

February 18, 2026
Ash Wednesday

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Recently, I read a new work of Bishop Erik Varden, a Trappist monk and Bishop-Prelate of the Territorial Prelature of Trondheim, Norway, entitled, *Towards Dawn: Essays in Hopefulness* (Elk Grove Village, IL: Word on Fire, 2025). What drew me immediately into his writings were these opening sentences:

"It is often casually said that we live in post-Christian times. I believe that statement to be false. Theologically, the term 'post-Christian' makes no sense. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, and all the letters in between. He carries constitutionally the freshness of morning dew. Christianity is of the dawn. If at times, during given periods, we feel enshrouded by twilight, it is because another day is in the making. It seems to me clear that we find ourselves in such a process of awakening now...Secularization has run its course. It is exhausted, void of positive finality. The human being meanwhile, remains alive with deep aspirations. It is an essential task of the Church to listen to these attentively, with respect, then to orient them towards Christ, who carries the comfort and challenge for which the human heart yearns" (*Preface*).

This orientation towards Christ so that we might remain in him ("*Remain in me*" - John 15:4), is the essence of the forty-day retreat the Lenten season offers you and me in preparation for the renewal of our Baptismal Promises at Easter. At the beginning of this sacred time, I write to you a third pastoral letter focusing on a theme that I spoke of on the day of my appointment as Bishop of Syracuse back in June 2019 – "In You All Find Their Home" – the last line of Psalm 87 as it is prayed in the Church's "Liturgy of the Hours."

If we look back in the Church's calendar to the second day of the month of February, we encounter the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord that gives flesh to our consideration of the theme and image of, in God and in God's house, finding a "home." Through the persons of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, along with Simeon and Anna, we encounter in this event found in Luke 2:22-39, some fundamental dynamics meant to be found in houses of worship, that is, in our parish churches.

First, they must be places where people feel warmly welcomed! Second, they are to be places where one gives true worship to our Triune God through our engagement in the Church's sacramental life and the rituals which are an outward sign of God's presence, and the grace (the gift) he wants to share from His very self. Third, our houses of worship are to be places of encounter, where we hear the word of God and through the working of the Holy Spirit, allow God to speak to our inner hearts, in order to mold our daily living into the divine image in which we are made. Finally, in our encounter with God's Real Presence, our houses of worship mission

us to go forth and to carry the light and peace of Christ into our homes, neighborhoods, nation, and world.

Again, we look to the subsequent verses of Luke 2:40-52, Verse 40 states; "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." How did this happen? Not only by what we, today, would refer to as the Domestic Church – that is, family life as the most fundamental community of faith (see *Lumen Gentium* #11), but also by a weekly keeping holy of the Lord's Day through worship and instruction in one's local house of worship, i.e., the parish church.

The *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011) highlights the importance of this weekly encounter in its commentary on Simeon and Anna. It states: "Both Simeon and Anna illustrate that waiting involves action and contemplative listening. They go to the place where their faith finds its home, and they are people of prayer. They were not simply in the right place at the right time; they were in the right place spiritually and recognized the time of God's action" (p. 2119).

It is in this context that I wish to address the need for our parishes and their pastors, along with their collaborators in pastoral ministry, to strengthen parish life in the areas of teaching the Catholic faith in its fullness (catechesis/sacramental preparation/Scripture study) and in providing the spiritual nourishment of both Sacraments and of the Church's devotional life on a regular, consistent basis.

Evangelizing Catechesis for Mission

Pope Francis in his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), wrote: "Catechesis is an essential part of the Church's mission to evangelize. It is the process by which we come to know Jesus Christ and his saving message, and it is the means by which we are formed as disciples who are sent out to proclaim the Gospel to others" (#222). Catechists, including teachers in parish programs and in our Catholic schools, along with those involved in youth ministry, play a vital role in this journey with the younger members of our diocesan Church by providing instruction, guidance, and support in accompanying our young people to know Jesus Christ personally and intimately. This is done through regular Faith Formation programs in our parishes, through Sacramental Preparation, participation in Sunday and Holyday Masses, and faith-based activities to engage our young people in the life of Christ's church.

The *Directory for Catechesis* (2020) presented by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization outlines five tasks for catechesis in the process of accompaniment: (1) Leading to knowledge of the faith – Scripture and Tradition; (2) Initiating Celebration of the Mystery – Liturgy and Sacraments; (3) Forming for Life in Christ – Morality and Social Justice; (4) Teaching Prayer; and (5) Introduction to Community Life – Disciple and Vocation. Their end is to form missionary disciples who not only internalize and hold onto their beliefs, but who also actively share and live their faith out in the world – in the public square.

