

# One Faith, One Family

A PASTORAL LETTER ON STEWARDSHIP

By Bishop Felipe J. Estévez  
for the Faithful of the Diocese of St. Augustine

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A P A S T O R A L L E T T E R O N S T E W A R D S H I P

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## INTRODUCTION: EUCHARISTIC LOVE AND STEWARDSHIP



### WORDS OF WELCOME AND HOPE

**M**AY THE PEACE AND JOY of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

I am grateful for this opportunity to speak to the hearts of our priests, deacons, religious, and the lay faithful, all of whom bring such vitality to our diocese.

As your bishop, I have experienced the power and beauty of being *One Faith, One Family* with all of you. As the shepherd of this family, it is both a gift and a challenge: A gift, because Christ's abundant goodness is revealed to me in so many surprising and inspiring ways. A challenge, because Christ, in the power of the Spirit, is encouraging me to invite our diocesan family to a deeper understanding of the call to Christian Stewardship.

My hope for this pastoral letter is to share my understanding of Stewardship as a way of life, mainly expressed in the writings and leadership of our beloved Pope Francis.

Your engagement with this letter is vital to its effectiveness. As I have mentioned in the past, your collaboration is an expression of our communion – the bishop and his people working together for the Glory of God.

Discussion questions follow each section of this pastoral letter. I encourage you to reflect on them both in times of personal prayer and in conversation with members of your family and parish community.

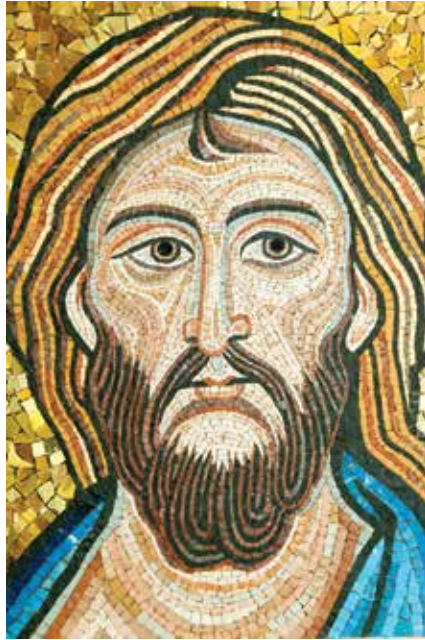
My desire is that this pastoral letter will become a living example of the local Church in an interactive, mutually enriching conversation – a process outlined by the Servant of God, Blessed Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*. In this encyclical, we hear a call to be a Church engaged in dialogue as a way to peace.

“If we want to be men's pastors, fathers, and teachers, we must also behave as their brothers. Dialogue thrives on friendship, and most especially on service.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, paragraph 87.





## WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP?

**S**TEWARDSHIP IS JESUS CHRIST: He is the master steward, the teacher, the friend, and the beloved. He expresses his love through the Eucharist – a love taken, blessed, broken, and given to nourish, shape, and transform a community of faith in service to God throughout the world.

St. Augustine’s famous quotation about the Eucharist is so relevant to our conversation, “Receive what you are and become what you receive.” The Eucharistic Lord Jesus, his body and blood, soul and divinity, is always present. At the same time, the Eucharist is an active force in our becoming a new creation: “Behold I make all things new” (Revelations 21:5).

There is nothing less neutral than the Eucharistic Mystery. It is the super-abundant source of all giving. The Eucharist reminds us that everything flows from the Father’s gracious initiative and action. Everything is grace. Everything is a gift – a divine gift that begets community. The Father’s pure gift inspires his beloved children to collaborate with him in spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Father loves us so much that he gives us the freedom to respond.

The Father’s graciousness is also seen in the witness of Christian marriage, a sacrament that reveals the mystery of God’s self-giving love and the community that this love begets, the family. Family life teaches us what it means to be in a relationship with one another. “All of the love that God has in himself, all of the beauty God has in himself, all of the truth that God has in himself, he gives to the family. And a family is truly a family when it is able to open its arms and receive all of this love.”<sup>2</sup> As this love extends beyond the family, the parish community, and by extension, the entire Church becomes a family of families in which we nourish and support one another in faith, hope, and love.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Address - Prayer Vigil for the Festival of Families*, Philadelphia, Pa., Sept. 26, 2015.



In the process of free and mutual self-giving love, the human heart becomes more attuned to the creative power, the boundless mercy, and the tender strength that characterize the life of the Trinity itself. Our lives, with the help of grace, can become a response-in-faith to the Father's gracious initiative. God, in his great love for us, desires our free cooperation in the unfolding of the story of salvation.



SCOTT SMITH

Cooperating with God is the soul of stewardship. As good stewards, the way we choose to live expresses in concrete and loving ways

our responsiveness-in-faith. Stewardship is the means by which we, as a diocesan family, make the invisible love of God visible, integrating all things into the sacraments of the faith.

You may remember the little boy in the crowd who brought Jesus five barley loaves and two fish (John 6:1-14). From a purely human perspective, the boy's offer seems desperately disproportionate to the hunger pangs of the crowd. Against all the odds, something extraordinary happens. Humanity and divinity join hands. The boy's response to Jesus becomes one with Jesus' prayer to the Father, and together, in a communion of love, Jesus and the boy open the door to a super-abundant manifestation of God's providential care. When our offering, no matter how small, is given as a response-in-faith, God supplies all that we need, with extra left over!

St. Thérèse of Lisieux was known to have said, "You can never have too much confidence in our good God!" Living in communion with the heart of Jesus helps us to "taste and see the goodness of the Lord" (Psalm 34:8).<sup>3</sup>

You may have noticed that I have not mentioned the traditional three T's of stewardship. I don't want to diminish the pastoral importance of encouraging our people to share their time, talent, and treasure; but I do see a subtle temptation that may result from isolating it from the richer context of Christ's life.

