

THE JOURNEY THROUGH
LENT, EASTER, ASCENSION AND PENTECOST
DIOCESAN SYNOD AND POST-PANDEMIC PASTORAL PLAN
FOR THE DIOCESE OF DALLAS



Introduction

As we return to Lent this year, still facing many of the effects and deep sorrows of an ongoing pandemic, I am beginning to envision a post-pandemic Church here in the Diocese of Dallas. In this pastoral letter I will present my thoughts on embracing an apostolic mission, a review of the state of the Diocese and a response that I believe will strengthen this Diocese after this historic pandemic.

I am writing to ask you to reflect on this and pray with me during this holy season. We reflect in Lent on our mortality and sinfulness; we do so looking forward to Easter, and Ascension and ultimately Pentecost, when the Apostles were called to go and preach the Gospel to all nations. Similarly, I ask you to join me as we discern our place in this painful period of history and begin to plan for the path ahead as the Apostles did. Through the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, let us ask the Lord to guide us and to accompany us, to give us renewed strength and determination to serve the world he came to redeem.

The Faithful

I recently celebrated my fourth anniversary as the bishop of the Diocese of Dallas. I recognize how blessed I am to be the shepherd of this local Church. The people are so faithful, committed, hospitable, and generous. They are proud to be Catholic and it is my desire to do whatever is necessary to strengthen their faith so that they are fulfilled in being Catholic and a part of the Diocese of Dallas.

Embracing the Apostolic Mission

This is a time of tremendous opportunity. This is not a time for going back to business as usual, but rather forward to fresh initiatives and bold witness to the enduring love of Jesus. This is a time to renew our faith in him and to strike out “into the deep water”¹ with trust that the Lord is with us in the boat, battered as it may be by many headwinds, yet still continuing toward the destiny to which he calls us. This is a time to recover the original animating spirit of apostolic times, to see ourselves as one with those original apostles and disciples, with Mary, our Mother, and all the holy men and women who followed Jesus. They were the whole of the Church left to carry out the mission of Jesus after his Resurrection and Ascension. Endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they went into a world dominated by the Roman Empire and the pagan Hellenistic culture of that day. They were able over the ensuing centuries to transform that empire and that culture, refashion them into the very means of articulating and spreading the message of Jesus to the ends of the Earth. Who could have predicted this or planned it?

It is time to recover the faith and trust of that original apostolic community: to implore the risen Lord as they did, to beg him to set our hearts on fire again with the zeal of the Holy Spirit which came upon them in the Upper Room at Pentecost, to ask for the strength to set out to the ends of the Earth, with a willingness to do and to suffer anything if only to preach Christ crucified and risen as the only hope for the world. The people of that day said of the Christians: “See how they love one another!” This sacrificial love bore witness to their faith in Jesus. To look to



the original apostolic community for inspiration is not an exercise in nostalgia, a longing for “the good old days” or a flight from the present world and its multiple crises: political, social, moral or spiritual. Rather, it comes from my own reflection on what the apostles faced and where they were sent.

¹ Luke 5:4

More importantly, it comes from my reflection on the person and message of Jesus and on his call to discipleship and reliance on his promise to be with us until the end of time. Pope Francis has spoken of the “infinite creativity” of the Holy Spirit² and the need for us not to sit “on the sidelines of this march of living hope” and let things pass us by. Rather to be engaged actively in life and in the world as it is given to us. Our mission to this world demands new initiatives and creativity in teaching the truth and living the faith. I believe that the Holy Spirit who infused the hearts, minds and souls of that original community to such dramatic effect is the same Spirit given to us now, here in the Diocese of Dallas, equipped with the courage to face what is necessary and committed to doing what is right and just.

Administrative Efforts

Over the past four years there have been moments when the Diocese of Dallas lacked a pastoral or apostolic momentum due to the need to attend to the pressing administrative responsibilities of the church. During these moments, it concerned me that some programs in the Diocese may have become stagnant and our pastoral practices became lukewarm. As I look at the church in a post-pandemic experience, I reflect on the many pastoral successes the Diocese has had, but I also see the need for spiritual renewal and regeneration.

