

Families and Youth Formed in Faith

A Pastoral Letter to the Catholics on the South Plains
and Llano Estacado of Texas in the Diocese of Lubbock



Most Rev. Robert M. Coerver
Bishop of Lubbock

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Design: Lucas Flores, Diocese of Lubbock Office of Communications

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Families and Youth *Formed in Faith*

Introduction

“The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. Then Jesus approached and said to them, ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.’” (MT 28:16-20)

With those words the Disciples were commissioned by Jesus to continue his work. Through water washing over us and the words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” we have been commissioned. As contemporary Missionary Disciples we are sent to make the person and message of Jesus known, to invite people to join us in following Him, and to continue the work of furthering the Kingdom of God, already in our midst, closer to its fulfillment at the end of time.



Local World Youth Day 2023 at Sacred Heart Church in Plainview

Evangelization

The first task we are facing is to continually be renewed in our own belief in and following of Jesus. Our relationship with Jesus, who took on our human nature in all things but sin, must continually impel us toward the fulfillment of our mission, shared with us in Baptism, fanned into fuller flame in us through Confirmation, and constantly nurtured by our full, conscious, active participation in the celebration of the Eucharist. Every time we partake of the Body and Blood of Jesus, our commissioning is renewed as we go forth from the celebration of Mass into the world, fulfilling the brilliant words of St. Augustine from the Fourth Century, “Become what you receive.”

The world and the cultural reality in which we live are in desperate need of the witness of Jesus and the values he taught and the grace he promised would be bestowed upon us by the Holy Spirit. The 2020 Directory for Catechesis (DFC) published in 2020 by the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, sets forth the need for a “New Evangelization” which has been promoted by Popes since the 1960s:

The Church finds herself facing a “new stage of evangelization” [Pope Francis] because even in this change of era the risen Lord continues to make all things new (cf. REV 21:5). Our times are complex, pervaded by profound changes, and in the Churches of ancient tradition are often marked by phenomena of detachment from a lived ecclesial and faith experience. The ecclesial journey itself is marked by difficulties and by the need for spiritual, moral, and

pastoral renewal. And yet the Holy Spirit continues to arouse the thirst for God within people, and within the Church a new fervor, new methods, and new expressions for the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. (DFC #38)

Evangelization and Catechesis

Catechesis must be seen as and conducted at the service of such “New Evangelization.” Catechesis must make Christ accessible. Encounter with Christ is necessary to faithfully fulfill the Christian mission of Missionary Discipleship. Followers of Jesus must become aware of and be prepared for a “missionary going forth” (DFC #50). Missionary Discipleship must be lived “under the sign of mercy.” “The essence of the mystery of the Christian faith is mercy, which is made visible in Jesus of Nazareth. Mercy, at the center of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, reveals the very mystery of the Trinity.



Eucharistic Revival workshop for PCLs and Catechists

It is the ideal of evangelical life [Gospel living], the true criterion of the faith’s credibility and the deepest storyline of the Church’s story. The Church is called to proclaim her primary truth, which is the love of Christ.” (DFC #51). Catechesis must empower people for dialogue about Faith and Salvation, as Pope St. Paul VI said, “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives.”

The Directory for Catechesis sets forth what it describes as “Tasks of Catechesis” (DFC #79-89):

- Leading to knowledge of the Faith—knowledge and exploration of the Christian Faith;
- Initiating into the celebration of the Mystery – assisting in the comprehension and experience of liturgical celebrations;

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- Forming for life in Christ – fostering the call of Baptism, Christian formation of conscience, and discovery of one’s own role in the plan of salvation;
- Teaching prayer – “To learn to pray with Jesus is to pray with the same sentiments with which he turned to the Father: adoration, praise, thanksgiving, filial confidence, supplication and awe for his glory.” (General Directory for Catechesis 1997)
- Introduction to community life – “Catechesis, in reference to preparation for community life, therefore has the task of developing the sense of belonging to the Church; teaching the sense of ecclesial communion, promoting the acceptance of the Magisterium, communion with pastors, fraternal dialogue; forming believers in the sense of ecclesial co-responsibility, contributing as active participants to building up the community and as missionary disciples to its growth.” (DFC #89)

