

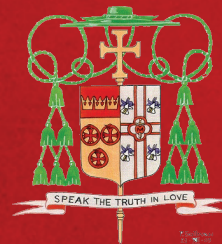
ECCLESIA SEMPER REFORMANDA

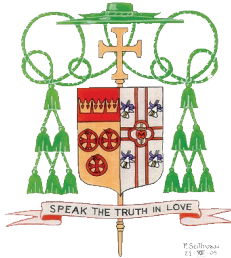
(THE CHURCH IS ALWAYS IN NEED OF RENEWAL)



A PASTORAL LETTER ON
THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IN THE
DIOCESE OF SIOUX CITY, IOWA

*MOST REVEREND R. WALKER NICKLESS
BISHOP OF SIOUX CITY*





ECCLESIA SEMPER REFORMANDA

(The Church is Always in Need of Renewal)

A Pastoral Letter on the Future of the Church in the
Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa

Text and Study Guide
Most Reverend R. Walker Nickless
Bishop of Sioux City

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In 2009, I presented a vision for the future of the Church of Northwest Iowa. So much has changed in those eight years, and yet that same vision, and those pastoral priorities remain all the more urgent and necessary, particularly in light of the many changes brought about by our Pastoral Plan for the future of our parishes, called “Ministry 2025”.

We have all begun the prayerful process of contemplating and planning for the future of our diocese and its individual parishes. It is vitally important that we all be mindful of the vision set forth in this pastoral letter. These priorities form the foundation upon which “Ministry 2025” is built. We must be working in unison, each and every one of us, toward these goals. Indeed, eight years later, the vision and priorities remain the same. What is this vision? What are those priorities? That: 1) We must renew our reverence, love, adoration and devotion to the Most Blessed Sacrament, within and outside of Mass. A renewal of Eucharistic Spirituality necessarily entails an ongoing implementation of the Second Vatican Council’s reform of the liturgy as authoritatively taught by the Church’s Magisterium, namely, the promotion of Eucharistic Adoration outside of Mass, regular reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of the Eucharist and our Mother. 2) We must strengthen catechesis on every level, beginning with and focusing on adults. If we who are supposed to be mature in faith do not know the Catholic faith well, how can we live it and impart it to our children and future generations of Catholics? 3) The first two pastoral priorities, renewal in Eucharistic Spirituality and Catechesis, will foster faithful families that are the foundation of the Church and society. We are called to protect, build up and encourage holy families in our midst, without whom the Church and the world would perish. 4) If we renew the Eucharistic, catechetical and family life of our diocese, we will simultaneously foster a culture where young people can more readily respond to the radical calls of ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life. 5) Finally, we must acknowledge and embrace the missionary character of the Catholic faith and the vocation of all Catholics to be, not only disciples, but also apostles.

All of these priorities are absolutely vital for the success of “Ministry 2025”, and in turn, the future of the Church of Northwest Iowa. However, one goal stands out particularly as key. It is absolutely critical for the future of the Diocese. Moreover, it speaks of what must be at the very heart of all of our ministry efforts moving forward: that is, mission!

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has made the “Joy of the Gospel” one of the central and consistent themes of his pontificate. Our visible joy – the joy of being Christ’s disciples, the joy of embracing our vocations, the joy of walking with our Savior in the way of the Cross in every aspect of our lives – is what makes our Catholic faith noticeable and attractive to others. Indeed, Blessed Pope Paul VI (soon to be Saint) likewise affirmed, “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.” Truly, the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus, and the world around us is so desperately in need of that joy.

Why this emphasis on Joy? Ultimately, it is because the joy of the Gospel, the joy of encountering Christ, the joy of living the fullness of faith, is in many ways the very foundation of our mission. It is a fundamental part of our identity as Catholic Christians. We are all empowered by the Holy Spirit and called to make disciples. We must share the love of Christ. With the help of God's grace, we all must strive for the renewal and transformation of the world around us through the joy of the Gospel. As Pope Francis reminds us, "The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew."

Much like the Samaritan woman who encountered Jesus at the well, when we have encountered Christ, and experienced this great joy, we cannot help but be driven to bring that joy to others. "The joy of evangelizing always arises from grateful remembrance: it is a grace which we constantly need to implore. The apostles never forgot the moment when Jesus touched their hearts." Surely, we must realize that "[The] task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church." Moreover, this call to evangelize forms our deepest identity, and the grace and vocation proper to the Church. If then the Church exists to evangelize, it is equally true that the diocese, the local parish, and even every individual who places their faith and hope in Christ, are called to evangelize, and to make disciples. Our faith teaches us that by virtue of our baptism, all of us, whatever our position in the church and level of formation, are "agents of evangelization." In truth, it is the duty of all Christians to share the Gospel with joy! This joy is rooted in true, and genuine encounter with Christ. This encounter is vital and essential to one's very real and intimate relationship with Christ.