In 2025, the Diocesan Office of Child and Family Catechesis presented to our parishes a new set of "Curriculum Guidelines" reviewed by me for Grades 1 - 6, to foster a greater knowledge of the Catholic faith and the teachings of the Catholic Church in the areas of Revelation, Scripture, Tradition, Sacraments, Liturgy, Morality: Conscience and Christian Living, Prayer: Relationship and Reflection, Church, Vocation, and Discipleship. To have effective catechesis, it is most important to have clear standards and practices in all parishes for the faith formation of our children and adolescents.

Pope Leo XIV, in his Sunday homily during the Jubilee Mass for Catechists declared: *"In this regard, as catechists you are those disciples of Jesus who become his witnesses. The name of your ministry comes from the Greek verb katēchein, which means 'to teach aloud, to make resound. This means that the catechist is a person of the word – a word that he or she pronounces with his or her own life. Thus, our first catechists are our parents: those who first spoke to us and taught us to speak. Just as we learned our mother tongue, so too the proclamation of the faith cannot be delegated to someone else; it happens where we live, above of all in our homes, around the family table. When there is a voice, a gesture, a face that leads to Christ, the family experiences the beauty of the Gospel. We have all been taught to believe through the witness of those who believed before us. From childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and even old age, catechists accompany us in our faith, sharing in this lifelong journey."*

The Word of God

Each January, on the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Catholic Church observes "Word of God" Sunday. This observance encourages the faithful to celebrate, study, and disseminate the Word of God in both personal and communal life. It reminds parishioners of their responsibility to share the Word of God with others – through Bible study groups, Adult Education series, and charitable works inspired by the Scriptures.

Again, in our parish communities, Word of God Sunday could really be celebrated every week, whether it involves a weekly breaking open of the Sunday Scripture readings or a more in-depth study of the events and people of the Bible. At a minimum, parishes should provide (or at least reference) for their worshippers, liturgical resources that aid the faithful in reflecting on the Daily Scripture Readings found in the Church's Lectionary.

It is important also that our young people become familiar with the Holy Bible and how to navigate it, along with exploring the wisdom contained therein. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, under the article dedicated to Sacred Scripture, one finds a section entitled: "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church." Two paragraphs in it quote, *Dei Verbum* – "The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" from the Second Vatican Council. They state:

131 "And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life" (DV, #21). Hence "access to Sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful" (DV, #22).

132 The Church "forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful... to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (DV, #25).

Sacramental Preparation

Along with catechesis and the reading and study of the Word of God, a third essential aspect of the teaching office of the Church in parishes is Sacramental Preparation. The *National Catholic Directory for Catechesis* notes that Sacramental Catechesis "presents Christian life as a lifelong journey to the Father in the Son and through the Holy Spirit" (p.114). It goes on to cite that such preparation involves parents and focuses primarily on the symbols, rituals, and prayers contained in the rite for each Sacrament.

With this in mind, I wish to reiterate to pastors and parish catechetical leaders that the remote knowledge of a Sacrament given in general catechesis does not suffice for the proximate (immediate) catechesis needed for the reception of a Sacrament. The Catholic Church demonstrates this principle in its *Order of Christian Initiation of Adults* (OCIA) which dictates the need for specialized catechesis for the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist. The Church now proposes it as a model for the preparation of not only the aforementioned Sacraments, but also for the Sacrament of Marriage. Pope Francis had on multiple occasions during his pontificate called for the Church to embrace a marriage preparation model based on the baptismal catechumenate.

Through this pastoral letter, I must emphasize the importance of Sacramental Preparation for our young people and their families, and to ensure that steps are being taken to strengthen this crucial time of faith formation in our parishes. As our diocesan "Sacramental Guidelines" direct: *"Through Sacramental preparation, pastors, pastoral teams, catechetical leaders have opportunities to journey with the parents of the children being prepared to receive Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation and Penance. This is a tremendous evangelizing opportunity, leading parents into a deeper relationship with Christ and/or conversion of heart and a continuing participation in our Catholic life. We must recognize that this is a time to evangelize households, not just catechize children."*

To give the reader of this letter a concrete illustration of what this paragraph means, I am enclosing an appendix to this letter which will contain an overview of the guidelines for the Sacraments of Baptism, First Penance, First Eucharist, Confirmation, and Marriage. These guidelines reflect the requirements of the Catholic Church's *Code of Canon Law* concerning the celebration of the Seven Sacraments by the Faithful. The complete text of the Diocesan Sacramental Guidelines is available on the Diocesan website – www.syrdio.org – under the Office of Child and Family Catechesis.

