

A Call to Conversion Pastoral Letter

On October 28, 2024, Bishop Gregory Parkes launched a new Pastoral Plan for the Diocese of Saint Petersburg called, "A Call to Conversion." The following is his letter to the faithful about the plan that will guide our diocese for the next five years.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In my prayer, I contemplate the People of God from the five counties of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Saint Petersburg standing firm in faith. I envision all of us making a conscious decision to place God first in our lives, making God's priorities our priorities. As we place the Lord at the center of our lives, we become more prayerful, more focused on loving and caring for our families and our neighbors in need, and less preoccupied with material things. In short, we find the true source of happiness and fulfillment that we all seek and that the Lord alone can provide. **Imagine how transformed our five counties would become if we all made God and the things of God a priority.** I have faith that, together, we can make this prayerful vision a reality.

As your Bishop, I have always firmly believed in establishing a shared vision for our diocese with clear priorities and attainable goals. For this reason, when I arrived in the Diocese of Saint Petersburg in 2017, I set out to listen and discern how the Holy Spirit was moving in our local Church. I held listening sessions throughout the Diocese and heard from countless members of our laity, priests, deacons, and religious, about their experience of Faith, their hopes for the future, and their joy in those areas of ministry where we have excelled in the past. I was edified by the various ways that so many have invested themselves in making Christ known throughout our diocese. The fruit of that experience was the articulation of the mutually shared vision, *Courageously Living the Gospel*, which focused on proclaiming Christ, inviting others into a deeper relationship with Him, and growing in that encounter with Him that gives our life "a new horizon and a decisive direction," as Pope Benedict XVI described.

Together, we have accomplished great things. We have expanded affordable housing and increased charitable support for those looking for shelter and work through Pinellas Hope and now Tampa Hope. We have expanded our outreach to youth and young adults at the parish level, in our universities, and across the Diocese. The goal of opening a new diocesan elementary school in southern Hillsborough County is moving forward. By working together, we have grown in our relationship with Christ and with one another and in doing so, we have cooperated with Him in building up the Kingdom.

In the years since we began this journey together, I have recognized a deep desire within my heart to continue to make Christ known, to follow Him more closely, to be transformed by His love, and to share that love with all those I meet. St. Augustine's well-known words continue to surface in my prayer, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We know that in this world our hearts are never completely at rest in the Lord. There are so many distractions, so many forces seeking to draw us into that constant search for satisfaction in the accumulation of possessions, power, and prestige. The great lie of our age is that we ourselves are capable of satisfying the deepest longings of our hearts.

I do not say this to discourage, but rather to encourage. **It is only in seeking Christ—in placing Him above all things—that we can experience that rest for which our restless hearts long.** We must never become complacent in this search, even to the point of embracing the challenges we will inevitably face. As Pope Francis has reminded us, our current situation poses "new challenges which, at times, are also difficult for us to understand. Our time requires us to live problems as challenges and not as obstacles: the Lord is active and at work in our world. Thus, go out into the streets and go out to the crossroads: call all those whom you find, excluding no one (cf. Mt 22:9)."

Brothers and sisters, the Lord is active and at work in the world and in our diocese! This means that in order to find our rest in Him we must allow ourselves to be moved by Him, to go out of ourselves in search of Him in the many ways that He is at work in our midst, and to be with Him there. My prayer for our diocese is that each one of us experience that restlessness and be moved out of our comfort zone into that great search for Jesus Christ, "the answer to which every human life is the question," as Pope St. John Paul II so beautifully stated.

This is at the core of my desire for how to move forward as a Diocese. Many of you have helped shape this vision. Providence had it that the global Church would embark on a renewed journey of listening and discernment. The pastoral plan contained in these pages is the fruit of the diocesan phase of the Synod on Synodality called for by Pope Francis in 2021.

Here in the Diocese of Saint Petersburg, deaneries, parishes, and other ministries hosted 156 Synod sessions with approximately 6,480 participants, in multiple languages. Furthermore, the Diocese received letters from individual Catholics and 207 responses to the online survey. Several sessions that were held focused on youth and young adults. Other sessions ensured the participation of specific groups, including migrant workers, prisoners, the homeless, the sick and

homebound, Catholics of various ethnicities, as well as young children and their parents.

As I have prayed over these responses and listened to the experiences of the countless people I encounter as I minister throughout the Diocese, I recognize both the tremendous work that we have done and continue to do, but also the opportunities that exist to go deeper in our relationship with Christ in such a way that everything be transformed. As such, in proposing this new pastoral plan, **I am not looking to impose new burdens on our priests, deacons, religious, and lay faithful, but rather to call all of us to conversion—to follow Christ more closely – and to seek new and creative ways of spreading the Gospel.** As we are taught by the U.S. Bishops' in their pastoral letter on stewardship, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, this conversion "is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life. It means committing one's very self to the Lord."

From the beginning of my time as Bishop, I have taken up Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)* as my guiding light, informing my ministry and leadership. In keeping with this urgent desire to proclaim the Gospel to all people, my prayer is that each of us would recognize the mission that flows from our personal encounter with the Lord. The more we grow in our relationship with Him, the more we should seek out ways to invite others into that relationship.

The conversion that this encounter demands of us should affect our relationship with everything. It should affect the way we relate to one another, the way parishes work together to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible, the way we structure our parish and diocesan offices and ministries, the way we immerse ourselves into our work, the way we educate our children, and the way we communicate the joy of the Gospel in all we do. Therefore, **the foundational goal of this plan is that we would challenge each other to value God above all else** as reflected through our policies, practices, activities, and decision making as individuals and families, and within our ministries, parishes, schools, deaneries, and Pastoral Center offices. As each of us deepens our understanding of what it means to value God above all else, my hope is that we will integrate this truth into our daily lives, our work, our play, and our worship. As you will see, there are three pastoral priorities that flow from this foundational goal:

1) Placing God first in all things, 2) Loving as God loves and serving as Christ serves, and 3) Going forth to make disciples.

As we prayerfully discern how best to implement the goals that correspond to each of these priorities, I ask that each of us recognize the responsibility to take this call to conversion seriously. My sincere desire is that this pastoral plan will aid us in our efforts to courageously live the Gospel, so that continued personal conversion will lead to familial, structural, and institutional conversion. Thus, I invite all of you to join me in asking the Lord how best to respond to this call to place Him first in all things, within the context of the circumstances we face.

We continue to be challenged by the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on stewardship: "Jesus' call is urgent. He does not tell people to follow Him at some time in the future but here and now—at this moment, in these circumstances. There can be no delay."

In the days and weeks ahead, I ask you to join the faithful throughout our entire diocese in praying for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, so that our restless hearts would be set on fire with His love. Let us pray that each of us would be so consumed by that love that we would be transformed more into the image of Love itself, Jesus Christ. Let us also pray that as a result, we will set our diocese and the world on fire with His love. I am confident that this is how the Lord is calling us to courageously live the Gospel in this particular moment in the history of our diocese.

As we join together in prayer, know of my prayers for you. In a special way I entrust you all to the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. May our Blessed Mother continue to lead us to her Son as we immerse ourselves into this new adventure and set out on this journey. May God's abundant blessings always be upon you and upon our diocese!

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Gregory L. Parkes
Bishop of Saint Petersburg