Our Catholic faith provides us with a wealth of opportunities in which we encounter Christ; in catechesis, in the Sacred Liturgy, in prayer, in the study of Scripture, and also in and through our relationships with one another. Recognizing this, and the importance of encountering Christ, Pope Francis admonishes us, "I invite all Christians... to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day." Indeed, the success of "Ministry 2025," the future of the Church of Northwest Iowa depends on this! We must not only seek more and more diligently to encounter Christ ourselves, but to also lead others to encounter Christ for themselves. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI declared, "To the extent that we nourish ourselves on Christ and are in love with him, we feel within us the incentive to bring others to him: Indeed, we cannot keep the joy of the faith to ourselves; we must pass it on."

Mindful of her mission to evangelize, the Church has always been aware of the fact that we are always in need of evangelization and renewal. "The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love; and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love... [She] has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel... [The Church] is evangelized by constant conversion and renewal, in order to evangelize the world with credibility."

For “Ministry 2025” to be effective, we must recover our primary identity as evangelizers, people who are not afraid to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It is of the utmost importance that this sense of mission motivate all of our efforts and planning. The reality is that, “All renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal.” Pope Francis likewise encourages us to consider that “All Church institutions, from the papacy to parishes, must be reformed so that their structures are directed not toward maintenance, but toward a permanent state of mission.” With this in mind we must begin to move beyond merely doing things the way we have always done them. United with the Holy Father, “I invite everyone to be bold and creative in the task of rethinking the goal, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” It is time for the faithful of the Church of Northwest Iowa to prayerfully consider how we too can begin to shift our focus away from merely status quo, to a deeper faith and fidelity to Jesus Christ; from maintenance to mission! Empowered by the Holy Spirit, nourished by the Sacraments, constant in prayer, let us go forth in mission!

The work of evangelization is broad, touching on all aspects of the Catholic Christian life. Be it our witness or the proclamation of the Gospel; be it in religious education or in our Catholic schools, or in the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy and the Sacraments, we must ever more embrace our missionary call to be evangelized ourselves, and to evangelize. We must also remember that we must seek to not only strengthen our relationship with the Lord, but also with one another. It has been said that there is no unity without community. Evangelization, our call to mission, points to just that: communion with Christ and with one another. Certainly, in the midst of the many challenges and difficulties that now face us, let us be committed to the task of being united in mission, in advancing the Kingdom of God, in building community and renewing the world around us through the joy of the Gospel. I believe that the vision offered in this pastoral letter provides a model of a Church committed to evangelization, committed to encountering Christ, and committed to renewal. Over the last several years there has been much discussion about building a culture of discipleship in our parishes. It must be understood that the vision I present to you in this pastoral letter, is just that: the characteristics of a community of disciples, intentionally living in a state of mission, committed to that task of evangelization, making disciples, and transforming the world around them with the joy of the Gospel.

Your brother in Christ.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R. Walker Nickless". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend R. Walker Nickless
Bishop of Sioux City

22 February 2018
Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter

To the Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Persons and all the Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Sioux City

I. Introduction

Praised be Jesus Christ, now and forever! It has now been almost four joyful years of being your bishop. It has been a time of learning and growth for me as a priest, called beyond my desires and talents, not without God's grace making up for all that is lacking in me, to be the shepherd for the flock in northwest Iowa. As shepherd, I am called to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15), the truth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, inseparable from His Church, "at the same time holy and always in need of renewal and reformation."¹ In order to do this, I have travelled to meet the priests and people of the diocese, always listening, asking questions, studying and, of course, praying about the current state of the Church. Now I offer my understanding of the state and direction of the Church, both universal and particular, at this juncture in her history. I propose this pastoral plan—a vision, so to speak—for the future of our Diocese, and some practical guidance for achieving our goals.

