

2014

PASTORAL LETTER: “Find Your Home in Christ”



Bishop Terry R. LaValley

Diocese of Ogdensburg

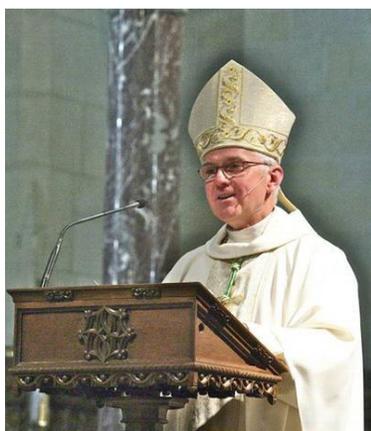
4/9/2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

We have been blessed! This past year, our faith has been challenged, enriched and celebrated from one end of our diocese to the other as we observed *The Year of Faith* and as we welcomed a new Pope. During this truly graced time, the Diocese of Ogdensburg embarked upon a very special endeavor. On February 14, 2013, the Diocese of Ogdensburg set out on a quest for clarity of mission. Given my desire for close collaboration with the faithful, I established an Envisioning Leadership Team to help me assess our needs and priorities as a diocese. Since that time, this faith-filled team, made up of women and men from across our diocese, met for day-long meetings once a month.

As you know, several Listening Sessions were held throughout the North Country giving me the opportunity to hear from a broad cross-section of our diocesan sisters and brothers so that the fruits of the Leadership Team's labors would reflect the pulse of our parishioners' experiences and concerns. The formal aspect of this envisioning process concluded at this year's Christ Mass with the announcement of our five-year vision and key priorities for ministry that have been established for every parish in the Diocese of Ogdensburg.

This is a very exciting, hope-filled time for our Church. During the Year of Faith, we have been re-energized to recommit ourselves to Jesus Christ and to share our faith with our sisters and brothers. With these priorities and goals, the faithful throughout the North Country will be invested partners, building up, in a focused manner, this Church we love.



Why now? Perhaps you remember, four years ago at my ordination/installation Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral, in my concluding remarks, I spoke of the joy of a journey, the struggle of a lifetime. We began then a new chapter in the ongoing faith story of the Catholic Church in the North Country. Today, we eagerly turn a page of that chapter. On that memorable occasion, I expressed my personal readiness to accept the mission entrusted to me and to faithfully guide all on this journey of faith. In answer to my inquiry, all those in attendance enthusiastically indicated their own eager readiness to join me. After much preparation and extensive consultation, I proclaim to you, my sisters and brothers, that we are ready to set out on this new dimension of our faith journey.

With the assistance of the Envisioning Leadership Team, I listened to hundreds of women and men from all over our diocese so that I might discern what the People of God in the North Country desire in terms of priorities in ministry and service. We all have an important role in the mission of the Church. As Blessed John Paul II taught, "Incorporated in Jesus Christ, the baptized are united to him and to his sacrifice in the offering they make of themselves and their daily activities. Because of the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay

faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church's mission." (*Christifideles Laici*, 14, 15)

Let's be honest, we look around us and know that things simply cannot stay the same. As one priest author noted, "We do not need to go to the missions anymore to find people in need of hearing the Good News. They are sitting next to us (or living next to us, or, indeed, under the same roof). Family members, friends, neighbors, either lost the faith or never really had it to begin with." (*Rossetti*, 117)

We are reminded of what the Church Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote: "At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, she should be able to answer the ever recurring questions which men ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live." (*Gaudium et spes*, 4)

So many faith-filled parishioners shared with me their reading of the times in which we live today here in the North Country. At those Listening Sessions, I mentioned that there are so many blessings and gifts here in our Diocese. We need to use those gifts wisely: to focus our time, talent and limited material resources to meet the challenges that lay ahead. But, we cannot embark on a journey aimlessly. So, at this time I want to share with the whole Church of Ogdensburg our mutually shared Vision, our Sacred Purpose:

**Christ-led, Christ-fed, and hope-filled,
The Diocese of Ogdensburg joyfully invites the people of the North Country
To the journey of faith through the proclamation of the Gospel,
The celebration of the Eucharist and the Sacraments, and the loving service of neighbor.**

For the next five years, we will be sustained in our ministry with the deep desire that all people take to heart these words: *Find your home in Christ: Renew Faith, Nurture Hope, Discover Love*. The roadmap for all to follow on this journey will call upon every parish in the diocese to embrace the following priorities and goals:

First Priority: Creating a Culture of Vocations

Goals:

- A. Establish the *We Are Called* Vocational Awareness plan for parishes by November 1, 2015.
- B. Convene *Follow Me* Summit by September 24, 2016.