In addition, the Family Life Office of the Diocese of Syracuse under my auspices will publish this month a "Framework for Marriage Preparation & Accompaniment" and new guidelines for Marriage Preparation in our parishes. In my letter introducing the framework, I share a quote from Pope Francis that gives further perspective to this new initiative in our diocese: *"Today more than ever, this preparation is presented as a true and proper occasion for*

the evangelization of adults and, often, of the so-called distant ones. There are, indeed, numerous young people for whom the approach of the wedding is an opportunity to encounter once again the faith which has long been relegated to the margins of their lives...It can be, therefore, an advantageous time for renewing their encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, with the message of the Gospel and with the teaching of the Church" (Address on the Inauguration of the Judicial Year of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota, 21 January 2017).

Pastoral Ministry in Service of Catechesis

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in #1142 reminds us that, "Certain members are called by God, in and through the Church to a special service to the community. These servants are chosen and consecrated by the Sacrament of Holy Orders, by which the Holy Spirit enables them to act in the person of Christ the head, for the service of all the members of the Church. The ordained minister is, as it were, an "icon" of Christ the priest [ed. Note – and as Pope Benedict XVI would state, 'Christ, the Deacon']."

Thus, in a particular and specific way, the priests and deacons of the Diocese of Syracuse have the wonderful, grace-filled role to accompany the lay faithful and one another, in seeking greater union with Christ and His Church. Since the inauguration of my own episcopal ministry in this diocese, one of my priorities has been evangelization – moving from Christendom to Apostolic Mission. The most common experience people have in encountering Christ is through the sanctifying function of the Sacraments (see *CIC*, Canon 835§2 & §3).

In our parish communities, a climate of welcome and hospitality is essential when inviting both members and seekers to deeper immersion in the life of the Church and to life in Christ – to actively engage in a constitutive element of the Catholic Church: the Universal Call to Holiness (see Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 5). The openness, kindness, and patience we exhibit (both clergy and laity) to those who come to our door or approach us in church or on the street is often the initial experience of the possibility and vastness of God's love and concern for them. Pope Francis often reminded those who serve in the Church that the Church is a "field hospital" (see Pope Francis, *Homily*, 5 February 2015), and of the need to meet people where they are and accompany them in their exploration, fears, doubts, and wonderment. Evangelization is about delight in who we are in God's vision and to share with another the peace that only Christ can bring (see John 14:27).

I am regrettably aware that this welcoming and open attitude may not always be present in parishes. Such occurrences are devastating to the person or family involved and clearly do not reflect Jesus' own call in the gospels, "Come to Me" (see Matthew 11:28). Persons who come searching for the church's help in their lives may be dismissed or sent away because somehow, they do not meet someone's standards (lay and clergy). I am troubled when I am told of persons being denied the celebration of Sacraments or other liturgical rites, such as the Order of Christian Funerals, because they are not a registered parishioner; or a judgment has been made concerning a person's spiritual life and their worthiness to ask for assistance. Disturbing also, are incidents when some who approach the Church in their need hear back, "it is not my job" or "I am too busy (period)." Such rigidity and insensitivity defeats Christ's own mission of meeting people, where they are on the road of life and inviting them into a renewed relationship with God [see

the stories of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10); Matthew, the Tax Collector (Matthew 9:9-13); or the Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42)].

Naturally, those in pastoral leadership by virtue of their office must uphold the Church's law regarding the celebration of the Sacraments or other rites, including the use of the approved liturgical texts. This being said, how can a parish and its leadership help to invite a person to further development in spiritual maturity and depth through proper preparation, rather than simply turning them away? Instead of sending someone away disheartened, how can we, like the Risen Lord on the road to Emmaus, approach those who are struggling and confused and help them to come to recognize Jesus in their own lives and in the breaking of the bread?