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<sup>3</sup> The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus may help us "see" a place where giving and receiving are inseparably united. The Heart of Jesus is beautifully described by St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians, "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped; rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness...he humbled himself becoming obedient to death even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). The Heart of Jesus receives everything from the Father in the power of the Spirit, and, in return, gives everything back to the Father in the power of the Spirit. The poverty of Jesus is the eternal blessing that makes us truly rich. In and through the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we experience the outpouring of the Father's love and care for us. In and through the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we are called to return our gifts to the Father for the sake of our brothers and sisters.



As a nation that possesses great material wealth, a material response may seem to come more naturally to us; but as St. Teresa of Calcutta said of the West, poverty is not just material. There is a spiritual poverty that seems to run much deeper in the human heart. Too few understand their true dignity in the eyes of God, who cherishes them even in their brokenness. As a result, our culture seems to swing between a frantic activism and a spirit-numbing sloth rooted in despair. Sometimes we ask people to give more and more without immersing them in the life of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit connects us to the grace that flows from the crucified and risen heart of Jesus.

“STEWARDSHIP IS A WAY OF LIFE THAT FANS THE FIRE OF LOVE DWELLING IN US FROM THE DAY OF OUR BAPTISM, INTO FLAME, A LIFE-CHANGING PROCESS THAT HELPS US UNDERSTAND AND EMBRACE OUR TRUE DIGNITY.”

We may remember the words of St. Augustine, “You being on the inside when I was seeking you on the outside.” If our understanding of stewardship is on the outside only, we run the risk of promoting a kind of activism devoid of a contemplative spirit. St. Paul nudges us toward a deeper, on-the-inside understanding when he says, “We are stewards of the Mystery of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). The mystery, my friends, is the Paschal Mystery, a self-emptying that paradoxically makes us rich

in receptivity and joy. When we begin to unite our self-emptying to the living presence and action of Jesus Christ, we start to live stewardship from the inside.

Stewardship is a way of life that fans the fire of love dwelling in us from the day of our baptism, into flame, a life-changing process that helps us understand and embrace our true dignity. The Eucharist is the source and summit of this incredible human adventure that leads us to a greater conformity with Jesus Christ and his Gospel!

I dedicate this pastoral letter and the feedback that it inspires to the care and protection of Our Lady of La Leche. Contemplating the quiet communion between our Lady and the baby nursing at her breast is a striking image of human and divine integration. This tender image may serve as a fitting companion to this letter. Through the intercession of Mary, may family life itself find stewardship as a way of life and a source of renewal and strength.

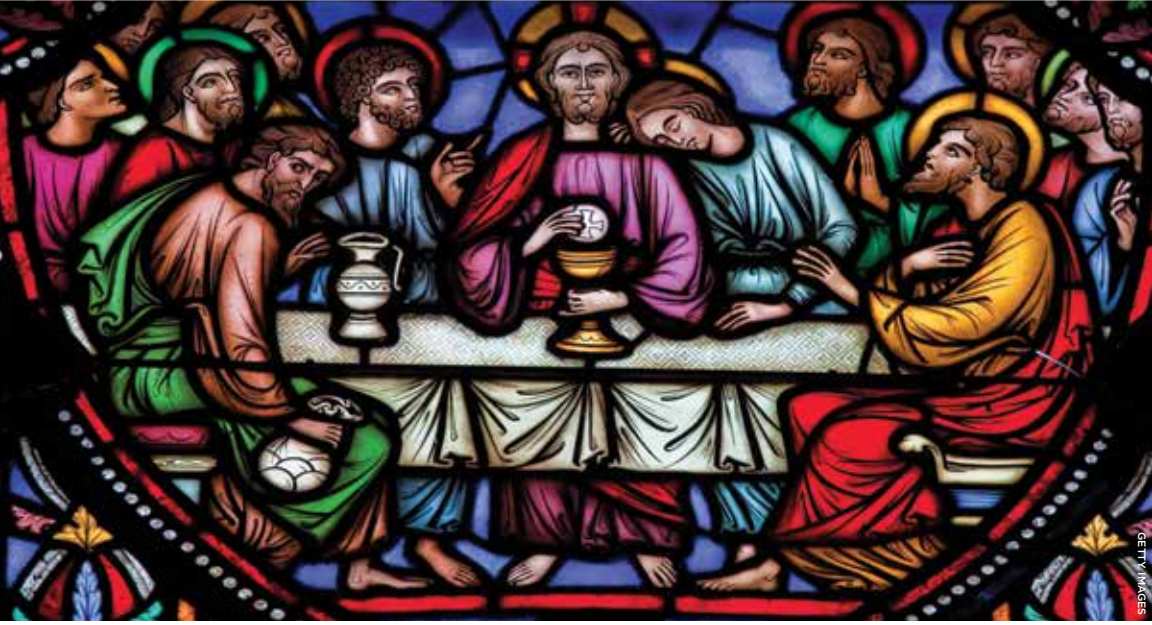
Let us now explore how Pope Francis is leading us towards a Eucharistic understanding of the dynamic process of becoming who we are, beloved sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of the Son, all united in the bond of love, who is the Holy Spirit.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the past, what has been your understanding of stewardship? Has this first section of this pastoral letter opened your heart and mind to new ways of imagining stewardship as a way of life?
2. Share a life experience when you, like the little boy with the loaves and fish, offered the Father a small gift and then experienced an outpouring of divine generosity.
3. How would you express the connection between the Eucharist and stewardship as a way of life?
4. Do you believe that belonging leads to a deepening of faith? How does your parish cultivate a sense of belonging?



## I. POPE FRANCIS AND STEWARDSHIP



### FROM THE STOREROOM: SOMETHING NEW AND SOMETHING OLD

**B**EFORE HIGHLIGHTING POPE FRANCIS' ideas for parishes – something new, it is important to affirm some traditional stewardship language – something old.

Stewardship is not a program or a fundraising mechanism. It is a heartfelt knowing that our personal and communal “yes” to God’s invitation helps us receive the joy that abundantly flows from our inheritance as beloved sons and daughters. Stewardship is a way of life that helps us know and feel a living connection to the personal, passionate love of the Trinity. This relationship helps us discover our true identity as brothers and sisters in Christ, which impels us to share it with others.<sup>4</sup>

When we deeply understand our relationship with Christ, the generous giving of time, talent, and treasure is a grateful response to God’s generosity. Investing time, sharing talent, and giving treasure are not just human “things-to-do” but more importantly, they are concrete and, when imbued with love, sacramental ways to serve the mission of the Church.