The role of catechesis in the Twenty-first Century needs to be reframed from models prevalent in the Twentieth Century. Catechesis is much broader than classroom education. Pope St. John Paul II broadened the Church’s understanding of formation for ministry by setting forth four “pillars” or dimensions of formation – intellectual, spiritual, pastoral, and human. Catechesis has been primarily conceived as education in the faith, corresponding to intellectual formation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has a beautiful treatment of the life of prayer and the Church’s spiritual tradition – catechesis should involve formation in the spiritual life. As laid out above, catechesis must form Missionary Disciples to “go forth” and live the baptismal call as modeled by Jesus commissioning the Disciples on the Mount of the Ascension – pastoral formation. And one of the outcomes of the Second Vatican Council was the Church’s embrace of the human sciences which developed in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries; catechesis must assist followers of Christ in their natural human (emotional) development.

Because of the too easily understood link between simply educational (intellectual) learning and catechesis, I have tried to emphasize in the Diocese of Lubbock the moniker “Formation in Faith” or “Faith Formation” – terms which can be more readily understood as embracing all four of the dimensions of growth in Faith set forth by Pope St. John Paul II. Given that broader scope and mindset for catechesis as

formation in Faith, the Directory for Catechesis sets forth a challenge for communities of faith in their ministry of faith formation:

The spaces for catechesis are settings in which the community expresses its own way of evangelizing. In the current social and cultural context, it is appropriate to reflect on the specificity of the spaces of catechesis as instruments of proclamation and of education in human relationships. It is therefore necessary that such environments be welcoming and well-kept, that they convey a climate of familiarity that fosters serene involvement in community activities. The very widespread environments that are patterned after school buildings do not constitute the best places for the unfolding of catechetical activities. It would therefore be good to proceed with an adaptation of these spaces to the actual meaning of catechesis. (DFC #222)

One might suggest that faith formation needs to be taken out of school desks and classroom spaces become more inviting as formation centers or areas.

Families Formed in Faith

Change is needed in our approach to formation in faith for all who are called to Missionary Discipleship. We have generations of Catholics who are, to a large extent, uncatechized. The increasing secularization of contemporary society is drawing people away from the practice of established religion. The prevalence of technology poses new opportunities for creative approaches to evangelization. And the “culture wars” of the present moment need to be cleverly addressed without engaging in fruitless skirmishes coming from an “embattled” posture.

When the Diocese of Lubbock celebrated the Fortieth Anniversary of its founding, I set forth priorities for the Diocese as we head into the middle of the Twenty-first Century. The first three priorities are directly related to the “New Evangelization” and our call on the South and Rolling Plains of Texas to be missionaries of that evangelization:

- Focus on the young adults and youth of the Diocese – more to come about that in what will follow;
- Help our Catholics form relationships through involvement in small groups of prayer, study, fellowship, support – faith

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formation opportunities in our parishes can give birth to and nurture such involvement;

- Develop our families as such small groups and offer them the support they need and the opportunities for service as Missionary Disciples as part of the nurturance of their call to discipleship – leading to my next point.



Blessed Carlo Acutis Relic Procession during Local World Youth Day 2023 in Plainview

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), the average daily time a parent spends with a child under 18 is 1.34 hours a day, which amounts to under 500 hours a year. In contrast, a child might spend 30 hours a year in faith formation. Our minuscule contact is insufficient to water the seeds of faith when school, peers, social media, and activities are like the Texas sun evaporating the needed nourishment. Prayer, charity, and a shared relationship with God are not always priorities in the homes of our parishioners. Parents often choose to send their child to faith formation to fulfill a requirement to receive a sacrament. Many of our students and their parents have “lukewarm souls.” What we gave our adult parishioners 20, 30, or 40 years ago has not sustained them to foster a “Domestic Church”. Many parishes struggle to find catechists. Not all parishes can meet the requirement of two safe environment-clear adults per class of minors. Many of our catechists have not returned or cannot return after COVID. We have dwindling numbers of parish members willing to carry on faith formation.

I believe a new approach to formation in faith which would be

especially beneficial within the Diocese of Lubbock is the model of Whole Family Faith Formation. Whole Family Faith Formation extends to all age groups within the parish—parents, children, singles, widows/widowers, and those seeking a faith home. Family networking, fellowship, fun, and building up of the Faith Community should be the hallmarks of such an approach to catechesis today. Pope St. John Paul II stated in his apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, that “the catechesis of adults... is the principal form of catechesis, because it is addressed to persons who have the greatest responsibilities and the capacity to live the Christian message in its fully developed form.”