Everyone has a vocation. The first vocation that each of us acquires by virtue of our baptism is to become a saint. Every person is called to be holy. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “All the faithful, whatever their condition or state—though each in his own way—is called by the Lord to that perfection of sanctity by which the Father himself is perfect.” (CCC, #825) We will build a culture where such awareness of our baptismal call is nurtured and where Church vocations are encouraged and celebrated. Genuine vocations will surface, indeed, flourish in the Diocese of Ogdensburg as our energy and fervor to bring Christ to others increase.



Second Priority: Strengthening Faith Formation in Family Life

Goals:

- A. Establish Youth Ministry, in accordance with diocesan standards, in 25-30 parishes with competent, qualified leaders (adult and youth) by June 30, 2015.
- B. Provide Family Catechesis for the Seven Sacraments for every parish by February 1, 2016.

While literally on his death bed, Bishop Wadhams said: “If one thing has, during the past year, contributed more than another to break my health and my heart, it has been the thought that one thousand seven hundred more souls annually come into the world in this diocese than receive the sacrament of baptism. There are seven sacraments, not two only—and the saddest of it all is that even these two, once accepted, are being rejected by those who formerly accepted them.” (*Early Ritualism in America, 190*)

Sound familiar?? Over one hundred and twenty years later, as we read the signs of our time today, we respond to this same concern of Bishop Wadhams with one of our pastoral priorities: strengthening faith formation in family life—enhancing youth ministry and providing family catechesis for the seven sacraments in our families.

Third Priority: Building Parishes with Living Stones

Goals:

- A. Charter a diocesan *Living Stones* Planning Committee with a clear mission and broad representation by September 1, 2014.
- B. Complete a diocesan-wide *Find Your Home in Christ* Census of all households between October 1, 2014 and August 1, 2015.



Bishop Wadhams, while reflecting on a goal he set when he learned he was to become the first bishop of this new Diocese of Ogdensburg wrote: “I know the task I have before me. The population is poor and scattered. It is a land of small settlements and long distances. The people cannot be reached by railways or stage-coaches. Even good wagon-roads are few. But I tell what I mean to do. I shall get a good pony that will carry me anywhere; and you take my word for it, it will not be long before I visit every family; and every man and woman, barefooted boy and yellow-headed girl in my diocese will know me. Yes, sir-ee!” (169)

My sisters and brothers, “*Yes, sir-ee*, you can take my word for it,” as this goal of a census is accomplished in our pastoral plan...every man and woman, every boy, shod or unshod, and every whatever colored-hair girl in this diocese will be contacted at their home by one of the local parishioners and by the time the census is completed, every person in the entire North Country will know that there is a faithful Roman Catholic living nearby who joyfully invites them to become a vibrant member of the Body of Christ we know as the Church.

Pope Francis, in the *Gospel of Joy* wrote, “In the desert, people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive. In these situations we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink...to go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 86) My friends, we shall tend to the spiritual health of all our sisters and brothers, many of whom are unaware of their spiritual ailments.

Later in that same document, His Holiness reminds us that “In virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The New Evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged to be actively engaged.” (*EG*, 120) My friends, clearly, if it ever existed, the Church that expected the person in the pew to simply “Pray, Pay, and Obey” is no more! Confident, joy-filled discipleship by all the baptized will foster a new springtime for the Church in the North Country.

Of course, it’s natural to be skeptical when something new like this arrives on the scene. My sisters and brothers, we will proceed with our goals in a step-by-step fashion, with the assistance of many persons equipped to help us address our priorities and achieve our goals. There will be guidance for our pastors and pastoral staffs.