Stewardship helps cultivate belonging by shining the light of faith, hope, and love on the usual ups and downs of everyday life. Every parishioner is encouraged to understand their heart as an altar upon which rests the full range of life experiences. As our experiences are offered to the Lord in faith, we learn to integrate the totality of our lives with the Eucharistic offering of the Lord.

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<sup>4</sup>Several years ago, the Diocese of Wichita, Kan., published a document called *The Four Pillars of Stewardship*. This document sees the parish as a family that nurtures and forms its member’s sense of belonging through hospitality, prayer, formation, and service. I see these four pillars as helpful tools in assessing the pastoral vitality of the different ministerial dimensions of our communities.





## NEW IDEAS AND BRAINSTORMING

**P**OPE FRANCIS' VISION is applied to parish life by using the following four points as a framework for a meaningful, robust understanding of how living stewardship as a way of life can revitalize diocesan and parish life.<sup>5</sup>

1. Missionary Discipleship
2. Spiritual Accompaniment
3. Evangelizing through Beauty
4. The Parish as a Field Hospital for Sinners

I am convinced that by implementing the Holy Father's vision of parish revitalization, we can enhance our understanding of time, talent, and treasure. To facilitate a better understanding, two principles must be kept in mind.

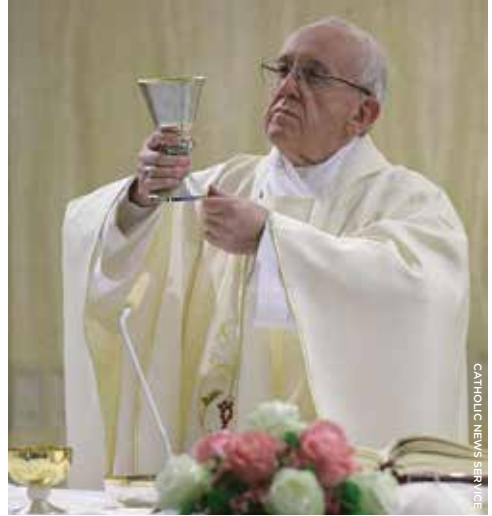
First, these four themes are profoundly Eucharistic. The Eucharist is the source and summit of integrating the human and the spiritual at the highest level. The Eucharistic celebration is the paradigm of the art of spiritual accompaniment, so well delineated in the famous story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). The Eucharist is the supreme beauty that draws us into the Mystery. The Eucharist is the food that heals the wounds of sin, alienation, and division.

Second, it is important to use both our intellect and imagination as we reflect on these themes. In a somewhat overly pragmatic age, the imagination can be underplayed or even forgotten. Pope Francis is calling us to ignite our creative powers by turning to the Holy Spirit, the divine igniter of the imagination so that parish life can become even more engaging, challenging, and hospitable – fully human. Let us explore these four themes in greater detail.

### 1. Missionary Discipleship

■ In his 2013 encyclical letter, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes, "...the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction."<sup>6</sup>

In an age obsessed with virtual communication, I can't over-emphasize the need for this face-to-face encounter. The Holy Father reminds us that true faith in the Incarnation is inseparable from self-giving love – of belonging to a community of faith.



<sup>5</sup>From an address to faculty working in seminary formation, by Archbishop Jorge Carlos Patron Wong, the Secretary for Seminaries of the Congregation for Clergy.

<sup>6</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, paragraph 88.



The Holy Father also encourages us “to develop a broad and profound sensitivity to what really affects other people’s lives.”<sup>7</sup> This sensitivity is the fruit of taking risks, in cultivating real relationships and open to reaching out to everyone regardless of one’s standing. I am poor, and the one I encounter is poor.

For this meeting-in-vulnerability to take place, we are invited to enter into what Pope Francis terms a “Revolution of Tenderness.” The Church has much to offer, but our institutional successes can never draw us away from remembering that the process of interaction and conversion is gradual. Relying humbly and joyfully on God’s grace, the diverse members of the Church strive to accept, appreciate, and understand one another. At times, this demands patient endurance.

Leaders are invited to unite their pain and suffering to the Cross of Jesus Christ. Preaching and teaching can never be divorced from this struggle for integrity. The brokenness of Jesus is the brokenness of our people. The resurrection of Jesus is the resurrection of our people. Here again, we recall the Eucharistic identity of Jesus Christ. He is taken, blessed, broken, and given in love. Through this love, we can see how the Eucharist is the sacrament that expresses and forms the dying and rising of each member of the Church.

Missionary discipleship finds its heart when we invite others into a personal, passionate relationship with our Trinitarian family: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The parish is a home in which we encounter face to face the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, and, from this place of “being-with” the ever-present Lord, we, as an ordinary band of disciples, invite others into the joyful adventure of human and spiritual growth.



GETTY IMAGES

“MISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP  
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## 2. Spiritual Accompaniment

■ Pope Francis presents a robust challenge to extend the boundaries of our ministry: “Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of setting to impose new obligations, they should appear as a people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty, and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 155.



by proselytizing that the Church grows but by attraction.”

No matter how well-crafted or powerful the homily or the catechetical presentation may be, the receiver of the Word still needs help in deepening their receptiveness to the Good News. Everyone needs a wise companion who can accompany them on the journey of faith with approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a non-judgmental attitude, warmth, and a spirit of welcome – the grace of attraction.<sup>8</sup>

While being faithful to the truth of our faith as we reach out to others, Pope Francis emphasizes that accompaniment “should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, and liveliness.”<sup>9</sup>

The way of accompaniment is seen in the breaking open of our life experiences in the light of Jesus’ love and mutual vulnerability. As a result, spiritual friendships are formed. These friendships transform parishioners into a Eucharistic people, who recognize Christ not only in the breaking of bread but also in the breaking open of the human heart to the dear neighbor. This “heart-breaking” faith sharing builds community, drawing us into the mystery of loving, mutual relationships and encouraging an exchange of ineffably beautiful gifts, both visible and invisible.



