



Come, Live  
in the  
Light!



A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE

THE MOST REV. FELIPE J. ESTÉVEZ, BISHOP OF ST. AUGUSTINE · MARCH 2013



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DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE









"You have been  
enlightened by Christ.  
Walk always as children  
of the light and keep  
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“You have been enlightened by Christ. Walk always as children of the light and keep the flame of faith alive in your hearts.” The newly baptized hear these words as they are presented with a lighted candle.

We are baptized only once but each day we have an opportunity to fulfill our baptismal promises – to deepen our life in Christ so as to build up his Mystical Body, the Church.

In this, my first pastoral letter since coming to you as your bishop in June 2011, I want to invite you to: “Come, live in the Light!”

It is my desire that all of us in the Diocese of St. Augustine, walk as “children of the light.” This means that together we seek to know the gift of our faith so that we can bring Christ’s light to those who dwell in darkness – to those who do not know him or have somehow forgotten him.

This is the Church’s primary mission – evangelization. Some people think that to evangelize means to proselytize or recruit someone to the faith. Rather, Pope Benedict XVI tells us, “The church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by attraction: just as Christ draws all to himself by the power of his love ...so the church ...accomplishes her works in spiritual and practical imitation of the love of her Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Pope Benedict has noted on numerous occasions the urgency to evangelize everywhere in the world, including the United States.

During his 2008 visit to the United States, he said, “People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. They need to recognize that implanted within them is a deep thirst for God. They need to be given opportunities to drink from the wells of his infinite love ...people need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with Him who came that we might have life in abundance.”<sup>2</sup> (cf. John 10:10)

## A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

For the last year, the diocesan staff and I have engaged in an intensive process of study and reflection to develop a strategic plan for the Diocese of St. Augustine. You have been an important part of that process. Many of you have shared your concerns and your hopes for the future during the nine listening sessions held around the diocese last fall.

This has been a wonderful opportunity for me to get to know the diocese. What I have found is a community deeply rooted in history and constantly renewed by the daily witness of Catholics committed to their faith.

Some of the ongoing ministries and initiatives in our diocese that share the gifts of the Gospel and our faith include:

- Formation and education through parish religious education programs and Catholic schools;
- The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA);
- Adult Ministry Formation (MFP);
- Programs at Marywood Retreat Center and the Southeast Pastoral Institute (SEPI);
- Service to others through Catholic Charities, St. Vincent's Healthcare, and summer camps for the disabled;
- Communications through our diocesan magazine, St. Augustine Catholic, the diocesan website, and local Catholic radio stations;
- Building the faith through activities like Cursillo and Christ Renews His Parish (CRHP), the annual Eucharistic Congress, conferences for Catholic men and women, and many more.

They all serve as vehicles for proclaiming the Good News and affirming our Catholic identity. If you are not already involved, prayerfully consider giving some of your time, talent and treasure towards one or more of these areas.

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Pope Benedict XVI

## RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT

In 1565, Father Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales, lead chaplain to Don Pedro Menéndez' fleet, celebrated the first Mass on these shores. He also became the first pastor of St. Augustine.<sup>3</sup>

The Great Cross at Mission Nombre de Dios is a 208-foot beacon of faith and memorial to the beginnings of Christianity and the Catholic faith in our nation, and its growth throughout this land. At the same time the Great



Cross proclaims to the world Christ's ultimate sacrifice – a graphic illustration of the victory of Christ's sacrificial love, which is renewed again and again at every Mass.

Regrettably, it's estimated that between 55 and 70 percent of the population in the 17 counties that make up our diocese have no Christian affiliation. But I believe there is a hunger for God, for hope and peace – and to be truly, deeply loved by our neighbors.

Even more distressing, fewer than 40 percent of Catholics in our diocese attend Mass on the Lord's Day – Sunday – or its vigil on Saturday. Meaning, most Catholics are not participating

in what should be the center of parish life.

Many of you expressed your concern for young families and their lack of involvement in the Catholic faith. How can we make our parishes stronger and attract our lapsed brothers and sisters when many of us are not there consistently to celebrate the source and summit of our lives as Christians?

We must increase our efforts to respond to the church's primary call to evangelization and to build an even more vibrant faith community.

During the next few years, I will be asking Catholics within the diocese to focus on three major priorities as a way to respond to the Church's primary call to evangelization as well as to the needs expressed by you as outlined below. This is a commitment we need to make both individually and together as a faith community.