My understanding begins with these personal reflections. I studied and was ordained a deacon and priest during the exciting, almost intoxicating, time of the Second Vatican Council. I am thoroughly a product of that momentous time, the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church in centuries. It has formed the context and culture of my entire ministerial life. Like Pope John Paul the Great, I have no other desire for my ministry than seeing the hopes and reforms of the Second Vatican Council fully implemented and brought to fruition.² Like Pope Benedict XVI, I know that, while we have worked hard, there is still much work to do.³ My understanding of this work has grown and deepened over the past forty years. So it must be for all of us. The Church is always in need of renewal because it is made up of us, imperfect human

"In looking over the years following the Second Vatican Council the Synod Fathers have been able to verify how the Holy Spirit continues to renew the youth of the Church and how he has inspired new aspirations towards holiness and the participation of so many lay faithful. This is witnessed, among other ways, in the new manner of active collaboration among priests, religious and the lay faithful; the active participation in the Liturgy, in the proclamation of the Word of God and catechesis; the multiplicity of services and tasks entrusted to the lay faithful and fulfilled by them; the flourishing of groups, associations and spiritual movements as well as a lay commitment in the life of the Church; and in the fuller and meaningful participation of women in the development of society. At the same time, the Synod has pointed out that the post-conciliar path of the lay faithful has not been without its difficulties and dangers. In particular, two temptations can be cited which they have not always known how to avoid: the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world."

– Christifideles Laici, #2

¹ Lumen Gentium #8

² See quote in sidebar, p.3

³ See quote in sidebar, p.4

beings. This is the deepest reason: as individuals and as a Church, we are always called to grow, change, deepen, repent, convert, improve, and learn from our successes and failures in the pursuit of holiness and fidelity to Jesus Christ and the mission he has given us. Moreover, we need to do this in the midst of an ever changing world, culture and society.

I have experienced this as a priest and now, through the biggest change of all for me, as a bishop. Despite my own unworthiness, I have been blessed abundantly by the Lord Jesus Christ in his call to me, in the graces of my episcopal ordination, and in your support and cooperation. I am happy and blessed to be your bishop. Having been called by God and the Church, I want to do my part to fulfill His mission among you. Thus, we need serious reflection and evaluation of the current state and direction, challenges and opportunities, for faith and ministry in our Lord Jesus Christ in our Diocese.

II. The Second Vatican Council and the New Evangelization

As is well known, Blessed Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council to be the moment of renewal for the Church in the modern world. The world had changed a great deal since the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, the so-called Enlightenment, and the secular revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Church now found herself beset on all sides by a world that could no longer understand her, and from within by an unfortunate tendency to isolation, fearing engagement with the rapidly changing world.

In opening the Council, Blessed John stated that the “greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council” was twofold: “that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be [both] guarded and taught more efficaciously.”⁴ Later in the speech, he elaborated on this: “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another.”⁵ The teachings of the Church, our identity and culture as Catholics, must be loved and guarded, yet

⁴ Pope John XXIII, Oct 11, 1962

⁵ Ibid.

“If we live in opposition to love and against the truth - in opposition to God - then we destroy one another and destroy the world. Then we do not find life but act in the interests of death. All this is recounted with immortal images in the history of the original fall of man and the expulsion of man from the earthly Paradise. Dear brothers and sisters, if we sincerely reflect about ourselves and our history, we have to say that with this narrative is described not only the history of the beginning but the history of all times, and that we all carry within us a drop of the poison of that way of thinking, illustrated by the images in the Book of Genesis. We call this drop of poison ‘original sin’.”

– Homily of Pope Benedict XVI, 8 December 2005, on the 40th Anniversary of the close of the Second Vatican Council

Personal Reflection

1. What are my reasons for reading this Pastoral Letter? How do I hope to grow and change from the Bishop’s words?
2. How have I grown over the years in my vocation?
3. Do I appreciate the Bishop of Sioux City and pray for him to lead and guide the Diocese?
4. How do I “speak the truth in love?”
5. In what ways am I in need of being renewed? Am I in need of growth in holiness and conversion toward Jesus Christ?
6. In what ways has Jesus Christ blessed me? What are the gifts and talents God has given me?

despite the sinful human beings who comprise her in this world, but His Sacrament, Bride and very Body. She is the Kingdom of God, visible in human history, already but not yet perfected in Heaven. A love of “our Mother and Teacher” the Church should be fostered at every level, not primarily as an institution, but as a holy mystery to be contemplated, loved, suffered for and renewed by our commitment.