The Eucharist

In light of the restrictions caused by the pandemic, we embraced the task of bringing the celebration of the Eucharist into the homes of thousands and embarked on our televised Masses which were also streamed onto social media and our website. This whole project began with liturgies at the Cathedral



² *Evangelii gaudium*, 278

and evolved into various priests presiding at the Masses. I am grateful to the staff who continued to joyfully embrace this project when I said “let’s take the show on the road” and we began televising the Masses at various parishes around the Diocese.

One woman who has been homebound for the last seven years wrote to me saying that she watched Mass on EWTN and was thrilled to see her bishops and priests celebrating Mass locally. She said, “Bishop, when you celebrated Mass at my home parish of Saint Pius X, it was the first time I’ve seen the inside of my Parish in seven years. I cried throughout the entire Mass. Thank you for such a wonderful gift.” Our partnering with the Catholic Foundation has made all this possible.

Discipleship

Our Lord Jesus Christ always challenged his disciples not to grow complacent. It is my concern that this pandemic has caused some of the faithful to become complacent. It is my desire to invite our parishioners off the comfort of their couches and back into our churches. It is important for us to do what St. Paul said to Timothy, “fan into flame the gift you received when I laid hands on you.”³ Hopefully, we can reestablish that flame of faith, the light of Christ, given to us at our baptism and rekindle it by the fire of His love. It is my goal to shepherd this local church through Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost to embrace the missionary work that lies ahead with the same apostolic fervor and zeal of the first Christian community.

It is always a joy to encounter parishioners who are on fire with the Gospel. It is my hope to see the Diocese of Dallas driven by this apostolic fervor. When I witness the energy, focus, and drive of the members of the diocesan immigration task force, the interracial healing task force, the evangelization task force, the pro-life committee, the Knights of Columbus and other local groups, I am motivated as the bishop of the Diocese of Dallas to do all the more so as to grow and strengthen the missionary disciples in North Texas. I envision expanding the opportunities for the lay faithful to integrate themselves into the administrative work of the Diocese through various teams, task forces, committees and councils to ensure that we never become stagnant, still, or lukewarm. In order to do this, it is my hope to reach out to our parishes in order to identify parishioners who have this apostolic fervor and desire to expand their missionary spirit to the diocesan level.

³ 2 Timothy 1:6

Following the Mission

One of my very first tasks was to reach out to a group of people to become a part of the diocesan task force on immigration. We recognize that our country is in need of immigration reform. While every country has a right to secure its borders, every family has a right to a better life. It is important to see the plight of families desiring the best for their children, and I recognize that our Catholic dioceses along the border struggle in ministering to the members of the immigrant community.

That is why I have announced that the Diocese of El Paso, Texas is now our domestic sister diocese.

That is to say, we will have a special care and concern for them and assist them in any way we can. I have been in touch with Bishop Mark Seitz, the Bishop of the Diocese of El Paso, to see how we can collaborate with him. In establishing this relationship, it is the desire to support our diocesan brothers and sisters there assisting them in the mission of welcoming the stranger.



The Healing

During the course of this pandemic, this country experienced civil unrest after the killing of George Floyd. In response I established a diocesan task force on interracial healing. We have met a number of times, and we are crafting a way forward which will include prayer, informational sessions, discussions, and ceremonies of healing. This task force has also created a resource for Lent: [*Lenten Reflection on Interracial Healing*](#). It highlights the Sundays of Lent with a reflection that guides us through the challenges we face with the racial divide in this country. I invite you to add this reflection as one of your spiritual exercises during this Lenten season. It can be found on our website.

With regard to our pro-life efforts, the Diocese of Dallas will continue our work in advancing the sacredness of every human life from the moment of conception until natural death. The struggles and challenges that make up our faithful discipleship includes how we can assist the homeless and hungry.

Catholic Education and Religious Formation

Recently, we celebrated Catholic Schools Week in the Diocese. This year's celebration was conducted virtually, but nevertheless, it afforded me the opportunity to tell students to thank their parents for being committed to Catholic education. And for those who struggle to send their children to Catholic school, I am delighted by all the efforts in the Diocese to make Catholic education possible for those who seek it.

The parishes of the Diocese are doing their best to keep the catechetical faith formation programs on track, but this pandemic has made it difficult. Parents, catechists, and parish ministers are attentive to the need of passing the faith on to the next generation. The Diocese is committed to keeping these formation programs strong and vital.