SCOTT SMITH

If we can accept that the Church grows by attraction, then parish priests and deacons are being called to become primary agents of accompaniment for the people of God, helping their flock “to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity.”<sup>10</sup>

To reach out more effectively to the faithful, priests, and deacons are encouraged to mentor their core leadership teams in the art of accompaniment. It is the attraction of our lives of humble service and joyful sacrifice that will help others in their faith journey – a process of ongoing awakening and conversion in response to the Good News.

In placing such emphasis on spiritual accompaniment and discernment, the Holy Father is encouraging all Church leaders to embrace their role as doctors of the soul and teachers of prayer. Pope Francis reminds us that “...without prolonged moments of adoration, or prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 165.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 262.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 262.



### 3. Evangelizing through Beauty

■ The Book of Wisdom teaches us that “...from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator” (Wisdom 13:5). Good stewardship practices, however beautiful, are a means to an end. They are to inspire a response-in-faith from the people of God. Pope Francis writes, “Every expression of true beauty can be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> Awe and wonder are attitudes of the human heart which predispose a person to greater receptivity. Beauty has its own way of stirring the soul in wonder and creating deep spaces of awe. True beauty is not only a balm for wounded hearts. It also has a way of assuring us that, even in the worst of times, the joyful radiance of God’s glory is with us.

At times, beauty can seem to be less present thematically in our preaching and teaching than some of the other qualities of God. We often hear about what is good and true. We often hear about the importance of unity. Pope Francis reminds us that “...every form of catechesis would do well to attend to the way of beauty.”<sup>13</sup>

In this section, I would like to address the human longing for beauty and its role in the Church in four ways: the beauty of the liturgy, creation, great artistic tradition of our Church; and hearts broken open by love.

#### 3-a. The Beauty of the Liturgy

■ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI speaks eloquently of the beauty of the liturgy. “It is a sublime expression of God’s glory and, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth...Beauty, then, is no mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation.”<sup>14</sup>

Given Pope Benedict XVI’s desire to integrate the human and the spiritual, let us renew our efforts to reverence the role of music and art to expand our capacity to respond to the call of love. Some of the most beautiful sounds in the Church are made when the liturgical assembly responds from their heart to the inspired texts of good hymns, songs, and chants. Those entrusted with preaching can find joy and challenge in the art of crafting homilies with sensitivity to beauty, form, and the capacity of language to move the human heart.



CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

#### 3-b. The Beauty of Creation

■ The recent encyclical letter, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, is an ardent appeal

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 167.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 167.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, paragraph 35.





from Pope Francis, to dialogue with every person on earth about the shaping of the future of our planet. It is beyond the scope of this document to delve deeply into *Laudato Si*, but one aspect of it is especially relevant to our discussion.

Pope Francis begins his letter by quoting the great poem of St. Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*. Both Pope Francis and his namesake remind us that our common home “is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. ‘Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.’”<sup>15</sup>

An important dimension of evangelizing through beauty is to preach tirelessly that “our very bodies are made up of [the Earth’s] elements, we breathe her air, and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.”<sup>16</sup> The ecstatic, poetic vision of St. Francis of Assisi exhorts us to stand in awe and wonder before the beauty of creation.

### 3-c. The Beauty of the Artistic Tradition of our Church

■ The writings of Pope Benedict often sing in praise of beauty. He encourages us “to admire the icons and the great masterpieces of Christian art for they lead us in an inner way, a way of overcoming ourselves; thus in this purification of vision that is a purification of the heart, it reveals the beautiful to us or at least a ray of it. In this way, we are brought into contact with the power of truth.”<sup>17</sup>

I have often affirmed my conviction that the true witness of the Christian faith and the most convincing demonstration of its truth against every denial are the saints and the beauty that their faith has inspired. For faith to flourish, we must lead ourselves and the persons we meet to encounter the saints, thereby entering into contact with the truly beautiful.

In response to Pope Benedict’s words, I can imagine a renewed dedication to integrating the great masterpieces of Christian art and iconography with our catechetical efforts. Our artistic tradition may also help us to make parish offices and other church spaces places of beauty and contemplation. The homes of our parish families can also be enhanced by creating an atmosphere that gives witness to their identity as the domestic Church. Pope Francis teaches, “A family’s living space could turn into a domestic Church, a setting for the Eucharist, the presence of Christ seated at its table.”<sup>18</sup> Let us not be shy in proclaiming that real beauty can bring us into contact with the power of truth.

Once again, we are aiming at the human heart, hoping that the faithful are brought to an increased receptivity not only to the beautiful one, Jesus Christ, but also his mother, Mary, who has been the focus of the most splendid works of art through all generations.

### 3-d. The Beauty of Hearts Broken Open by Genuine Communication

■ Besides the beauty of the liturgy and the arts, we must not ignore the beauty of our life stories. Church leaders have the immense privilege of helping parishioners find beauty in the unfolding of their personal narrative. Let us not make the mistake of reducing beauty to art and music; thanks to the power of the Cross, we can also see beauty in what the world finds burdensome. Saints like Teresa of Calcutta, Vincent de Paul, and the Venerable Felix Varela always found the face of Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor. Is there anything more beautiful than the

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, paragraph 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 2.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Message ... to Communion and Liberation*, August 24-30, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, paragraph 15.



new life that emerges from the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy?

The call to holiness is a reminder of the importance of attentive listening and the ministry of compassionate presence. As people share their stories with us – often stories of wounded beauty – are they attracted by the presence of Christ within us? Is their vulnerable beauty received with the peaceful presence reflective of the tenderness of the Spirit? Are we instruments of the healing love of Jesus who is the face of the Father's merciful heart?

The call to evangelize through beauty is an integral part of Pope Francis' call to a revolution of tenderness. When we are convinced of the tenderness of beauty and the beauty of tenderness, no human being can be seen as a commodity, or identified solely by their productivity. Every person is a manifestation of the beauty of God, and the Church is urgently called to unveil the human beauty that has been obscured by or buried under the cold manipulations of a throwaway culture.

