

Catholic Church of Eastern Montana

DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

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2016

**LENTEN LETTER TO PRIESTS
DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-
BILLINGS**

From

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Priest's as Co-Workers with the Bishop in the Liturgy of the Eucharist

Lent 2016

Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, provides a key insight into his vision of evangelization and the kind of pastoral service to God's people we are to provide as ordained ministers. The vision he presents is one in which we must strive to be connected with those to whom we minister. Programs have their place and certainly too does teaching about the faith, but a central element of our role as priests (if not the central element) is to accompany our people and help them to hear the call of God in their lives. Some of our parishioners are like the wise young virgins with their lamps filled with oil waiting expectantly for the bridegroom. Others have lamps that are but half full and possibly close to empty. Our role is to provide a vision for our people - God's people - that is vibrant enough and clear enough for them to want to choose the vision set forth by the Gospel rather than other visions that are actually short sighted and nothing but dead ends. As one translation of the Book of Proverbs asserts: "Without a vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18).

Parish priests have a definite role to play in presenting a vision to God's people. So too does the bishop. In October of 2010, I wrote a pastoral letter that was sent to parishioners throughout Eastern Montana via the Harvest. In it, I outlined a vision of what I hoped would be a consistent experience in every parish and mission in this diocese. The hope I expressed was as follows:

- That people experience welcome and hospitality;
- That liturgy be celebrated in a manner that informed the mind, touched the heart and inspired the soul with the fullness of the Gospel;
- That comfort be offered to the afflicted and challenge to the complacent;
- That sacraments be readily available to Catholics throughout the Diocese;
- That the poor, vulnerable and marginalized of society be sought out;
- That social justice be embodied in all members of the Diocese;
- That religious and spiritual formation be offered to parishioners of all ages;
- That stewardship be a way of life;
- That evangelization be understood as a responsibility of all the baptized;
- That the Rite of Christian Initiation be fully celebrated;
- That young adults accept calls to priesthood and religious life;
- That Catholic schools flourish

I believe the vision is true though challenging. It would not be realistic to expect that all of our parishes could embody all of these elements at the present time. I do believe that when a significant percentage of parishioners have become "intentional disciples" and have experienced a definite personal encounter with Christ and conversion to his Gospel, the vision becomes reality. This vision I cite is compatible

with the vision of Pope Francis. It is a vision for which we have a responsibility to advance as ordained ministers and pastors in the diocesan Church. But how do we move toward the vision? Our approach must be similar to that of answering the question, "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer: "One bite at a time!" In attempting to move toward the vision, we select several priorities that realistically can be achieved within a definite time frame and then put a plan in place to move toward the vision.

This is the purpose of the Diocesan Pastoral Plan 2016-2021 recently promulgated. As you may recall from the diocesan Summit last year, three priorities surfaced. They reflect the input from those who attended the Summit as well as roughly 2000 people who voiced their opinions at listening sessions held around the Diocese over the last year and a half. Listed in order they are: Parish Life and Liturgy; Evangelization and Discipleship; Vocations to the Priesthood. I refer you to the pastoral plan itself for a detailed presentation on these three priorities.

The main focus of my Lenten Letter to Priests this year is the Eucharistic liturgy. It is listed first among the priorities along with parish life. Nothing is more central to the faith of Catholics than the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy. Those who faithfully gather Sunday after Sunday to celebrate and express their faith know in their heart of hearts what the Vatican II Council affirmed about the Eucharistic liturgy. It is "...the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; at the same time, it is the fountain from which all her power flows" (Sacrosantum Concilium #10).

It is through the Liturgy of the Eucharist that the people of God express their unity as Church, as members of a body of Christ. It is through the Liturgy of the Eucharist where the identity of Catholics is nurtured and shaped. It is from the Liturgy of the Eucharist that Catholics are sent forth to fulfill their role as "missionary disciples" (Evangelii Gaudium #120). The Liturgy of the Eucharist, when celebrated well, is transformational. Sadly, when it is not celebrated well, it can become an occasion of discouragement.

Having celebrated the Eucharist in all but a very small handful of churches in eastern Montana, I am inspired by the devotion of the Catholic faithful. I have been impressed with the efforts made by priests, deacons, religious and laity to celebrate their faith in Christ. Faith in Christ for them involves more than a mere religious structure for life. They understand the Eucharistic celebration as an affirmation of their hope and faith in the Christ who offers salvation from sin and death.