I remember as a newly ordained priest in Watertown, NY, one of my assignments was Daily Mass at the Sister Adorers of the Precious Blood Monastery. When I joined the sisters for Daily Prayer or even at Mass, I often would hear the doorbell summoning them to the reception area of the monastery, where they would encounter someone in need of help. One day I gathered the courage to ask the superior of the monastery, how could the sisters deal with such distractions in these moments? Her answer to me was simply: "Oh, Father Doug, it's easy...we leave Christ, to meet Christ." I have never forgotten this lesson.

This sage advice is critical to remember when in daily life our parish communities are asked to put into practice the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy – echoing Jesus' own words in Matthew 25:39 – "*Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" St. Vincent de Paul would counsel: "Do the good you can do, and do it today." This advice is especially important so that together in both the common and ministerial priesthood, you and I can be a living Gospel for all people to hear!

In family life, those responsible for a family feel the weight of parenthood and the pull of the expectations and sacrifices incumbent upon them in daily life. This state is meant to be no less true of the priest and deacon serving parish families which have been entrusted to them. Time for renewal through prayer and rest is important for all priests and deacons, including a weekly day off and permitted vacation time. However, as parents know, this need cannot stand in the way of caring for one's family!

For parish priests, this care needs to be the mark of one's priestly life, especially when it comes to the readiness and willingness to be available to those who approach us for the Church's Sacraments and Sacramental Rites. High in importance must be our availability for the Sacraments of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick to those who come to us or who seek pastoral visits to homes of registered parishioners, or homes and institutions within our parish boundaries. It is also the responsibility of parish priests and deacons to help couples prepare for the Sacrament of Marriage and have a better understanding of the Sacrament, through their own involvement in marriage preparation, as well as, arranging for trained married couples in their parishes to assist them for a rounded sacramental formation.

An essential element of serving those who come to our parishes seeking to know Jesus Christ and his Church, is the formation of pastoral teams to better assist in the pastoral care given in our parishes. It is important then for all the baptized to step forward and exercise their baptismal calling. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes: "*The laity can also feel called, or be in fact called, to cooperate with their pastors in the service of the ecclesial community, for the sake of its growth and life. This can be done through the exercise of different kinds of*

ministries according to the grace and charisms which the Lord has been pleased to bestow on them" (#910).

Home

A common expression often used is, "Home is where the heart is!" This is certainly my great desire concerning the parishes of the Diocese of Syracuse. St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests, described the priesthood as "the love of the heart of Jesus." Since the common priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood of those in ordained ministry all participate in the one priesthood of Christ, this should be seen as a call for our parish communities to be places where the love of the heart of Jesus is active and alive!

In the work of Bishop Erik Varden, cited at the beginning of this letter, in the essay "Evangelization in Forgetful Times," Bishop Varden speaks about "Marks of true Christian spirituality – Trinitarian, Christocentric, Biblical, doctrinal, liturgical, Catholic, i.e. hospitable." It is that word, "hospitable" that I wish to emphasize to those who read this letter as we begin our Lenten observances of prayer, fasting, and charitable works. How can this word that Bishop Varden sees synonymous with "Catholic" be our special mission as we embark on our Lenten journey?

He goes on to state, "[T]o be hospitable is to invite guests *home*, and a home has boundaries. What is more, a home is a space that is lived in and loved. To claim a home as home, it is not enough just to be able to itemize its furniture; we must use it, cherish it, make it our own." All of this is for the sole purpose "to enable" the homecoming of another – is this not a vision for our parishes? That rather than curse the darkness we may feel surrounds the present moment of human history, we can direct our attention to the final verse of the Easter Proclamation: "*May this flame be found still burning by the Morning Star: the one Morning Star who never sets, Christ your Son, who, coming back from death's domain, has shed his peaceful light on humanity, and lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.*"

A sign that hangs near my chapel in the bishop's apartment in the Cathedral rectory says, "The best sermon is not one preached with one's lips, but with one's life." This is my prayer and hope as we seek now to renew evangelizing catechesis throughout our diocese by rejuvenating faith formation in our parishes, more diligent Sacramental preparation, and above all, greater focus on the Word of God and the celebration of the Sacraments so that all may find in God and in our churches – a home!

In the Name of Jesus,

Most Rev. Douglas J. Lucia
Bishop of Syracuse

Appendices

The documents listed below are located on the diocesan website

Sacramental Guidelines and Information

[Baptism](#)

[First Penance](#)

[First Eucharist](#)

[Confirmation](#)

[Marriage](#)