### **Goal 1: Proclaim the Gospel**

Our faith is not a “private matter,” as the secular world would claim. We are called to “make disciples of all nations ...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28: 9a-10a) This is the opportune time for all Catholics to become entrepreneurs in the faith, finding creative ways to make new disciples, re-kindling the fire of Christ’s love in the hearts of our lukewarm brothers and sisters, and instilling true hope in the hearts of the downtrodden.

### **Goal 2: Enrich Parish Life**

We need to enrich the life of our parishes. Our parishes are like warm hearths for the weary traveler, ready to receive and care for our neighbors. We need to shift our pastoral approach to be more inclusive, more wide-reaching and more encouraging of full and complete participation in parish life, generally, and more particularly in our Eucharistic celebrations.

### **Goal 3: Engage Young Adults**

We need to engage our young adults, bringing them to our communal celebrations of faith, especially the Eucharist. This can only happen when we strengthen the bond between successive generations of Catholics – passing the torch from one generation to the next – enabling us to build up the Church.

Allow me to explain more fully each of these goals:

#### **GOAL 1: PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL - SHARE THE FAITH**

I am most grateful to our priests, religious, catechists, religion teachers, and above all the parents of our community (the primary educators of our children in the faith), for their dedication to proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ to those under their care.

At the same time, I call on you to be faithful and bold in your daily encounters with people everywhere, especially in this Year of Faith.







It's important for us to consistently bear witness to our faith, by regularly attending Mass, learning more about our faith and traditions, proclaiming the Gospel and serving our neighbors in need. Without these regular, consistent practices, our young people will not learn to appreciate them.

### ***Catholic Education***

Our Catholic schools play an important role in the Church's primary mission of evangelization, and I urge you to

strongly affirm and support them.

Comments submitted during the listening sessions indicate an overwhelming support among the faithful for our Catholic schools and parish religious education programs. Support and appreciation for these two vehicles that form our youth in the faith was mentioned in 20 percent of our surveys. Yet enrollment in both Catholic schools and parish religious education programs over the past decade is stagnant. It's important that we sustain our schools and religious education programs, and remain open to new ways to accomplish this vital mission.

One way to do this is to engage the business community by building coalitions with those who recognize the value and unique mission of Catholic education. In addition to ensuring the high quality of our programs in parishes, I hope to see them become even more fervent places of witness to our Catholic identity – attracting more students and families to our rich faith tradition.

### ***Communication***

I listened carefully when you requested a more collaborative spirit and improved communication between our parishes and institutions of the diocese. Over the next three years, I will work to implement a communications plan to improve the overall effectiveness of conveying our faith to all. I will give special attention to our clergy by providing them resources and ways to explore “Best Practices” to effectively proclaim the Gospel during the homily and in their one-on-one ministry.

## GOAL 2: ENRICH PARISH LIFE - LIVE THE FAITH

Your desire for a vibrant parish life was evident in such comments as: “Make our parishes places where everyone wants to be.” “Enable our priests to preach boldly the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” “Our young people need to feel the joy of practicing our faith.”

I believe we need to shift our pastoral approach from maintenance to one of outreach; from liturgical obligation to profoundly inspiring the celebration of liturgies with the fullest participation of our faithful; and from caring for a few to caring for many.

In order to assist this shift in our pastoral approach, we intend to identify and publish over the next two years, five-to-seven local case studies of “Best Practices” that can be shared with sister parishes throughout the diocese. One of which will be how to effectively invite and welcome back our brothers and sisters who have left the church.

I urge each of you to make a fresh commitment to join others in our faith community weekly to celebrate the Eucharist at Mass.

Our Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist should not be viewed as an obligation. This special opportunity to experience the Eucharistic liturgy is where we encounter God’s presence – above all his presence is experienced in the Eucharistic sacrament, in his life-giving Word, in the person of the celebrant and in the community gathered to give praise and honor to our Lord.<sup>4</sup>

The power of the Eucharist challenges us to recognize our own dignity as well as the dignity of others, and to be sensitive to the plight of the needy. It strengthens us for the week ahead, moves us to a more Christ-like existence on Earth, and unifies and heals divisions. Nothing comes close to this unique power. So, what could possibly keep us from wanting these things for ourselves and those around us?

Yet, we often take these gifts for granted like we do with so many blessings in our lives such as our health, families and friends.

