

A Springtime of the New Evangelization

Pastoral letter from Bishop Oscar A. Solis

The Diocese of Salt Lake City begins another chapter in its mission of proclaiming the Gospel to all the people. As the newly installed shepherd of our local Church, I cannot help but reflect on the divine providence of God for us in the State of Utah. This is the perfect time to begin our spiritual journey together. In the world of creation, Mother Earth is awakening with spring and new life. The sun rises earlier and sets later, the coldness of winter gives way to the rising warmth of the sun, the once dormant redbuds and crabapple trees are coming back to life and starting to bloom again.

In just a few days the Catholic Church throughout the world will celebrate her own springtime of new life. Easter Sunday is here upon us. The resurrection of Christ from the dead brings about new beginnings, offering an opportunity to see and experience things with our minds and hearts renewed. On that day we will exult, with ringing bells and joyful shouts of “Alleluia,” and proclaim that he who had died is risen. Christ “*has broken the prison bars of death,*” he is “*coming back from death’s domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns for ever and ever*” (*The Exsultet*).

I. Spiritual Renewal and Rebirth

But how will we, as Church in Utah, create that moment of Easter together? This is a question I have been asked many times, ever since the first day when my appointment was announced. My answer is that I do not know, exactly, where this path will lead us, but I feel kinship with the Prophet Isaiah when he said, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God” (Is 61:1-2).

Healing the broken-hearted, releasing prisoners, comforting all who mourn are lofty goals. Nevertheless, they are precisely what our baptismal promises call us to achieve. Still, it can be a daunting task to know where to begin this new phase of our journey as we follow our Lord to the Cross, and through it to eternal life. So I suggest that we allow nature, the new growth and new life of spring, to set the tone for our local Church to bring about a rebirth in our faith as followers of Christ and a renewal of our commitment to our mission of proclaiming God’s salvation.

Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, said: “*The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love*” (*Evangelii Gaudium #120*). The mission of the Church today remains the same – to bring people closer to God in order to help them encounter Christ and rediscover the presence of God in their lives.

The spiritual rebirth of our faith and the renewed commitment will be our guiding star as I lead us along the path in carrying out our mission together. However, I cannot do it alone but need the cooperation of all. A springtime of the New Evangelization in our diocese is an undertaking that all of us Catholics must commit to. It requires the involvement of the entire faith community to bring about that spiritual renewal among our priests, deacons, women and men religious, and the laity; in our parishes and schools, pastoral and social ministries, and other components of Church life.

Here are the essential priorities I humbly share for our collaborative diocesan pastoral endeavor:

Faith Formation

For seeds of evangelization to grow and bear fruit, they must be planted and take root in the good soil of our parishes. Parishioners must be given the opportunity to receive the necessary formation to know, live and share their Christian faith. The present culture poses a serious challenge to the practice of our beliefs. Therefore, it is necessary for every Catholic to learn more about the essential teachings of Christ and our Church, in order to gain a deeper understanding of what we believe. Catechetical formation of our young children and teenagers is so important in this regard. It should bring about transformation of hearts and minds, so that they may fully live and share their faith confidently with great ardor, joy and enthusiasm.

The Holy Eucharist and Catholic Identity

As Catholic believers, we are a community of faith that celebrates our belief rooted in the Word of the Scriptures and Church tradition. Knowledge of Christ leads us to the celebration of our faith in the Eucharist, where we encounter the living presence of the risen Christ. We find our Catholic identity in the celebration of the Holy Mass and other Sacraments. These are the channels of God's graces, the fountain of new life, nourishment, forgiveness and other spiritual gifts. Renewal calls for vibrant and uplifting Sunday liturgical celebrations and other forms of worship. As Church, the people of God coming from various cultural backgrounds gather around the altar as one family even in the midst of diversity; welcoming, understanding and embracing our differences and commonalities.

Vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life

The sacramental life of the Church necessitates ministers of the altar. In our mission diocese, the harvest is great but the laborers are few. The scarcity of priests and religious is a serious concern. So, let us generate greater enthusiasm in promoting vocations to the priesthood and religious life in order to attend adequately to the spiritual needs of the people. Let us cultivate vocations within the family and in schools accompanied by constant prayers of petition, invitation and witness of our life so that more men and women may be inspired to pursue this path of life.

Social Justice and Culture of Life

Evangelization goes beyond knowing Christ and learning about God's commandments and the teachings of the Church. It is also about establishing a right personal relationship with God and with one another. The Catholic teachings should remain a secret no more. Part of our mission is to become instruments of justice and peace by respecting the dignity of every person and promoting the common good. Remember that life is a special gift from God. He created us in his own image. As Church, let us live the Gospel of life that proclaims, protects and nurtures the sacredness and rights of every person from the moment of conception to natural death.

Christ instituted marriage as sacred, making the family a sanctuary of life, a domestic church where God resides, and the heart of a civilization of love. Today, a healthy family still forms the basis of a healthy society. Confused values and various moral ills adversely harm our families these days. We must teach and uphold the fundamental truth of marriage as a loving union between a man and a woman, and strengthen its spiritual bond through prayer. Recognize the importance of formal preparation before marriage and ongoing formation for couples in order to support them in coping with the challenges of family life.