The Evangelization and Family Faith Formation Division of the Diocese has for several years been making tools available for use in the parishes and families of the Diocese, tools which are especially targeted towards families and Whole Family Faith Formation. The Division is committed to providing training to parish leaders and catechists fostering the development of family-centered faith formation in our parishes. In coming months and years I want to see those efforts multiplied and families throughout the Diocese empowered to be the primary and preeminent venues for solid formation in faith. Therefore, I am asking the parishes of the Diocese of Lubbock to begin transitioning out of the school and classroom model of religious education and into the model of Whole Family Faith formation.

Whole Family Faith Formation lends itself to creative application and involvement. There is no single mold in which such formation must take place. The diversity of parishes in our Diocese, and the complexities of our households of faith (families) in the parishes, demand of us flexibility and adaptability and creativity. Whole Family Faith Formation fosters such wide-open possibilities. The time has come to take this bold step in favor of family life, wholesome formation in faith, and mature acceptance of the baptismal call to Missionary Discipleship.

Sacrament of Confirmation

The time has come for another change in mindset and practice to take hold within the Diocese of Lubbock. The longstanding practice of our celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation needs to be updated in keeping with the theological understanding of Christian Initiation and

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formation in faith which has developed over the course of the last fifty years. In addition, the realities of living in the middle of the Twenty-first Century must inform our practice.



Celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation during Easter Vigil 2023 at Christ the King Cathedral

In 1971 Pope St. Paul VI signed the Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation. A fresh look at that document is quite revelatory. The second sentence of the Constitution reads, “Born anew by Baptism, the faithful are strengthened by the Sacrament of Confirmation and ultimately are sustained by the food of eternal life in the Eucharist. By means of these Sacraments of Christian Initiation, they thus receive in increasing measure the treasures of divine life and advance toward the perfection of charity.” Two sentences later we read, “Conscious of its pastoral charge, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council devoted special attention to these Sacraments of Initiation, prescribing that the rites should be suitably revised and more accommodated to the understanding of the faithful.” Later in the document we read, “Finally, Confirmation is so closely linked with the Holy Eucharist that the faithful, after being signed by Holy Spirit and Confirmation, are incorporated fully into the Body of Christ through participation in the Eucharist.”

What is noteworthy in the Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation is the consistent ordering of the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist. There is no treatment of Confirmation as the “Sacrament of Christian Maturity.” There is no mention of those confirmed becoming “Soldiers of Christ.” The specific importance of Confirmation for sacramental initiation is stated in these words, “Through the Sacrament of Confirmation those who have been born anew in Baptism receive the ineffable Gift, the Holy Spirit himself, by whom ‘they are endowed . . . with special strength.’ Moreover, having been signed with the character of this Sacrament, they are ‘more perfectly bound to the Church’ (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* #11) and ‘they are more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith, both by word and by deed, as true witnesses of Christ.’ (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, #11)”

The current practice for celebrating Confirmation between the age of reason or maturity and the age of sixteen arises from the desire that Candidates for Christian Initiation have direct contact with the Chief Shepherd of the local Church, the Diocesan Bishop. As Christianity began to spread to various parts of the world the value of the connection to the local Bishop gradually took on greater importance than the theological and liturgical preference for the ordering of the Sacraments of Initiation. It was impossible for the local Bishop to initiate all those prepared to be initiated into the Church. Thus, Confirmation began to be separated further and further from the celebration of Baptism and eventually even further from the celebration of First Eucharist. What I would call a “derived theology” (a theology “derived” from the actual practice, as opposed to practice flowing from the theology) developed surrounding Confirmation. Confirmation became the “Sacrament of Christian Maturity” and emphasis was placed on those confirmed becoming “Soldiers of Christ.”

Over time, preparing for Confirmation began to be used as a practical means for retaining students in religious education programs. This was especially true in places where Confirmation was celebrated during high school years. Such an approach, which could be called “Forced Faith” takes an approach with rules and requirements that actually motivate young people to seek out and do only the bare minimum to get through our programs. Religious education programs often experience a gap in attendance by students between celebration of First Communion and

beginning preparation for Confirmation. In locations where that has been the practice, concern has been expressed that after Confirmation the students are not seen to be active in the parish at all. Some statistics place the attrition rate after Confirmation at eighty percent. My personal experience in visiting immediately before the Confirmation Ceremony with those to be confirmed is that tenth and eleventh grade students are extremely reluctant to be engaged. Many students in ninth grade are already “checked out.” Students about to graduate from high school are either totally disengaged from the process or the ceremony, or they are mature enough to behave as young adults with some measure of engagement. Overall, celebrating Confirmation during high school

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seems to breed resentment toward the Church and organized religion.