It was my pleasure to initiate a Home School Mass in the Diocese, recognizing that many of our families homeschool their children. It is my goal to assure that faith formation is a part of their curriculum and to provide a support system in the Diocese for these families. Many believe that this pandemic has resulted in a higher number of families who will opt for

homeschooling their children in the future. My goal is to challenge the domestic church, the family, to fulfill the responsibility of handing on the faith to the next generation.

Service to Others

Along with these efforts, I am so very proud of Catholic Charities Dallas. Catholic Charities has brought forth our St. Jude Center, offering our homeless brothers and sisters 55 years and older permanent housing. It is our hope to have another similar center in the near future. Catholic Charities also offers thousands of meals throughout the nine counties of the Diocese through their food truck program. Partnering with Catholic Charities, the Diocese of Dallas, as well as other faith-based communities, have participated in the “Be Golden” campaign. This campaign challenges people to follow the Golden Rule, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” To highlight this effort, the city of Dallas has turned its beautiful skyline gold. It is my hope the city will do it again making this the third consecutive year to celebrate the fact that we are all called to “Be Golden” as we uphold the common good and serve our brothers and sisters.



Our Seminarians and Priests

The Diocese of Dallas has often turned to the Lord of the Harvest in prayer asking to send workers into the vineyard. There was a day that this Diocese had 13 seminarians, today, we have over 70 men studying for the diocesan priesthood. Recognizing that the Lord of the Harvest has answered our prayers (and we pray that we are continually blessed with priestly vocations), I am pleased with the expansion of Holy Trinity Seminary by the recent completion of the Cardinal Farrell Center. I pray that we will also be fruitful in expanding our Redemptoris Mater Seminary by adding more space for them to grow. Redemptoris Mater

Seminary has already been enhanced by the established Masters of Divinity degree provided by the University of Dallas.



It is my hope in the years to come to provide for men in our formation programs to participate in an upcoming Institute for Homiletics at the University of Dallas. This institute is poised to offer a curriculum for our clergy formation programs and the continued formation program for priests and deacons in the diocese.

I am particularly grateful and proud of the young priests of this Diocese who have devoted themselves to serving those afflicted with COVID. These young priests are certified by our local hospitals to be at the bedside of our parishioners, administering the sacraments. When hospital restrictions prevent loved ones from being present during this time of suffering, many parishioners have expressed their appreciation in knowing that their priests were present to their loved ones when they could not be.

At the same time, I am mindful of how our priests have multiplied the number of Masses and liturgical celebrations because of the need to limit the numbers gathering for such events due to COVID restrictions. My heart is filled with joy knowing that the priests of the Diocese have never stopped offering the sacraments to the faithful despite the hardships of this pandemic. These priests have many times taken the sacraments from inside the church to the elements outside in order to safeguard the health of parishioner, and have even sat out in the cold and the rain to serve parishioners who patiently waited in line to go to confession. I have said before that we have the hardest working priests I have ever encountered. They

truly dedicate themselves to the priestly service of their people. Out of care and concern for my brother priests, I have begun conversations in establishing a priest retirement home in the Diocese. As these good men have taken good care of the people of God, it is fitting that this local Church assist them after they have given their lives to the Lord in serving the faithful of this Diocese.

Leaven in Society

The Diocese of Dallas has celebrated various liturgies that call together professionals men and women from the same professions — the Red Mass, the White Mass, and the Blue Mass. The Red Mass is the opportunity to gather lawmakers, legislators, lawyers, judges, paralegals, etc. to reflect on the law of the land and how we are called to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. The White Mass gathers all those in the medical profession (doctors, nurses, physicians' assistants, technicians, etc.) to celebrate the noble profession of healing while at the same time upholding the moral standards of the sacredness of life. The Blue Mass calls together all those in uniform who served in the military, law enforcement, first responders, firemen, police officers, etc., recognizing that they play a significant part in keeping us safe while at the same time encountering dangers and facing life threatening risks. Such lives of service compel us to pray for their safety and to support their good work.