Justice and charity are the other important components of our mission of evangelization. Love for our neighbors and little ones reveals our love for God. Justice sets the right relationship among people that allows us to see in others, in the poor, the unemployed, the addicts, the sick, the least in our society, the undocumented and the refugees, the very face of Christ. For this reason, let us renew our support and strengthen diocesan and parish justice ministries so that these become distribution centers of charity and dispensers of God's blessings, especially to those in need.

Ecumenism and Interfaith Dialogue

There is some hostility in proclaiming the Gospel in the public square. Let us foster a dialogue and encounter, not only with ourselves and with God, but with those who do not share our beliefs. Courage and fidelity to our mission come along with mutual respect, understanding and harmony among diverse people and leaders of different faith denominations. Commitment to ecumenism, dialogue and unity is our big contribution to the world and humanity. Let us intensify our prayer that the grace of God be upon us to warm our hearts, mold our minds and guide our hearts toward an ever-greater unity and peace by extinguishing hatred, by opening paths to mutual understanding, and by constructing not walls but bridges that connect. As Pope Francis said, "*Communication has the power to build bridges, to enable encounter and inclusion, and thus to enrich society. How beautiful it is when people select their words and actions with care, in the effort to avoid misunderstandings, to heal wounded memories and to build peace and harmony*" (**Message for World Day of Social Communications, Jan. 22, 2016**).

II. Culture of Dialogue and Accompaniment

Pope Francis, in his Lenten message, emphasized that the culture of encounter is a theme desperately needed in our world today. We live in a climate of division and polarization, where differences are highlighted according to race or cultural traditions, religion or politics, gender and color of skin. Such differences have resulted in hatred, hostility and distrust. The antidote is dialogue tempered with charity that allows us to recognize the sanctity of life in the mother's womb; to meet and welcome the strangers, the poor, the sick, the homeless, the immigrants and refugees as our brothers and sisters; to tear down walls that separate us and instead build bridges; to embrace one another with mutual love and respect for one's dignity as a person and as a friend.

As Bishop of Salt Lake City, I ask that we all strive together to make the New Evangelization truly become a part of everyday fabric of our local Church. The New Evangelization challenges us to live our identity and mission as disciples of Jesus. Let us leave our comfort zones, reach out to all our brothers in order to establish friendship with everyone even with those who are on the margins of society and in the peripheries so that no one feels the bitterness of isolation and abandonment. Let us bring the Good News of God's love for us to the whole world and to every person we meet whether they be our neighbors or complete strangers. In a spirit of Christian discipleship, share your personal encounter of Christ with your family, friends and other people and let us do it every day with enthusiasm and joy anywhere you go – on the street, in a city square, at school, in the marketplace and wherever you are (*Evangelii Gaudium* #127).

III. Be Missionary Disciples

“Our Church exists to evangelize,” Pope Benedict XVI declared. Her very purpose is to proclaim the Gospel by the way we believe, love and serve one another. Members of the Church, we are called to be missionary disciples of Christ. Therefore, we must not make the mistake of trying to hoard the fullness of God's goodness within the walls of our Church. Christianity is a religion built in the spirit of sharing. As God shared His love for us through Christ His Son, so we are called to share the Good News with everyone, not only to those in the pews but also in the workplace and our communities. To do this, we must transform ourselves into missionaries so that we may draw to Christ the poor, the broken-hearted, those who have left the Church as well as those who have not heard of Christ and never encountered Him in their life.

But be missionaries of mercy with compassionate hearts and the ability to heal wounds, to warm the hearts of others and be a brother or sister to one another. Pope Francis recommended that we establish our Church parishes as field hospitals always ready and open to receive sick people and bind their wounds, and where God's compassion and mercy is dispensed. Each of us has wounds to heal. Let our Church offer a soothing balm for God's people and offer this soothing ointment to others even as we partake of it ourselves.

I know that there are many challenges to the faith. Our society today mocks our efforts to uphold the dignity of life. We are opposed when we speak out against abortion; when we insist that the homeless, the poor, the sick, the incarcerated, and those who are addicted to harmful substances must be seen as people worthy of respect despite their circumstances; when we encourage our neighbors and our state and our nation to welcome the immigrant and the refugees. These are challenges indeed but we count on the grace of God. His assurance is clear: “Whatever you do to one of the least of these my brethren, you do it to me” (Mt. 25:40). So, do not be afraid and take courage. After all, this mission is not ours, it is Christ's, who accompanies us at all times.

IV. Go and Proclaim the Good News

Our Church needs more witnesses who can manifest the presence of God in our world. It begins in our own conversion through personal encounter with Christ in our life. The love of God we experience compels us to go and share the joy of the Gospel and the beauty of our faith with others (2 Cor 5:14).

This is our common mandate from Christ as His disciples. Let us stay close to each other accompanying and leading other people to God. As we journey together as one family in faith, we hope to establish God's kingdom of love, justice and peace along our path. I ask that we take this blessed time to renew our commitment to our vocation and mission. By doing so, united in the service of God, we will indeed be oaks of justice planted by the Lord, unfurling new leaves to show His glory in this beautiful Rocky Mountain springtime.

Easter Season has come upon us to usher novelty and youthfulness, rebirth and newness of life. It is a sacred moment and a wonderful opportunity to allow our renewed faith to transform our hearts and minds. Through the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, may God bless us so that working together in unity and solidarity as a family of faith, a springtime of the New Evangelization becomes a reality in our Church here in the Diocese of Salt Lake City.

+ *The Most Rev. Oscar A. Solis*
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