Jesus told His disciples: “Go, therefore and make disciples...” (*Matt. 28: 19-20*). He didn’t say “stay home and wait for them to come to you!” Today I am asking for the help of every person in the pew to make our diocesan vision, not a daydream or wishful thinking, but a well-founded hope. One person, that is, the Religious Sister, Brother, Deacon or Priest, cannot convert a neighborhood on his or her own. But, through the grace of God, the whole parish has the means. I pray and am confident that we have the will.

Back in 1988, Pope John Paul II wrote: “In the present circumstances the lay faithful have the ability to do very much and, therefore, ought to do very much towards the growth of an authentic ecclesial communion in their parishes in order to reawaken missionary zeal towards non-believers and believers themselves who have abandoned the faith or grown lax in the Christian life.” (*CL, 27*) It is this mission that unifies the parishes.

I know that our priests want to minister with joy and confidence with a clear vision of where they are headed. An essential element for moving towards this goal is a re-commitment on the part of all priests to take seriously and exercise responsibly their ordination mandate to be preachers and teachers in their parish communities.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, in the midst of clergy scandals, decreasing number of active priests, scarcity of seminarians, the societal effect of secularism, and personal health concerns, haven’t these holy men, our priests here in the Diocese of Ogdensburg served us so selflessly?



Thank God for these men who so devotedly continue to minister to God’s people. Thank God for these heroes of the faith who day in and day out pastor the good people of the North Country. These your shepherds will be richly blessed for bearing their personal Crosses as they hear and heed so lovingly the Baptist’s words: *He must increase, I must decrease*. This shepherd is eternally grateful to each and every one of you, my coworker in the Lord’s vineyard for your truly inspiring ministry and for your loving patience and prayerful support of me. Thank you, men of God!

We remember St. Luke tell us the story of two discouraged, half-believing disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were let down because Jesus was dead. Then this Stranger joined them on their journey and listened to their sad story. There were these women who visited Jesus' tomb who had an unbelievable tale to tell. They had seen a vision of angels who declared he was alive. This Stranger then opened the Scriptures for the two disciples. They asked this Stranger to stay with them. He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. At this moment, the disciples recognized this Stranger. "Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us? They got up immediately and returned to Jerusalem where they recounted and rejoiced in what had just happened. (cf. *Luke 24:13-35*)



In his Encyclical on the Eucharist, soon-to-be St. John Paul II taught: "Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful can in some way relive the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: 'their eyes were opened and they recognized him' (*Lk. 24:31*)" *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 6) It is from the Eucharist that the Church draws her life. It is the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history. The women at the tomb saw a vision of angels who declared that Jesus was alive. Isn't that the message we want to proclaim to our neighbors as we set out to put flesh on our diocesan Vision Statement? It is from the Eucharist that we will draw the spiritual power needed to carry out our mission.

Now, I'm not so naïve to think that many won't quip: "This plan is too ambitious. The bishop doesn't have a clue as to what he's asking. It's not practical. It's too much." My sisters and brothers, I call upon the 'can-do' North Country spirit of all the faithful who call this place home. It is essential to understand the urgency of the moment. May we never remain on the sidelines of our diocesan march of living hope begun today. Please don't 'sit it out', but, as the recording artist, Lee Ann Womack so beautifully urges, "I hope you dance." I pray that we all give this moment more than a passing glance. This local Church, armed with passionate energy and determined resolve will heed the Lord's command: "Follow Me!" May the Blessed Virgin Mary, the 'Star of Evangelization,' inspire and guide all our efforts. Thank you for embracing the joy of the journey, the struggle of a lifetime!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley
14th Bishop of Ogdensburg

Sources:

Gaudium et Spes, 4, *Vatican II* (1965).

Rev. Stephen J. Rossetti, *Letters to My Brothers*, (2013).

Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, (1988).

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (2013).

Rev. C.A. Walworth, *Early Ritualism in America, Reminiscences of Edgar P. Wadhams, First Bishop of Ogdensburg*, 1893.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992.

Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 2003.