God must be our first priority, now and always, and our parishes need to be places where all of God’s children feel welcome.

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Bishop Felipe J. Estévez

## ***Broken Relationships***

Drawing on my own pastoral experiences, I know that many Catholics who are divorced or divorced and remarried no longer participate in parish life and have fallen away from the faith entirely. I heard many voice these concerns during the listening sessions.

Yet, they should know that when the pain of broken families, broken relationships and broken marriages is greatest, the arms of the Church are open the widest.

Blessed John Paul II reminds us in *Familiaris Consortio*, that Catholics, who are divorced, and even remarried, remain a part of the Church and should be welcomed into the parish family. They should be urged to participate in the life of the Church as fully as possible under their circumstances.

We have not always done an adequate job in making this point heard; even worse, we have sometimes given a cold shoulder to those in need of emotional, spiritual and canonical support.



I want to ensure that this culture is changed by providing information, skills and tools to our priests, deacons and parish staffs so that our parishes can truly be beacons of hope and provide the compassion of Christ to those in need.

## ***Welcome Diversity***

The diocese is rich in its diversity of ethnic communities in our parishes.<sup>5</sup>

- 10 percent are Hispanic
- 8 percent are Filipino
- 4 percent are Asian
- 3 percent are African-American

Relatively new arrivals to our diocese include a vibrant Haitian community and significant groups of Albanian and Burmese Catholics whose faith has survived some of the most brutal and repressive governments of the 20th century.

These Catholic communities of faith, prayer and love needs to be nurtured and celebrated. Let us be open to the demographic and cultural





shifts occurring in North Florida and be thankful for the immigrants who bring diversity, new life and opportunities for cultural and social exchange.

We are of a Catholic (universal) faith. I want to commend and affirm our ethnic chaplaincies and the Hispanic apostolate. They do much to bridge the gap between cultures – a gap that can so easily result in a loss of the faith if it's not cared for properly.

### ***Stewardship***

Living the faith also means being good stewards of the gifts that God has given us. Giving our time, talent and treasure in response to God who is love, leads us to respond to the needs of our parishes, the diocese and the larger community. I am personally grateful for all the sacrifices our Catholic faithful make to support the mission Christ has entrusted to us, whether it is through our many Catholic ministries and initiatives, in parishes, the national collections, or through the financial support of our diocesan appeals.

My dream is that every parish will exercise a strong commitment to stewardship, both in the local community and to our larger church family.

### **GOAL 3: ENGAGE YOUNG ADULTS - BUILD THE FAITH**

I listened intently to your concerns about the absence of our youth and young adults in parish life, the need for strong and faithful marriages and vocations. I also heard your cry for more formation and fellowship opportunities that will unite and bind the youth and young adults more closely to the Catholic Church.

First and foremost, our children are formed early by witnessing how their parents live and practice their faith.

Let us make Eucharistic adoration a more widespread practice, introducing this to our children as early as possible with appropriate formation. In parish life, it can begin with a weekly or monthly holy hour. The Real Presence of Christ produces real love in our hearts. In my experience, the practice of frequent visits to Jesus in Eucharistic adoration renews and strengthens my commitment to live in his love.

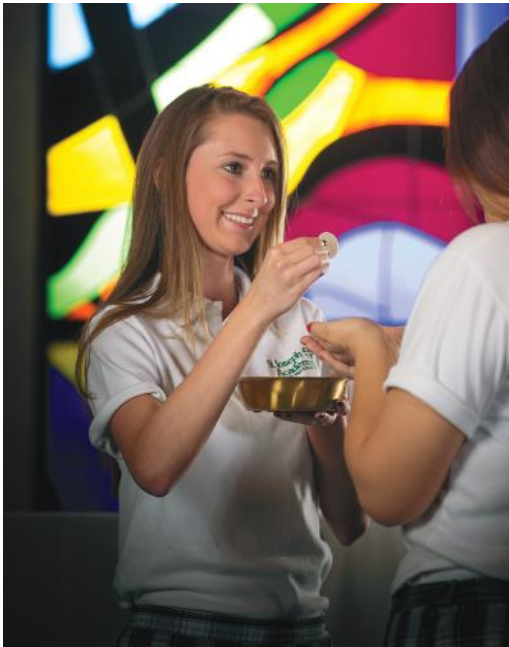
I encourage young people and old alike, to constantly explore and grow in knowledge of our faith and engage in conversation. This dialogue and continued growth in the faith, is what links generations. Only by this unity can we pass on our faith, share our precious memories and personal experiences, and build the faith with each future generation.