The time has come for a change in mindset and practice regarding the Sacrament of Confirmation to take hold within the Diocese of Lubbock. We need to shift the paradigm from “sacrament earned” to “grace received.” From the above cited Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation, as well as from the Introduction to the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults, restoring the ancient order of celebrating the Sacraments of Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist – is an ideal and worthy practice. It should be noted that according to the Code of Canon Law, children of the age of discretion/reason, defined within the Code itself as seven years old and above, MUST be fully initiated if they were not baptized before attaining the age of seven. I ask all Pastors, Parish Catechetical Leaders, and Catechists to adhere to this canonical norm/stipulation. For any parish which would like to take the bold step of celebrating Confirmation and First Eucharist in the same ceremony, I would be happy to make arrangements to celebrate that wonderful ceremony. I request that such parishes confer with my office in advance so that we can render the necessary guidance, assistance, and scheduling. In all parishes of the Diocese of Lubbock, I hereby decree that, by 2026, EIGHTH GRADE be the maximum grade level at which Confirmation will be celebrated. I realize that 2024 and 2025 will need to be transition years as we reduce the age of Confirmation in many of our parishes. Arrangements will need to be

made for larger Confirmation celebrations in some locales during those two years. I also alert parishes to the fact that some high school level students might move into the Diocese of Lubbock. Arrangements will need to be made to have those students prepared for Confirmation and to celebrate the Sacrament with them (perhaps a large diocesan celebration each year at the Cathedral for those students?). I should also state that in the Diocese of Lubbock preparation for Sacraments is NOT required to follow a two year curriculum; I leave it to the individual parishes to discern what is most appropriate for their Candidates for Sacraments.

I know that some will express concern about “losing” our high school students if we do not confirm them during their high school years. Such concern is understandable and legitimate. But that concern must not be allowed to outweigh the benefits of confirming at an earlier age – greater engagement in the formation and celebration of the Sacrament, more interest in things of a religious nature and less peer pressure counter to such interest, empowering the students with the Grace of the Holy Spirit and its Gifts and Fruits before they transition into the challenging high school environment of today, greater ease for Confirmation preparation to take place within the context of Whole Family Faith Formation. The high school students in our families and communities of faith need to be ministered to in a very different manner from traditional catechesis or religious education. We as Church need to embrace the challenge of genuine Youth Ministry in the middle of the Twenty-first Century.

Forming Youth in Faith

Young people, especially high school students, are confronting many profound challenges, some of which have arisen only within the current century. Social media involvement is an issue to be confronted. Suicide and threats and thoughts of suicide have reached epidemic proportions among our teenagers today. Pornography and human trafficking and inappropriate “sex education” themes are rampant on the internet and in segments of our contemporary society. And there are the normal struggles in physical and emotional growth which young people need to process, and their families should expect the faith community to be able to guide them through such struggles. As Pope Francis would say, our youth, our teenagers, our high school students, need specific forms and strategies of accompaniment.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has published a framework for Catholic Youth Ministry entitled *Renewing the Vision*. The document sets forth three goals for Ministry with Adolescents (notice it is not primarily a matter of “catechesis” any longer at this age level): “First, empowering young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ; second, drawing them into responsible participation in the Catholic Church; and third, fostering their personal and spiritual growth.” The document goes on

A comprehensive framework for youth ministry must:

- (1) be developmentally appropriate
- (2) be family friendly
- (3) be intergenerational
- (4) be multicultural
- (5) have community-wide collaboration
- (6) have strong leadership
- (7) have flexible and adaptable programming for young people.

Renewing the Vision
-USCCB

to say, “A comprehensive framework for youth ministry must be (1) developmentally appropriate, (2) family friendly, (3) intergenerational, (4) multicultural, (5) have community-wide collaboration, (6) have strong leadership, and (7) have flexible and adaptable programming for young people.” We find ourselves at a moment as Church and in society in which we must find “a way for integrating ministry with adolescents and their families into the total life and mission of the Church, recognizing that the whole community is responsible for this ministry.” The framework goes on to say, “An integrated approach to youth utilizes each of the Church’s ministries – (1) advocacy, (2) catechesis, (3) community life, (4) evangelization, (5) justice and service, (6) leadership development, (7) pastoral care, and (8) prayer and worship.”