Many other Catholic professionals could benefit from an opportunity to gather together with their colleagues in the common bond of faith to discuss how to live out their discipleship in the workplace, to reflect together on how they are called to be leaven in the world. Businessmen and women, media professionals, teachers, laborers, hospitality workers could benefit from similar Mass celebrations. Such gatherings can help strengthen apostolic zeal, providing an opportunity to gather with faithful brothers and sisters in their field and to support each other in living out the Gospel and faithfully following the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Sacred Vocations

The Diocese of Dallas is blessed with men and women in consecrated life. The religious communities in the Diocese add a special witness of the Gospel with the special charism of the various communities. In recent time, we have added two additional communities of women religious to the Diocese and we are profoundly grateful for their presence and their service to the church, especially in our schools.

At the same time, much is celebrated in family life and married couples. In addition to the diocesan newlyweds Mass, we need to do what we can to strengthen marriages and keep the family strong and faithful. It is my goal to build up this area of ministry in the Diocese.

Our deacons are a blessing and their committed ministry of service is a mainstay in many of our parishes. They are impressive. I am pleased to announce that in this Lenten/Easter time we will be sending out details about information meetings for those who may be interested in learning more about the diaconate.



Increased Involvement of the Lay Faithful

It is my hope to encourage the faithful to take on an active role in advancing the pastoral mission of the Church. That is to say, I envision laypeople being a part of teams in the Diocese that will address such pastoral outreach as marriage ministry, youth ministry, assisting newlyweds, catechetical classes for our children, welcoming people preparing for the Easter sacraments of initiation, etc. These groups will assure that the work of the Diocese keeps the pastoral momentum alive in the Diocese. I have already seen the faithful involvement in the many diocesan groups and organizations already present in the Diocese. I am impressed with what they do, and I welcome their help. In the weeks, months and years ahead, we will be inviting more faithful to step forward and be active in the work of the Church.

Catholic Organizations/Institutions

It is my desire to build up the Catholic culture in North Texas. I am pleased with the number of Catholic organizations and institutions that help strengthen the faithful. I am mindful of the Knights of Columbus, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Catholic Charities Dallas, Guadalupe Radio, the University of Dallas and our many Catholic schools, just to name a few. A number of national Catholic organizations also permeate this Diocese by their pastoral outreach. All of this provides an opportunity for our faithful to grow and to strengthen themselves in faith. In doing so, it helps to fortify the Catholic culture.

Pastoral Center Staff

Finally, I am grateful to our Pastoral Center staff who have worked so very hard to keep us up and running during this pandemic. This pandemic has afforded us the opportunity to look at things differently and to embrace a different way of ministering to our people. With the help of many from outside the Pastoral Center, our staff has been able to maneuver through the challenges of the past couple years. We are blessed with excellent co-workers.

A Historic Response to a Historic Pandemic

As we begin this Lenten season and enter into this special time of grace and conversion, the Lord is calling us to respond to him now, as emphasized in the words of Paul to the Corinthians, the second reading for Ash Wednesday: “Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”⁴

The above represents much of what we have been doing in the Diocese over the



past years, with some thoughts on the direction of the Diocese going forward. At the same time, this movement forward requires both input and support from the whole local Church. Therefore, in light of the historic nature of this pandemic, I believe an equally historic response is required, a response that looks toward a post-pandemic, apostolic Church. It is my plan then to call a diocesan synod for the

Diocese of Dallas. The last diocesan synod took place in 1934, nearly 87 years ago and it was convened by Bishop Joseph P. Lynch, the 3rd Bishop of Dallas and the longest serving bishop in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States. As we look toward life after this pandemic, I believe a local synod is the best way

⁴ 2 Cor. 6:2

for this local Church to develop the means to respond to the needs of the faithful in this increasingly challenging world.

Diocesan Synod



A diocesan synod itself is a special gathering of clergy and faithful for the purpose of offering assistance to the bishop in setting the direction for ministry in the Diocese for the future. A diocesan synod does not directly address doctrinal questions or Church teaching, but is focused on a pastoral plan, touching on all elements of the local Church. At the synod meeting, many recommendations and suggestions of the faithful will be given to the synod body, who will consult and vote on resolutions to be presented to the diocesan bishop for implementation in the Diocese.