Learning about our faith and traditions should not stop at confirmation.

### *The Domestic Church*

The family is the fundamental building block of society, and yet the “domestic church” is shrinking rapidly. Marriages fell in the Diocese of St. Augustine from 712 in 1998 to 480 in 2012. Baptisms and confirmations are similarly in decline.

Teens and young adults who do not understand their role as Catholics



in society will not see the importance of these sacraments in order to raise good, holy families.

In response to the changing media for evangelization and formation, one of our goals over the next three years is to research and identify technology-based faith formation opportunities for young adults. Evangelization and formation for young people were mentioned by more than 20 percent of the respondents during the listening sessions. We need to jointly engage our young,

and one way to do this is through the use of available modern technology.

It is my hope that by enabling our young adults to be better versed in the tenets and traditions of our faith; they will in turn serve as role models for the next generation.

In the same way that well-formed young adults can effectively model the faith to our youth, good campus ministry can assure that when our youth leave home to further their education, they do not leave their faith behind.

The diocese is making a concerted effort to provide a visible presence and spiritual home-away-from-home for students attending colleges and universities in the diocese. With better communication tools and collaborative efforts we can further connect our college students with a solid Catholic campus ministry.

As a goal over the next year, let us also strive to increase the number of college-aged students that are involved in Catholic campus ministry in the diocese by 15-to 20 percent.

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### ***Answering the Call***

One very positive change that has significantly benefited our local church has been the number of young men who are discerning the call of the Lord to the priesthood. This shows how active the Holy Spirit is in our families and parish communities. Please remember our seminarians in your prayers and continue to encourage our young people, especially young women, to answer the Lord’s call to follow him all the way.

### **COME TO THE BANQUET OF THE LORD!**

At the beginning of this pastoral letter I invited you to, “Come, Live in the Light!” Now, because we are a Eucharistic people, I also invite you to, “Come to the banquet of the Lord!”

The church draws her life from the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of Christian life.<sup>6</sup> As a Eucharistic people we have celebrated together as Jesus commanded: “Do this in memory of me.” (Luke 22:19)

We are called to come together at least once a week on Sundays and on holy days, reading Scripture and breaking bread in Communion.





When we actively participate in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we come away from it changed, transformed and full of the spirit.

It follows from the Eucharist that we are compelled to continue the work that began with the Apostles 2,000 years ago in obedience to Jesus' command: "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, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20a) Let us invite others to come to the banquet as well.

Remember also the gift of Our Lady of La Leche, whose shrine in St. Augustine is the first to our Blessed Mother in the United States.

Ask her, "Be my mother." She will come to you and show you the true dignity of womanhood, motherhood and the gift of fertility. She is the patroness of children in the womb and of families, and she will help us build a culture of love and life.

Join me and our Blessed Lady in sharing, living and building our faith as fellow members of the Body of Christ. Calling down the life-giving Spirit on us all, I leave you with this prayer of St. Augustine:

*Breathe in me O Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.*

*Act in me O Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.*

*Draw my heart O Holy Spirit, that I love but what is holy.*

*Strengthen me O Holy Spirit, to defend all that is holy.*

*Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit, that I always may be holy. Amen.*

Yours in Christ,

+ v. r. Felipe

Felipe J. Estévez

Bishop of St. Augustine

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Holy Mass for the Inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean: Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” May 13, 2007.

[http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/aparecida\\_Ingles.pdf](http://old.usccb.org/latinamerica/english/aparecida_Ingles.pdf), accessed 12/31/2012.

<sup>2</sup>“Celebration of Vespers and Meeting with the Bishops of the United States: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI,” April 16, 2008.

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080416\\_bishops-usa\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080416_bishops-usa_en.html), accessed 12/31/2012.

<sup>3</sup>Mission Nombre de Dios and Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche

[http://www.missionandshrine.org/fr\\_lopez.htm](http://www.missionandshrine.org/fr_lopez.htm), accessed 12/12/2012.

<sup>4</sup>Sacrosanctum Concilium, 7

<sup>5</sup>Actual numbers of minorities are certainly greater in our community as minorities especially tend to under-register in parishes by as much as 20 percent.

<sup>6</sup>Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, Nov. 21, 1964.

[http://www.vatican.va/archvie/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat=ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archvie/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat=ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), accessed 12/28/2012.