#### 4. Living the Parish as a Field Hospital for Sinners: Providing Contagious Healing through Offering Mercy

■ The image of a field hospital is a vivid, even graphic way of understanding a parish. A field hospital is a messy place, a far cry from the sterility and order one might find in some institutions. In the field, the pace can be hectic, at times frantic. Doctors and aides are called upon to make quick assessments and to prioritize the procedures according to the gravity of the patients' conditions. The field hospital can be a whirlwind of human experiences, from cries of misery to the whispers of quiet gratitude. When our parish doors open wide to the marginalized, the unchurched, the abused, the addicted, the homeless, we may find ourselves immersed in a similar whirlwind.

Living in and serving the parish as a field hospital for sinners means to savor the reality that we are people who receive healing, forgiveness, and a new sense of belonging through the gaze of Jesus' love for each of us. I can think of no more striking example than the redemptive gaze of Jesus in the story of the Good Thief in Luke's Gospel (Luke 23:39-43).

Dismas, as tradition calls him, is wracked with pain, bodily and spiritually, and his lifelong partner in crime is taunting the Lord Jesus. After rebuking his partner, the Good Thief turns to the Lord and asks to be remembered when Jesus enters into his kingdom. Can you imagine the gaze that Jesus shared with this man who was at the end of his rope? "Today, you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Pope Francis expresses the importance of living in solidarity with the wounds of others: "Sometimes we are tempted to be that kind of Christian who keeps the Lord's wounds at arm's length. Yet Jesus wants us to touch human misery, to touch the suffering flesh of others. He hopes that we will stop looking for those personal or communal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and know the power of tenderness."<sup>19</sup>

In the field hospital for sinners, we are confronted with the painful, inconvenient cry of the poor. While I can understand the desire to hide behind or build walls around our comfort and safety, the Holy Father is inviting us to face our resistances with courage and to dare to kiss the wounds of the sinners the Lord brings to us.

Just as St. Thérèse of Lisieux believed that our human state of misery is what attracts God's mercy, we, too, have to be attracted-in-love to those whom the world deems miserable and undesirable, treating them with mercy. Pope Francis reminds us that "...the Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk...God never tires of forgiving us; we are the ones

<sup>19</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, paragraph 270.



“JUST AS ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX BELIEVED THAT OUR HUMAN STATE OF MISERY IS WHAT ATTRACTS GOD’S MERCY, WE, TOO, HAVE TO BE ATTRACTED-IN-LOVE TO THOSE WHOM THE WORLD DEEMS MISERABLE AND UNDESIRABLE, TREATING THEM WITH MERCY.”

who tire of seeking mercy.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most challenging part of stewardship as a way of life is to risk encountering the fullness of the Mystery of Jesus Christ. It is not enough to live in a contract with a superficial and complacent tranquility. Building relationships with Christ Jesus and his people are the very foundation of stewardship. We have to allow Jesus to encounter our misery and pain. We must confront courageously the reality that we too are in need of a healer. All of us, most especially our clergy and lay leaders, need to share from the heart the great diversity of our human experiences in our journeys of faith.

Speaking to young people at World Youth Day, Pope Francis told them, with a twinkle in his eye, “Don’t be afraid to make a mess!” There is no place messier than a field hospital. If stewardship as a way of life is to become contagious in our diocese, we can’t hide behind walls of fear or control. The formative image of the field hospital must become real for us. Pope Francis is challenging us to accept the mess as a place of encounter with the glory of Jesus Christ, who is wounded too. “The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven, and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”<sup>21</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has your parish promoted stewardship as a way of life in the past? What new opportunities might you see unfolding in your parish right now?
2. What does missionary discipleship mean for you? What does it mean for the particular culture of your parish?
3. How does your parish accompany people on the road from the first small steps of conversion toward an invitation to respond more fully to the mission of Jesus Christ?
4. What kind of beauty touches your heart most? How might the role of beauty be expanded in your family life, parish and ministries?
5. In what ways is your parish a field hospital for sinners? Are you ready to be inconvenienced by being hospitable to others?

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 3

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 114.



## II. THE VITALITY OF OUR DIOCESE: A SONG OF GRATITUDE



DON BURK

### THE GRATITUDE OF A BISHOP'S HEART

**I**N THE GOSPEL OF LUKE, the evangelist gives us a glimpse of the contemplative attitude of Mary, the Mother of God: “And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). As I see the growth of stewardship as a way of life in our diocese, I, too, reflect on the power and beauty of the Lord, guiding and shaping the life of our local Church, *One Faith, One Family*. This section of the pastoral letter is a song of gratitude for your receptivity, goodness, and generosity. You are the people of God responding-in-faith to the call of God who is love – the love that has a proper name, Jesus Christ!

### THE JOY OF OUR LADY OF LA LECHE

**L**ET US BEGIN by rejoicing in the patronage of Our Lady of La Leche. Our diocese has been a good steward of the extraordinary gift of this Marian shrine, dedicated to an ancient devotion to the nursing mother.

Mary's presence has enriched us for nearly 450 years. The first Christians of Florida loved her so much that the chapel was once known as “The Chapel of the Indians.” At this chapel, hundreds of parents have sought Mary's intercession in



ZACH THOMAS





their desire for a child. In so many instances, their prayers were answered.

This fruitfulness in faith has made our shrine known throughout the world. Mary accompanies her children from the experience of barrenness to a new sense of Christ alive in the human heart. Our “sacred acre” at Mission Nombre de Dios has created a space of prayerful encounter with Jesus Christ through Mary, bringing blessings of mercy, healing, and restoration to so many lives. It is a place where the people of God receive the tenderness of the Holy Spirit.

Following the same path of the 16th-century Spanish missionaries, Marian piety has grown in the western counties of our diocese, thanks to the new Santa Fe Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche at St. Madeleine Sophie Parish in High Springs.



