and villages to tell even more people about Him. (Luke 12: 1-6)

Since the publication of “Alive in the Spirit,” the Lord has made us aware of two pressing opportunities to evangelize. In “Proclaim Jesus!” I suggest a new evangelization initiative and two sets of benchmarks focused on two special groups of people, our teens and our Hispanic brothers and sisters. I believe that our diocesan church and every parish are called to be more effective in bringing the good news to our neighbors who have been baptized and who share our faith.

Training our children in the faith

I draw my inspiration here from the parable of the sower and the seed. (Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-22) The seed that fell on good ground yielded great results. The plants were tended carefully and that investment paid great benefits. Some seed, however, fell among the thorns. It sprouted and grew, but the thorns choked it, and the plants died. These thorny areas describe the environment where many of our teenagers have been planted. Like you and me, they received the Spirit in the waters of Baptism and in Confirmation but the ways of the world grew strong and choked off their life in the Spirit. Like plants that seek the sun, they continue to search for Jesus but the

negative ways of the world often keep them from understanding the great love that Jesus has for them. They struggle to focus their energies on the faith into which they were baptized. They need the help of disciples, believers in Jesus, to clear away the thorns and allow the light of Jesus to shine more intensely into their lives. Only then they can grow strong in their faith and bear fruit thirty, sixty and a hundred fold.

I hear so many people tell me, “Bishop, I am worried about our children and grandchildren; they don’t practice the faith like the people of my generation. Can’t we reach out and evangelize our own?” I tell them that I am worried, too, but I have hope. First, I believe that our young people today have just as much faith in God as we did when we were their age. But, because society has surrounded their lives with so many thorn bushes, many are not engaged disciples who are active in their church. We don’t always see their faith, but I know it is there -- I experience it when I administer the Sacrament of Confirmation. Every year, I have numerous opportunities to be with young people in settings where they give witness to their faith and demonstrate their capacity for leadership in the church. I meet them on Teens Encounter Christ (TEC) weekends. I listen to them tell me about their mission trips. At the National Catholic Youth Conference, I was overwhelmed at the faith of our teens and moved by their leadership. I know that, across our diocese, our teens are sharing in the mission of the church in so many ways that they are difficult to count. Second, I know that if we reach out to inactive teens, they will respond in their own way and become disciples in their own right. Discipleship is the purpose of our youth ministry programs.

The bishops of the United States wrote an excellent letter in 1997 about ministry to young people, “Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry.” From that letter, I draw these benchmarks that I commend to the parishes of the diocese. The secret to re-kindling the Spirit is engagement. People of all ages are most receptive to the call of Jesus when they are involved regularly with the church. When they see and experience disciples who are concerned about them, and who want to help them grow in the faith, they will respond. It is no secret among parents and grandparents that we cannot force our young people to accept their gift of faith. Rather, we must invite them, engage them and lead them to consider the great love that God has for them. If they are invited, engaged and led, they will respond.

- Parishes will develop youth ministry programs built on the eight components described in “Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry.”
- Parishes will engage teens in the process of developing ministry programs enabling them to exercise their gifts of leadership.
- Parishes will enable youth to take their place in the community of believers serving and leading in all parish ministries, including liturgy, social justice, stewardship, faith formation and pastoral care.

Welcoming the stranger

In the parable of the sower and the seed, some of the seed fell on the path. It sprouted, but it was quickly underfoot, it wasn't nurtured, and it died. Those seeds are the people from many cultures, especially our Hispanic brothers and sisters who have moved to our diocese and who continue to come in search of freedom and the opportunity to work and support their families.

I have a special concern for immigrants from Latin America. Since I first became your bishop in 1999, the number of weekend Masses in Spanish has increased more than tenfold. The number of Hispanic people who have immigrated to our diocese has multiplied several times over and continues to grow. Many of them now are raising their own families, so the number of immigrants and of first generation American citizens will continue to expand dramatically. They live in all parts of our diocese. When parishioners tell me that there are no Hispanic people in their parish, I tell them, "They are there, you just haven't found them."

Most Hispanic people who live in our diocese were baptized in the Catholic Church and celebrate the same sacraments that are so familiar to us. They share our baptism, and the call to live as disciples of Jesus. But, the problems that come with living in a new place with a different culture and without a common language wear down the practice of the faith. Unfortunately, on occasion, we have not made them welcome in God's house. We must change! We must rescue these valuable seeds and keep them from being destroyed by the pressures of daily life. We must give them an opportunity to bloom and to blossom by reaching out to them and engaging them in the life of our parish. They too have been blessed by God with gifts and talents. As strangers in a foreign land, they often are reluctant to step forward. It is our responsibility to love our neighbors as ourselves and invite them to join us in the community of believers.