At the same time, even deep devotion does not replace the importance of celebrating the liturgy well. I have had experiences in some churches that caused me to ask, "What exactly are we celebrating and expressing in this particular liturgy?" Although these liturgies may have been celebrated ritually correct, there was no sense of joy or life in the priest celebrating the Mass or among the parishioners.

In order for a liturgy to be celebrated well, it must be accomplished in a manner that is more than ritually correct and/or rigidly experienced. People are not created by God to be drones or robots. The Eucharistic Liturgy must be experienced as something more than mechanical. This is not to say the liturgy should be a kind of free flowing form of chaos. The objective of good liturgy is adoration and worship of God that is guided by ritual. Irreverence and free form worship does little to make a liturgy truly life-giving. This does not mean that liturgy should be experienced as dour or dismal. As Hilaire Belloc once wrote, "Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, there's always laughter and good red wine. At least I've always found it so. *Benedicamus Domino.*"

Every Liturgy of the Eucharistic, but especially those on Sunday, should strive to fulfill what the Church intends to accomplish: that the faithful be able to discover God's love and mercy and God's presence in their lives; that the faithful experience a sense of healing and peace; that the faithful hear an ever deeper call to conversion to life in Christ; that the faithful know they are sent forth to share Christ in word and deed.

It is important for the priest to know the ritual of the Liturgy of the Eucharist well so that he may celebrate it in a manner that is true to the faith. In the Latin Rite, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal provides these instructions. Any priest who celebrates the Mass should be very familiar with the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. Attending to these norms assures that the faithful will be presented teaching and practice that is consistent with the apostolic tradition of the Catholic Church and the contemporary expectations of the Church with regards to liturgy. Catholics who assemble for worship have a right to the full and authentic teaching and practice of the Church. The structure of the liturgy should never indiscriminately be changed lest there be a risk of altering a fundamental teaching and/or practice of the Church. Care must be taken so that personal preferences for *avant garde* approaches to liturgy or attempts to recreate eras of the Church that no longer exist do not override what is stipulated in the *Novus Ordo*.

Devotional prayers and personal practices may creep into liturgies. They should not be incorporated just because there is a personal preference for them. Devotional prayers and practices certainly have a place in the lives of the faithful, but they are not a part of the liturgy. Similarly, care should be taken with regard to the incorporation of some cultural elements into the general scheme of the liturgy. While every culture has the capacity to carry the Gospel, every culture is likewise in need of purification. Not every cultural element fits well.

This does not mean that liturgical norms do not allow for no creativity. While requiring fidelity to the ritual, the Roman Missal itself provides numerous possibilities for artistic and faith-filled expression. Concrete circumstances within a parish setting will require a prudential judgment on the part of the pastor and those who plan and carry out a given liturgy.

A priest who appreciates the art of celebrating knows how to make liturgies life-giving. He does not make himself the focus of the liturgy. Only Christ can be the focus

of the Eucharistic Liturgy for this is the true purpose of the Eucharistic Liturgy, i.e., that we recognize Christ in the breaking of the Bread. The role of the celebrant, however, is not to be invisible. He is to be transparent. A good celebrant knows how to allow himself to be the instrument of grace. Pope Francis provides a good example.

Liturgical commentators have observed that Pope Francis is not exactly a liturgist. It is not that he could care less or that he is careless. His focus is just more so on those who are on the periphery of life, especially the poorest of the poor. But, he is powerfully effective when celebrating Mass. He knows how to connect with the members of a liturgical assembly and to allow himself to be an instrument of grace.

As an example, I cite the Mass Pope Francis celebrated on Holy Thursday 2015 at the Rebibbia detention facility on the outskirts of Rome, Italy. I watched it with interest last spring on TV. It was not the typical papal liturgy celebrated in St. Peter's Square. It was more like one that would be in a parish. The chapel setting was quite simple. There was a small choir. I'm sure they prepared specially for the Pope, but the music was simple and without a sense of performance. The sanctuary was uncluttered yet contained all the essential elements for the liturgy with matching altar and ambo. The altar itself was adorned simply with but two candles and a small crucifix. The homily was brief and to the point, addressing the spiritual needs of the inmates present. There was even a child of about three who ran up to the altar during the Eucharistic Prayer with his parent in hot pursuit! Granted, it was the Pope who celebrated the Mass which made it particularly special for those in attendance, but what struck me most was the Pope's ability to connect to the people who made up the assembly. It was moving and inspiring, genuinely real and genuinely life-giving. The Pope provides an example for those of us who celebrate the Mass. He demonstrates the kind of instrumentality that any priest should embody when presiding at the Eucharistic Liturgy.