An event of this magnitude will require much preparation, and I plan for this to be a part of a 10-year process, culminating in a celebration of the 500th anniversary of the appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe to San Juan Diego, a key moment in the evangelization of the Americas.

The Synod Timeframe

The following represents a tentative schedule for the process:

December 12, 2021: This feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe will be the opening of the synodal process with a Mass including members of the Preparatory Commission, all of whom will aid in managing the synod process and conduct listening sessions throughout the Diocese to hear the needs of the faithful. This celebration will mark a 10-year preparation period of the Diocese of Dallas for the 500th anniversary.

2022-2024: Listening sessions will be conducted throughout the Diocese in the many parishes and communities that comprise the Diocese. The Preparatory Commission will facilitate the process of compiling details and documents in preparation for the synod.

2024: The synod itself will take place near the 90th anniversary of the 1934 diocesan synod. The synod will be a multi-day event wherein the synod

body consults and votes on resolutions that the diocesan bishop can consider for implementation.

2024-2031: The time after the synod will include the implementation of the synodal declarations and decrees throughout the Diocese. I anticipate that many of these projects will take multiple years to come to fruition, and my hope is that they will continue to guide the development of the Diocese going forward. This time will also focus on spiritual, pastoral and temporal renewal throughout the Diocese.

December 12, 2031 will include a large Mass and procession celebrating the conclusion of the synodal process and the 500th anniversary of Our Lady of Guadalupe's appearance to San Juan Diego.

To be clear, this is not a process that turns Church governance into something managed by voting or committee. Instead, this is a consultative process where the faithful can come together to speak of their needs and hopes for the Church. What I hope to develop from this synod process is a pastoral plan that can listen to the wisdom and insights of all the members of the diocese and respond in the best way possible to the ongoing and ever-changing pastoral needs of the Diocese today and in the future.

Diocesan preparation

During the time preparing for the synod and leading up to the 500th anniversary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I envision that the clergy and faithful will experience pilgrimages and processions that will help, assist, and strengthen their faith, devotion, and discipleship.

In preparation for convening a diocesan synod, I consulted our archives and came across a thesis written by Dallas priest Fr. Jack Hopka entitled, "The Diocese of Dallas: a Story of Growth and Development." He delivered this work in the Spring of 1985 to Saint Paul's University and I was struck to read that "...when (Bishop) Gorman became Bishop of Dallas Fort Worth in 1954 the diocese was growing by leaps and bounds. The population of Dallas itself was in excess of 434,000 in 1950 and was to increase by another 250,000 in the next 10 years. In order to provide for the pastoral care of the many Catholics moving into the area, Gorman set out on an ambitious building program, establishing many new parishes and schools. In the years 1954 to 1956 alone, eight new parishes were established all of them in the area of the see city."

Today, I am aware that the Dallas-Fort Worth area is poised to grow from the 2018 Census Bureau population of 7,539,711 to possibly over 10 million people in 2030, as some have predicted. Like my predecessors, my desire is to set this Diocese up for success by providing for the spiritual and sacramental needs of the people of God.



Conclusion

Let us return then to our apostolic roots. Let us understand our place in this barren Lenten season, always with an eye on the resurrection at Easter, on the heavenly Ascension and finally on the mission set forth at Pentecost. With our God, we can overcome any obstacle, “Each of us should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms,”⁵ just as the apostles did.

Our Lady’s appearance to San Juan Diego set in motion an unimaginable, unforeseen, dynamic evangelization of the Americas where previously there had

⁵ 1 Peter 4:10

been only a few who responded to the Gospel message. Through her presence, through her intercession, the Gospel message spread with great speed and effect. We ask her, the patroness of our Diocese, to accompany us now, and during the days and years ahead, to pray with us and for us, to teach us in these days, with so many challenges and difficulties, how to say 'yes' to God's will as she did to the archangel Gabriel in the Annunciation, and as she did every day of her life. May she guide us and accompany us on this journey:

*O God, Father of mercies,
who placed your people under the singular protection
of your Son's most holy Mother,
grant that all who invoke the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe,
may seek with ever more lively faith
the progress of peoples in the ways of justice and of peace.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.*

Most Reverend Edward J. Burns, DD
Eighth Bishop of the Diocese of Dallas
February 17, 2021
Ash Wednesday