## THE EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS

**O**UR ANNUAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS has been a remarkable witness to the healing and power of the Eucharist – the source and summit of the Church’s life. I have heard many stories from the hearts of the faithful reflecting the impact of the Eucharistic Congress, stories of:

- conversion
- falling more deeply in love with the Eucharistic Lord
- increasing the practice of pure love by the adoration of the most Blessed Sacrament
- the strengthening of family life
- the releasing of long-held pain, resentment and lack of forgiveness
- the re-kindling of a sense of belonging to the entire local Church
- a renewed connection to the universal Church promoted by distinguished speakers.

The faithful are touched by the compassionate solidarity of our priests, who spend untold hours sharing the mercy of God in the sacrament of reconciliation. The room set aside for confessions is our field hospital for sinners. When we, as a family, celebrate the Eucharist on the Saturday morning of the Congress, I am moved by the communion I share with the dedicated priests of our diocese. They are truly doctors of the soul and stewards of the Mystery of Faith.



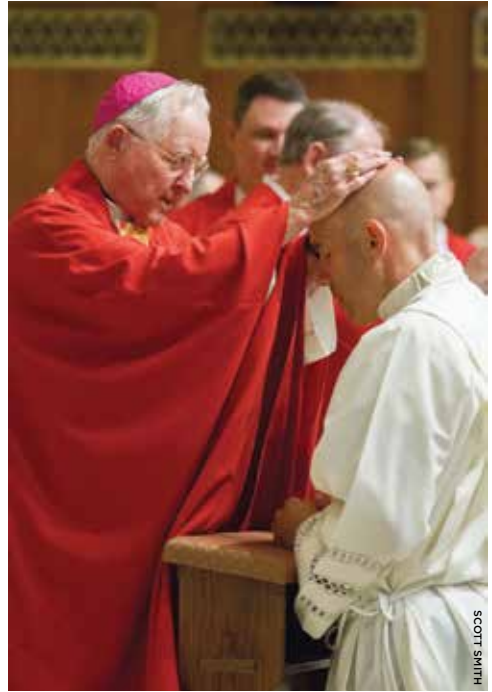
## SIGNS OF HOPE

**O**THER SIGNS OF OUR VITALITY include the growing number of men who have been called to be diocesan seminarians and of women who are responding to consecrated life. The ever-expanding ministry of our permanent deacons is yet another example of renewal in our diocese.

How wonderful it is to see men and women of all ages responding-in-faith to a time of discernment, the pursuit of wisdom, and the cultivation of a vibrant prayer life! If we want to see the face of the “New Springtime” promised by St. Pope John Paul II, gaze upon the faces of those called to priestly and diaconate ministry and religious life.

I have also been impressed by our faithful’s support of those studying for the priesthood. I believe that one of the reasons for the success of the Bishop’s Annual Stewardship Appeal is that our people can see a future full of hope. Our seminarians embody this hope in a special and endearing way.

Many signs of hope are emerging from the hearts of young people in our diocese. Our Campus Ministry Outreach, the expansion of residences both at the University of Florida Student Center and the University of Northern Florida (Frasatti Hall), the presence of FOCUS missionaries, and our full-time chaplains reveal to us the capacity of young adults to contribute meaningfully to the mission of Jesus Christ. Their enthusiasm, dedication, and vigor ensure a vibrant and healthy future for the local Church.



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## THE CRY OF THE POOR

**O**UR DIOCESE IS BLESSED by several agencies that provide direct service to the materially poor, both locally and internationally. Through Catholic Charities, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the commitment to prison ministry, and other charitable initiatives, our diocese provides invaluable assistance not only to those in need but also to our parish communities who listen attentively to the cry of the poor. I know from personal experience that these agencies, in collaboration with our parishes, see the



poor not as a problem to be solved but rather as persons to be encountered as “other Christs.” I believe that Pope Francis’ vision of “a Church for the poor and with the poor” is realized in inspiring ways right in the heart of our diocesan life.



## FAITH FORMATION ON FIRE

**O**UR FAITH FORMATION MINISTRY, both in our schools and our parish-based formation programs, is so rich in creativity and outreach. Faith formation for people of all ages is indeed a top priority for our diocesan family. The New Evangelization and the art of spiritual accompaniment are blossoming among us, thanks to the dedicated efforts of our priests, deacons, religious, teachers, catechists, and lay ministry leaders. They walk shoulder to shoulder with people of all ages. My pastoral visitations of schools and parishes help me to appreciate the diversity and scope the programs offer. One of my particular joys is presiding at the Rite of Election, when I get to meet hundreds of people who are walking with Christ in the RCIA process, accompanied by their families, catechists, and clergy.

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An essential dimension of our diocesan Ministry Formation Program, which seems especially relevant in the context of this letter on stewardship and the vision of Pope Francis. This ministry is dedicated to the integral formation – intellectual, emotional, pastoral, and spiritual – of lay leaders, who, upon returning to their

particular communities, are called to become lay apostles, who are well-trained in the art of accompaniment and equipped to bring about Pope Francis’ revolution of tenderness.

## EVANGELIZATION IN ACTION

**M**ISSIONARY DISCIPLESHIP is also advanced by evangelization programs developed by the Catholic Leadership Institute. The seeds of this program are taking root in our diocese. Several parishes are discerning and developing intentional plans for evangelization. These plans, however, are not only on a conceptual level. An integral part of this initiative in the Church is the formation of evangelical relationships – spiritual friendships that allow for the faithful to share the story of how they have come to know and love Jesus. I am confident that the storytelling and faith sharing will dovetail perfectly with our efforts to bore our call deeply as stewards of the Mystery of Faith.



I rejoice in the recent building of new facilities at parishes and missions around the diocese. They include, St. John Paul II in Nocatee, St. Francis of Assisi in Yulee, Holy Family in Jacksonville, our two Sacred Heart parishes, St. Mary, Mother of Mercy in McClenny, Holy Faith and Queen of Peace in Gainesville, St. Francis Xavier in Live Oak, St. Michael in Fernandina Beach, Christ, the Good Shepherd in Trenton, as well as the construction underway at St. Anastasia. Only a real love for the Church's mission could inspire and bring to fruition such generous responses-in-faith to the future growth of our faith communities.