Above all, what must be remembered is the intent of the Liturgy of the Eucharist: that the faithful be able to celebrate and express their life in the risen Lord; that the faithful be nourished and supported; that their right to the fullness of the apostolic tradition be safeguarded; that the faithful be inspired to live their faith with conviction in their day-to-day worlds. What happens at liturgy should make a true connection between the ritual action being celebrated and the daily activity of those who have gathered to worship in spirit and in truth.

The Diocesan Pastoral Plan 2016-2021 can be viewed as just another program that should be shelved and quickly forgotten. I want to emphasize the importance of setting a vision. In the case of this letter, I want to emphasize a vision for liturgy. A vision functions like a compass that heads us in the right direction as a united diocesan Church rather than a fragmented group of individual priests and parishes who may not have settled on a vision or even a vision that is in opposition to that of the bishop. As chief liturgist of the Diocese, I have a responsibility to provide oversight with regard to liturgy in the Diocese. It is my hope that you will take what I have written to heart and reflect upon your practice during the Season of Lent this year. As priests of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, you were ordained to be "co-workers" with the bishop. The

notion of “co-worker” comes straight from the Prayer of Consecration from the Ritual for the Ordination of Priests:

Almighty Father, grant to this servant of yours the dignity of the priesthood. Renew within him the Spirit of holiness. As a co-worker with the order of bishops may he be faithful to the ministry that he receives from you, Lord God, and be to others a model of right conduct. May he be faithful in working with the order of bishops, so that the words of the Gospel may reach the ends of the earth, and the family of nations, made one in Christ, may become God's one, holy people.

There is also the promise of respect and obedience to the bishop and his successors that too often is forgotten as an integral element of priestly commitment.

We know that priests have functions within the Church but we are more than functionaries. Our role as priests is very much intertwined with our humanity and that of the people we serve. As priests, we hold up before the people of God the great images and stories of salvation from the heart of Christian tradition. We are most effective in our ministry when we help people to experience the dream for which God created us all – a great Communion of Saints.

It is a lofty challenge to do this well for bishops as well as priests. Because of sin and the general limitations of character that impact each of us, we will likely never attain perfection in our witness to the vision. But this is our task. I am convinced that the more we, as bishop and priests, work together to accomplish a singular mission, the more fruitful will be our efforts. This requires respect and trust and an openness to share and listen to each other and to the people we serve. We must keep in mind that the ultimate reason we were ordained was to proclaim the salvation in Christ for which God has destined all people and to do whatever we can to help people to hear this message!

Pope Francis has often used the model of shepherd when speaking of the role of bishops and priests. It is an ancient image used in both Old and New Testament and the Fathers of the Church, e.g., St. Augustine. The flock is really not our flock at all, but Christ's who is the true Shepherd. And the liturgy is really not ours to do with as we wish based on personal preference. We were ordained and sent out on the mission for which Christ founded the Church on the Apostles. God intends for us to provide a remedy for sin which is celebrated through the liturgy. We affirm that Christ was crucified and is now risen from the dead. This is a primary service we render to our people. The Rite of Ordination stipulates that we represent “...the Good Shepherd who came not to be served but to serve, and to seek out and rescue those who were lost.”

My prayer is that we, as ordained ministers, remember the important role we play in communicating salvation in Christ through the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The faithful need to be provided information about the teaching of the Church and the values of the Gospel. They long for a heartfelt experience of God's love for them in Christ celebrated in the midst of sisters and brothers. They want to be inspired so that they will go out

and witness to the personal encounter they have had with the Lord. They want to experience the *Joy of the Gospel*. I believe firmly that when our Eucharistic Liturgies inform the mind, touch the heart and inspire the soul, our people grow in faith and are set on fire to share the Gospel. Contrarily, when they hear homilies that are poorly prepared and delivered, and experience liturgies that are lukewarm and do little to touch or inspire them, our people become discouraged and sometimes look elsewhere.

May this time of Lent provide us all an opportunity to pray and reflect on the important role we play in celebrating the Eucharist. It is a great responsibility and a great grace with which we have been entrusted.

In Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the dead,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Michael W Warfel". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billing