At the diocesan level, we have established an Office of Hispanic Ministry, and have launched several programs to minister to the Hispanic people who live among us. But, effective ministry – engagement – must take place in every parish. The sad fact is that, if we do not tend to these new arrivals and welcome them into their parishes, then people of other faiths will fill the gap. These evangelizers from other faiths are enthusiastic about their church, they speak the Spanish language, and they understand the Hispanic culture. In so doing, they also are showing us what we must do to evangelize our Hispanic neighbors.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has called for major changes in our immigration laws, calls that I strongly support. Our laws today are not just and often have the effect of separating families in violation of our strongly held principle that families are the basic building blocks of our society. Our efforts to secure reforms of the immigration system have not succeeded as yet. I have every confidence that the bishops of our country will continue to appeal to the conscience of every American citizen and urge them to support measures that will respect the aliens and strangers in our nation. God's law demands no less. (Deuteronomy 5:14-15; 24:18; 27:19). I encourage parishes to convene forums at which parishioners can discuss this issue and mobilize local resources to advocate for the strangers in our land.

- Every parish will reach out to identify, contact, welcome and engage Hispanic people who have settled in their area.

- Parishes will engage Hispanic people in every aspect of parish life – liturgy, faith formation, stewardship, fellowship, pastoral care and social justice.
- Parishes have a God-given opportunity to demonstrate their love for the strangers who live among us by helping them to adjust to their life in a new community, especially by helping them to learn English.

WELL DONE, GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

At the core of a disciple's life lies stewardship. Some associate stewardship with collections and campaigns, but nothing could be further from the truth. When Jesus talked about stewards, it wasn't about collecting funds for a project or to pay ministry bills but about the ways in which stewards used the resources the master had given them. (Matthew 25:14-30) Jesus taught stewardship. More importantly, He lived stewardship and modeled a life of stewardship for us. The bishops of the United States published "Stewardship: A Disciple's Response" with specific suggestions to help us follow Jesus and embrace stewardship as a way of life.

Being a steward requires a conversion from a life focused on acquiring the goods of the world for ourselves to a life dedicated to using the gifts with which God has blessed us to build the Kingdom of God. Conversion is not a single event like Baptism or graduation from high school, but a life-long process, filled with temptations, doubts, and all the "isms" that discourage stewardship -- commercialism, materialism, secularism and individualism. Disciples believe in Jesus, they overcome these challenges, and they live as Jesus lived.

Over the past five years, I have met more and more stewards in our diocese and very often in ways other than financial stewardship. I see priests, deacons, religious and lay ministers who recognize that God has blessed them with gifts and abilities to build the Kingdom. I see many stewards in the hundreds and thousands of volunteers in every aspect of church life. I see them at Confirmation as they rejoice in the young men and women whom they have led to the sacrament as catechists; I see them at youth rallies helping our young people mature as disciples of Jesus. I see them at nursing homes, visiting the sick in parishes, helping at natural disasters, working in food banks or clothing resale stores. Disciples are everywhere, doing in our time precisely what Jesus did in His: using the blessings of the Father to care for the poor and the sick and to teach everyone about the Father.

Stewardship is a way of life for us as disciples of the Lord and for us as parish communities. Around every one of life's corners God has placed yet another opportunity for stewards to bring His love and His grace.

- Parishes will form a Stewardship Committee to lay the foundation for an effective program to invite disciples to live as stewards of God.

- Stewardship is a way of life, hence it reaches into every corner of our human activity. Parish Stewardship Committees will develop a plan for utilizing the gifts and talents of all parishioners in the building of God's Kingdom.
- Every parish or cluster stewardship plan will include a component for children and teenagers, following the guidance of "Stewardship and Teenagers: The Challenge of Being a Disciple," adopted by the bishops of the United States in November 2007.

CONCLUSION

Jesus said of His disciples, "By their fruits, you will know them." (Matthew 7: 16) When disciples of Jesus pass through a person's life, they leave behind the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. They leave feelings of love, justice and mercy. People recognize them as living a life modeled by Jesus, a life characterized by love of God and love of neighbor.

It is by the fruits of our actions that people will know that we are disciples of Jesus. The initiatives and benchmarks in this letter suggest only some of the ways in which we can follow the instruction of Jesus and make disciples of everyone we meet. God has blessed every parish in special ways, and every parish in our diocese faces its own challenges. I urge pastors and pastoral councils to embrace the challenges of discipleship and to Proclaim Jesus! If the benchmarks in this letter don't fit a parish's circumstances, then, by all means, develop different ones. We must be about our Master's business.

The prophet Habbakuk told the people of God to "wait for the vision, it will surely come, it will not be late." (Habbakuk 2: 2-3). And, while we wait, we are to be about the work of the Lord. Jesus told us that, when the King returns, He will be most pleased with His stewards who have done as He asked. So, it is with us. We will go throughout our world with a simple message: Proclaim Jesus!