## EVANGELIZATION THROUGH BEAUTY

**WE BEGAN THIS SECTION**, a song of gratitude, by talking about Our Lady of La Leche. Her unique presence permeates the recent beautification of our historic Cathedral Basilica, which took place in 2015 for the 450th celebration of the founding of St. Augustine. When our diocesan family celebrates Mass at the Cathedral, all of us receive the tender gaze of Our Lady, her image smiling upon the assembly from her place in front of the choir loft. I firmly believe that the renovation of the Cathedral, while structurally necessary, was much more than a well-timed facelift. We, as *One Faith, One Family*, experienced the solidarity of all our parishes collaborating in this diocesan project. I am very grateful for the

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strong support of all in our diocese who made it happen. The new look of our Cathedral Basilica, visited daily by hundreds of visitors, is a sign of how the Lord communicates with his people through the beauty of the artist's touch and the good work of our artisans.

Pope Benedict XVI said, "The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes...to the power of Truth."<sup>22</sup>

I am struck by how Pope Benedict's words relate to our diocesan emblem, which is rooted in St Augustine's personal experience of God's passionate love. In a real sense, all the ministries and initiatives presented in this section are manifestations of the beauty of the Lord. I



**DIOCESE OF  
ST. AUGUSTINE**  
*The Catholic Church of North Florida*

I can't emphasize enough how important it is for us, as a diocesan family, to be receptive to the arrows of love the Lord uses to pierce our hearts and to open our eyes (see 1 John 1:1-4). In fact, this awareness is essential to understanding the theology of stewardship, because it is inextricably connected to the joy of giving of self to our dear neighbor and our Lord.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. After reading this section, did you discover something new about the vitality of our diocese?
2. As you prayerfully acknowledge the blessings in your life, do you sense a call to be more engaged in your parish?
3. What role does gratitude play in your prayer life?
4. How is your heart pierced and your eyes opened to see the love of God?

**NOTES:**

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<sup>22</sup>Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Message ... to Communion and Liberation*, August 24-30, 2002.



### III. A CALL TO PRAYERFUL ACTION IN FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE



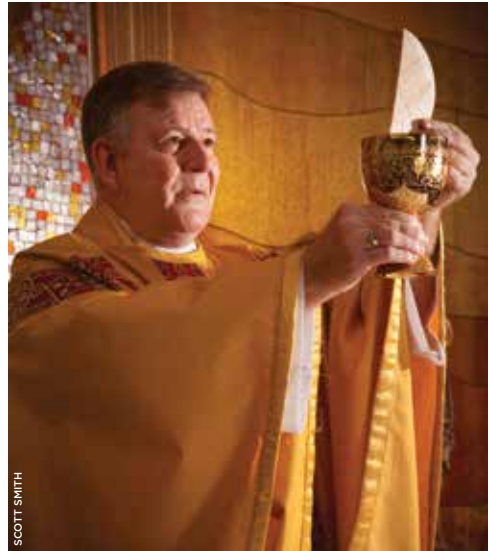


## HELPING THE STORY UNFOLD IN PARISH AND FAMILY LIFE

**T**HIS PASTORAL LETTER is at best the first chapter of a story that invites an unfolding within the context of our parishes. I hope that my words serve as a catalyst for discovering the goodness in your communities; for dreaming about new possibilities; for discerning how the Lord is guiding your dreams; and for designing responses to the unique needs of the people entrusted to you.

I would like to offer the following suggestions as ways to help advance the story – the Gospel story of Jesus Christ. Our work is a continuation of the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery alive among us.

1. In our preaching and catechesis let us, with insight and courage, make a Eucharistic understanding of stewardship and the vision of Pope Francis a pastoral priority.
2. Promote and welcome families in the parish by being receptive to their unique needs and providing resources for their support and growth. Some parishes have identified a “Family Life” coordinator to assist the pastor in fulfilling this vision. Our Family Life Office offers assistance in training and supporting these volunteers.
3. Encourage parish families to choose one evening a week to share their faith based on the discussion questions in this document. Perhaps parishes could sponsor stewardship essay contests for the different levels of faith formation – children, middle schoolers, and teenagers. These essays can be an excellent means for families to share the fruits of their prayer life.
4. Offer theme-centered Eucharistic Holy Hours for the expansion and fruitfulness of our shared vision of stewardship.
5. Teach about the simplicity and power of learning about *Lectio Divina*, so that the Word of God may take root more deeply in our hearts. Pope Benedict talks about this practice as being a wellspring of the Spirit, living water preparing us for the fresh blossoms of the New Springtime.
6. Share, through the communication channels of our deaneries, the best practices of stewardship already vibrant in our parishes. I invite deans, as representatives of a body of



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diocesan parishes, to be key communicators of feedback to this document, helping our ongoing conversation stay alive, relevant, and focused. The promotion of stewardship could profitably be on the monthly agenda of every deanery meeting in our diocese.

7. I encourage an active sharing between the five deans and our Diocesan Stewardship Council. One of the deans could serve as an *ex officio* member of the committee, ensuring a healthy exchange of ideas. It is crucial that a consistent stewardship message is communicated throughout the diocese. At our annual Stewardship Day, reports from the five deaneries would enhance an already enriching experience.
8. Partner with neighboring parishes by sharing resources and mutual support.
9. If you don't already have one, form a Stewardship Committee in your parish that collaborates with your pastor. Our Diocesan Stewardship Council is ready to assist.
10. Encourage and inspire teams of lay people to give witness talks at Mass and in other contexts about their experiences of Stewardship as a Way of Life. Pastors and clergy are encouraged to accompany their people in the articulation and sharing of their faith stories.
11. Invite parish leadership groups to study this pastoral letter in communion with their pastor and lay leaders.
12. Promote conversation in response to this letter. Through small groups, we learn the art of ordinary spiritual conversation: Sharing from the heart what we hear in prayer; learning by practicing what we hear in prayer. What a great way to become contemplatives-in-action! These groups might include Town Hall meetings, small faith communities, Bible Study groups, target special interest groups, and meetings with ministry leaders and active parishioners.
13. Create a ministry dedicated exclusively to the use of social media. A wise and creative approach to media tools can do much toward effectively communicating our pastoral vision.