We receive and accept the fullness of faith in the Church both objectively and affectively. Before the Second Vatican Council, our catechesis in the United States was very strongly formal and aimed at the head. We memorized concise answers to common questions, and followed the disciplines of the Church because that was what Catholics did. We knew the answers to “what” and “how,” but not the deeper answer to “why.” We fell into a shallow formalism; we did not use the form for its true end, namely, a deep, personal, intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit that transforms our hearts. After the Council, we swung wildly in the opposite direction: our catechesis became very strongly affective in order to emphasize the relational aspect. We tried to mine our experience of God’s love for us, to learn how to love God deeply, personally, intimately in return. But without the formal knowledge of faith, experience alone is not a solid teacher. As a result, two generations of us now have a very poor knowledge both of the Catholic Faith and of Jesus Christ. A religious illiteracy and ignorance pervades many sectors of the Church; it is an open wound in her side. We need a solid, systematic, and comprehensive catechesis, not eschewing “what” and “how,” answering also “why,” faithful to the entire Deposit of Faith and the Church’s Magisterium, forming both head and heart.²⁸

Despite the Church’s constant emphasis on the primary importance of adult catechesis, we continue to focus, sometimes exclusively, on youth and adolescent education.²⁹ It is the Church’s constant teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children, yet we continually fail to provide them with the requisite formation, knowledge, and skills. Instead, we attempt

²⁸ Catechesi Tradendae # 27, 21

²⁹ See Catechesi Tradendae #43, Christus Dominus #14, Ad Gentes #14

“The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”

– John Paul, II, Catechesi Tradendae #5

Theological Reflection

1. What is the connection between our knowledge of God and our ability to be in a relationship with Him?
2. Describe the importance of the goal of catechesis and evangelization “to lead the faithful to a divine person, Jesus, not simply an idea”.
3. What is the balance between the formal knowledge of faith and the relational aspect of faith? What are ways that the “what, how, and why’s” of faith can be answered comprehensively?
4. What are direct and immediate ways of catechizing adults?
5. Is the insufficient catechesis of adults the result of a lack of desire to learn or an ignorance of how to learn about the teachings of the Church?

Notes:

most, if not all, the teaching in schools and parish programs. How can parents and parishioners live the Catholic faith and impart it to others if they don't know it themselves? I learned a long time ago in my seminary studies, "*Nemo dat quod non habet*" — no one can give what he does not have. Youth and young adult catechesis cannot be healthy unless we have rigorously well-formed adults who witness the Catholic Faith in their lives, in teaching their families, and in the Church and the public square.

For this to take place, the leadership of the clergy and catechists is irreplaceable. As Pope Paul VI taught us, "The modern world listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if it listens to teachers it is because they are first witnesses."³⁰ At the foundation of our catechesis must be personal witness to the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I am convinced with Pope John Paul the Great that the "the more the Church, whether on the local or the universal level, gives catechesis priority over other works and undertakings, the results of which would be more spectacular, the more she finds in catechesis a strengthening of her internal life as a community of believers and of her external activity as a missionary Church."³¹

3. The first two pastoral priorities, renewal in Eucharistic Spirituality and Catechesis, will foster faithful families that are the foundation of the Church and the society. We are called to protect, build up and foster holy families in our midst, without whom the Church and the world perish.

"A man and a woman united in marriage form a family together with their children. God instituted the family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution. Marriage and the family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children."³² This seems really basic, but it is worth repeating in our day and age when the family has

³⁰ Evangelii Nuntiandi #41.

³¹ Catechesi Tradendae #15.

³² Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church #456.

"Dear families, you too should be fearless, ever ready to give witness to the hope that is in you (cf. 1 Pet 3:15), since the Good Shepherd has put that hope in your hearts through the Gospel. You should be ready to follow Christ towards the pastures of life, which he himself has prepared through the Paschal Mystery of his Death and Resurrection."

— John Paul II, Letter to Families #18

Personal Reflection

1. In what ways have I protected and strengthened family life?
2. How does my marriage make me holy?
3. How do I try to love my spouse and children to heaven?
4. Are family prayers a priority in my family? Are they more than just meal time prayers?
5. How do I uphold the teachings of the Catholic Church in the area of marriage, family life and sexual morality? Have I tried to come to a deeper understanding of these teachings?
6. How have I counteracted those things in society that threaten authentic Catholic marriage and families such as pre-marital promiscuity, cohabitation, contraception, abortion, pornography, divorce, and infidelity?

Notes:

have a grave responsibility to build up and nurture holy families in our midst. We must do so by strengthening their Catholic faith, identity, and culture through the above pastoral priorities, but also by sustained preaching and well-crafted pastoral ministry programs. We must give concrete help against the corrosive effects of pre-marital promiscuity, cohabitation, contraception and abortion, pornography industry, easily executed divorce, and infidelity. But we must also guard against and equip families to resist the breakdown of the family that sometimes happens through over-activity, the domination of communication technologies and novelties, and the cult of fun and entertainment, to name just a few dangers.