As a diocesan Church we must move boldly and intentionally into a new approach to serving our youth and all young people. That was the single most frequently mentioned area which emerged in the Synod Listening Sessions which I facilitated throughout the Diocese in 2022. Reducing the age of Confirmation is a necessary step toward serving our young people more effectively. Moving forward in new directions with ministry to youth will require great commitment and collaboration among the entire People of God throughout the Diocese of Lubbock. Priorities must be reassessed.

Resources must be allocated in different directions. Leadership cultivation and formation needs to occur immediately. I firmly believe that ministry to youth ought to be perceived as a CRITICAL NEED at this time because of crisis situations arising in the lives of our young people.

We must be patient as we move forward with our ministry to youth. There might be many empty places at the table for a while. But if we are steadfast in maintaining our commitment to our youth, we can turn their attitude toward Church around from that of resentment or apathy, into interest in belonging, leading, evangelizing.

Conclusion

This turned out to be a more extensive document than I originally intended. But as I opened up my heart on this matter I found it important to say everything that has been said. Perhaps it would be beneficial to summarize the document with the following statements:

- Catechesis must make Christ accessible.
- The tasks of catechesis are: Leading to knowledge of the Faith, initiating into the celebration of the Mystery, forming for life in Christ, teaching prayer, and introduction to community life.
- We must begin transitioning out of the school and classroom model of religious education and into the model of Whole Family Faith formation.
- According to the Code of Canon Law, children of the age of discretion/reason, defined within the Code itself as seven years old and above, MUST be fully initiated if they were not baptized before attaining the age of seven.
- Any parish which would like to take the bold step of celebrating Confirmation and First Eucharist in the same ceremony, please confer with the Office of the Bishop in advance so that we can render the necessary guidance, assistance, and scheduling.
- In all parishes of the Diocese of Lubbock, by 2026, EIGHTH GRADE is to be the maximum grade level at which Confirmation will be celebrated.
- In the Diocese of Lubbock, preparation for Sacraments is NOT required to follow a two year curriculum.

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- The high school students in our families and communities of faith need to be ministered to in a very different manner from traditional catechesis or religious education.
- Ministry to youth is a **CRITICAL NEED** at this time.



Local World Youth Day 2022 at Saint Anthony Church in Brownfield

Our primary task as Church is to make disciples, not students. As Jared Drees of “The Religion Teacher” likes to say: Students prepare for tests; Disciples prepare for the final test. Students focus on grades; disciples focus on grace. Students learn about Jesus; disciples follow Jesus.”

The work of formation in faith is about responding to Jesus’ parting words to his disciples to “Go make disciples of all nations . . .” (MT 28:19). Disciples have had an encounter with Jesus; formation in faith is to facilitate that encounter by making Jesus accessible. “Communion with Jesus Christ, who died and rose again, who is living and always present, is the ultimate end of all ecclesial action and therefore of Catechesis as well.” (DFC #426). May the Immaculate Heart of Mary, under whose embrace the Diocese of Lubbock is entrusted as our Patroness, intercede for us as together we move further into the middle of the Twenty-First Century, now approaching the Jubilee Year of 2025 as proclaimed by Pope Francis “As Pilgrims of Hope.”

Bishop Coerver's top priorities

*shared at the Mass celebrating the 40th Anniversary
of the Diocese of Lubbock on June 17, 2023*



- Focus on the young adults and youth of the diocese
- Help Catholics form relationships through involvement in small groups of prayer, study, fellowship, support
- Develop families as such small groups and offer them support and opportunities for service as Missionary Disciples
- Encourage effective, healthy, and legitimate retreat experiences and programs
- Make use of and support efforts of the Catholic Education Growth Fund (a new initiative of the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops, to widen the space of the tent of Catholic Education) to support families and parishes and local communities in providing quality and effective faith formation opportunities and strategies.

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Students focus on grades; disciples focus on grace. Students
learn about Jesus; disciples follow Jesus.*

- Jared Drees
of "The Religion Teacher"



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