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<sup>23</sup> The use of the simple acronym, **R.I.M.**, which stands for **R**elationships, **I**ntity, and **M**ission, may be helpful when we teach about stewardship as a way of life. Stewardship starts not with concepts or things we need to do but with relationships. God loves us not only for what we do, but most especially for who are in his sight. Let us invite our people to a personal, passionate friendship with God, Father Son, and Spirit, and with our sisters and brothers in faith, the Church. With God's help, the parish can become a uniquely sacred place in which a culture of relating in spiritual friendship is intentionally cultivated. What other place in our society affords such an amazing opportunity?

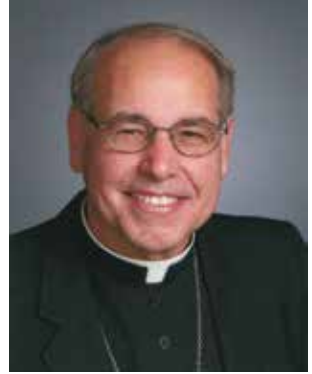
When we belong to a vibrant, joyous parish family, our faith comes alive in so many heartfelt ways. An atmosphere of Christian belonging helps us to trust God and one another. As our confidence grows in the context of a loving family, we learn how to be ourselves. We no longer have to wear masks or play a pre-determined role. We experience the freedom of being the children of God. This freedom, the fruit of belonging in Christ-centered relationships, helps us to find our deepest identity, our Christ identity. The Book of Genesis teaches us that we are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Through involvement in meaningful parish relationships, we begin to see Christ's likeness not only in our brothers and sisters,





## WORDS OF HOPE AND GRATITUDE

**AS BISHOP, I AM FULL OF JOYFUL EXPECTATION** in witnessing how our diocesan story and ongoing conversation will emerge. This teaching document is shared with you not to focus too much on efficiency or productivity but rather as a way to deepen our relationship, to celebrate our identity, and to accompany each other in mission.<sup>23</sup> I encourage all of us to be most attentive to the pastoral care of families, because, it is in the context of family life, that the foundational virtues of stewardship – accountability, generosity, joyful sacrifice, and concern for the other – are learned and cultivated.



Good Stewardship begins with meaningful relationships, rooted in self-giving, and Eucharistic love. Let's work together to keep this conversation alive, always attentive to the goodness the Lord is showering upon us. I pray that our shared insights will deepen the sense of communion we share. You, the People of God, and I, your bishop, walk together in faith. The first chapter of St. John's First Letter tells us that no darkness can overcome the light of Christ. "This is the message we have heard from him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Your witness gives me hope, and I am so grateful for your witness to the light of Christ, a light that vanquishes the specters of sin, division, despair, and death.

## AFFECTION AND MUTUAL BLESSINGS

**IN CLOSING, I ASK FOR YOUR PRAYERS AND BLESSINGS.** The bishop is the spiritual father of a large diocesan family. As a spiritual father, I share your dreams and your joys, your disappointments, and your sorrows. I, too, am in need of your prayers. I hold all of you close in my heart with a deep fatherly affection. We are indeed *One Faith, One Family*, especially close in the celebration of Eucharist, where the limits of space and time are no longer imposed on us.

As we break bread at Eucharist, let us remember the words of St. Augustine: "We receive what we are and become what we receive." May the Lord "take" us, seizing our hearts, minds, memories, and imaginations. May he "bless" us with his courage and insight. May he "break" our hearts open in love. May he "give" us, pouring us out as a libation for the good of all people, to the Glory of God the Father. AMEN.

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but also in ourselves. We begin to know through experience how much God loves us, his precious people.

In receiving the revelation of how loved we are, a joyful zeal for mission begins flowing in and through our humanity. We are reminded that Jesus, our deepest identity, is the Word made Flesh. He is truly alive in our hearts through baptism. Another word for this Incarnational spirituality is stewardship. Stewardship teaches us that our mission, while it involves hard work and human creativity, looks to the future with hope, and begins to embody the great petition from the Our Father, "thy kingdom come." God loves us so much that he invites us to cooperate with him in the mission of redemption. The mission of Jesus is our mission as well.

The importance of **R.I.M.** – **R**elationships, **I**ntity, and **M**ission – has a place of honor in evangelizing through beauty. Christian relationships reveal our beauty; this rediscovered beauty helps us to heal our wounded identity; the healing of our identity leads to a desire to serve the Healer, himself, as we invite others into his forgiving intimacy, his sheltering nearness, and his transforming love.



## CONCLUSION





# Prayer to Our Lady of La Leche

*Dear Mother Mary, our Lady of La Leche, with great hope and confidence we entrust our work Eucharistic Stewardship to you. We acknowledge our littleness and, in communion with you, we magnify the Glory of the Lord. The Spirit touched the barren womb of your cousin, Elizabeth, and your virginal womb.*

*From seeming emptiness, the voice crying in the wilderness and the Lamb of God came forth, proclaiming a year acceptable to the Lord, in which sight is given to the blind, hearing to the deaf, dancing to the lame, and freedom to prisoners. From seeming barrenness, we have been given a new family, the Church, a place of relationship, identity, and mission.*

*Our Lady, we celebrate the freedom and joy your “Yes” gives to us. Accompanied by your spouse, the Holy Spirit, touch our barrenness, so that we may give birth to new life in the Diocese of St. Augustine.*

*With you as mother and guide, we are indeed One Faith, One Family. Help us make our parish life a culture of encounter with your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to accompany one another in the light of your maternal gaze. Help us to evangelize through the beauty of Trinitarian fecundity. Help us to provide healing for those who are broken and vulnerable. Help us to be a family where all people may find a place of warmth, welcome, and belonging.*

*Mother of the Word Incarnate, give us the courage and insight to promote tenderness in all we do. We go into mission, not with the arms of war, but with the gifts of the Spirit: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and Fear of the Lord.*

*Knowing that your presence and intercession envelop us with tender love, we walk together in the reality of contagious hope the road to peace. We pray through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one triune God, for ever and ever. AMEN.*