A concerted effort by the diocesan staff, pastors, priests and deacons, catechists and, of course, parents to find concrete, creative ways of strengthening family life in our communities is an urgent necessity. A renewal of family life is a sure recipe for the renewal of the Church and our society, and it must receive our creative attention and pastoral concern.

4. If we renew the Eucharistic, catechetical, and family life of our Diocese, we will simultaneously foster a culture where young people can more readily respond to the radical calls of ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life.

It is no secret that the Church is struggling to fill the ranks of her priests and religious. Why would anyone give their life to the Church and her faith, unless they already know it, love it, and live it? The lack of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life is not a mystery; it is precisely a crisis of faith. Where Catholic faith and life flourish, vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life also flourish. If we are faithful in the above objectives or pastoral priorities, I am confident that vocations will come. If the Eucharist is the center of our lives, so that we worship God alone; if catechesis is strong, so that we know and love God intimately; if families are strengthened through our pastoral ministry, so that the common priesthood sets an inspiring example,

“The priest is not a mere office-holder, like those which every society needs in order to carry out certain functions. Instead, he does something which no human being can do of his own power: in Christ’s name he speaks the words which absolve us of our sins and in this way he changes, starting with God, our entire life. Over the offerings of bread and wine he speaks Christ’s words of thanksgiving, which are words of transubstantiation – words which make Christ himself present, the Risen One, his Body and Blood – words which thus transform the elements of the world, which open the world to God and unite it to him.”

– Pope Benedict XVI Homily
June 11, 2010

Personal Reflection

1. What have I been doing to promote vocations to priesthood and religious life? What more could I do?
2. How do I challenge the youth today to strive for the highest ideals and the common good?
3. Am I supportive of the idea that one of my children or family members could be called to the priesthood or religious life?
4. How could my actions and life style have possibly deterred others from considering priesthood and religious life?
5. Do I respect and uphold the dignity of priests and religious?

gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the Church itself.”⁴³ The laity are called to sanctify the temporal order: to bring Christ in their heart, head, and hands into their families, workplaces, professions, schools, and the public square; to show love for Him among their children, friends, coworkers, and even acquaintances. Thus the lay faithful exercise their prophetic, priestly and kingly vocation, received in Holy Baptism. To list all the opportunities around us to do so would be impossible; most importantly, I want to call forth their genius, creativity and zeal to tell me and my clergy how this can be done here and now.

V. Conclusion

“Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a ‘proof’ of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a ‘not yet.’ The fact that this future exists changes the present.... Faith gives life a new basis, a new foundation.... Above all, it is seen in the great acts of renunciation, from the monks of ancient times to Saint Francis of Assisi and those of our contemporaries who enter modern religious institutes and movements and leave everything for love of Christ, so as to bring to men and women the faith and love of Christ, and to help those who are suffering in body and spirit.... For us who contemplate these figures, their way of acting and living is *de facto* a ‘proof’ that the things to come, the promise of Christ, are not only a reality that we await, but a real presence: he is truly the ‘philosopher’ and the ‘shepherd’ who shows us what life is and where it is to be found.”⁴⁴

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in the time I have been among you I have learned how admirably strong is the faith to which you cling, yet how far from the “fullness of faith” to which we are called by our loving Savior. We truly need today those “great acts of renunciation” for the sake of Christ: not so much renunciation of our material things, as of our false attachments to both material and spiritual things. In order to strengthen our devotion to Christ in the Holy

⁴⁴ Spe Salvi, #7-8.

“Dear brothers and sisters, during the Synod Assembly, the problems and prospects of the new evangelization in America have been examined. Any solution is based on the awareness of the urgent duty of ardently and courageously proclaiming Jesus Christ, Redeemer of the whole man and of every man. It is only in drawing from this living source that we can effectively stand up to all the challenges.”

– Homily of Pope John Paul II concluding the special synod for the New Evangelization in America December 12, 1997

Personal Reflection

1. Do I actively communicate and look for opportunities to hand on the faith to others, both friends and strangers?
2. What programs do I participate in at my parish and in the Diocese that seek to evangelize fallen away Catholics and non-Catholics?
3. In what ways do I participate in the New Evangelization?
4. What am I doing to be evangelized?
5. How do I place my trust and reliance on God when I evangelize?

Notes:



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