



“The One”

Ecclesial Renewal through a culture of “evangelizing catechesis”

A Vision for Renewal in the Diocese of Bridgeport

Most Reverend Frank J. Caggiano

Bishop of Bridgeport

A culture of “evangelizing catechesis” seeks to provide (1) effective opportunities for each baptized member of the Church to encounter the presence of Christ daily, thereby fostering an ever- deeper relationship with Him, while at the same time (2) being accompanied in their personal journey of faith towards becoming active, missionary disciples in the world.

Such a culture will facilitate the effective proclamation of the kerygma of salvation in Jesus Christ and assist every baptized member of the Church to seek radical personal holiness.

With these as its goals, an ecclesial culture of evangelizing catechesis finds its source and culmination in the full, active, conscious, and fruitful participation of every baptized Catholic in every liturgical celebration, especially that of the Sunday celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. As such, it will lay the groundwork for (1) a sustained Eucharistic revival in our Diocese, as well as (2) fostering the long-term renewal of parish life.

As noted above, evangelizing catechesis is defined by two dynamic principles, each of which demands further explanation: (1) **Fostering ongoing encounters with Christ** and (2) **“Graced Accompaniment”**.

I. Fostering Ongoing Encounters with Christ:

The Lord seeks to reveal His presence to each person made in the divine image and likeness through a variety of means that reflect the very nature of the human person. More specifically, since the

human person is a graced union of body, soul and spirit, the Lord seeks an encounter with every person through these very elements that form us.

The human transcendentals of **truth, beauty and goodness** are often identified as the principal means through which the Lord makes His presence known. This is true because humanity seeks perfection through attaining truth, beauty, and goodness. Thus, our search to encounter God, imprinted upon on individual souls, finds pathways to Him precisely through these three transcendentals in both ordinary and extraordinary ways.

Even with our best of intentions and sustained efforts, no person can manufacture or guarantee an encounter with the Lord. Every encounter with the Lord is an act of grace through the power of the Holy Spirit, building upon a person's receptivity to the movement of grace in his or her life. A culture of encounter seeks **intentionally to create as many opportunities as possible by which grace can touch the mind, heart, and spirit of a person**, thus creating the possibility that encounter with Christ may occur. However, in the ultimate analysis, God alone chooses the time, means and venue by which a person may encounter His presence, love, and mercy.

The image that can best describe an ecclesial strategy of promoting encounter with Christ is that of **sowing seeds**. Our collective task over the next few years is to sow as many seeds of potential encounter with Christ as possible, through truth, beauty, and goodness, so that such seeds will give birth to a living faith and love in those who avail themselves of these opportunities. Such effective encounters with Christ will create the first steps of discipleship that needs to grow deeper over a person's lifetime.

The three transcendentals that contribute to an ecclesial culture of encounter are:

1. **Truth:** We must recognize the fact that the fullness of **truth is a multivalent reality** whose elements all point to **God who is Truth Himself**.
 - a. Among some of the opportunities to encounter the truth are:
 - i. Providing **systematic instruction of the Catholic faith for all the baptized, especially adults and parents**.
 1. This must include learning the truths of the faith as articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
 2. Special emphasis must be given to effectively teach the Church's Eucharistic faith and teaching, especially in the Real Presence of Christ
 - a. Resource: Institute for Catholic Formation
 - ii. Offering **instructions in apologetics** in an age-appropriate manner so that the unperceived obstacles that often block the act of faith can be exposed and explained, including:
 1. Providing the faithful of all ages a comprehensive understanding of Christian Anthropology (i.e., Theology of the Body)

2. Exploring scientific and secular truth as a means by which the intimate relationship between faith and reason can be understood
 - a. Resource: Catholic schools' curriculum
 - b. Opportunity: ongoing formation of catechists and Catholic school teachers
 - c. Opportunity: To create an effective middle school/high school formational experience that will allow the transmission of faith in a holistic manner
 - iii. Utilizing and integrating opportunities afforded by **modern communication and social media to serve as educational tools** in the faith. This requires that we discern the proper limits by which technology can serve as a formational agent, since personal interaction within a community of faith is a constitutive element of all Catholic formation
 1. Resource: St John Paul II Center for Evangelizing Communication (inaugurated on April 27, 2023)
2. **Beauty**: seeks venues by which the human person can affectively encounter the presence of God, who is **Beauty Himself**. This is a constitutive element of Christian formation since an encounter with Christ demands a complete, holistic response to his invitation to conversion.
- a. Among the opportunities to encounter beauty are:
 - i. **Sacred Liturgy**: A recommitment to celebrate the Sacred Liturgy with a spirit of reverence, transcendence, and beauty, while inviting the faithful to full, conscious and active participation in the celebration of the Eucharist.
 - ii. **Sacred Music**: To afford all the baptized sustained opportunities to experience the full patrimony of sacred music that constitutes the Church's patrimony. This includes the rich variety of music from the many cultures of our global church, from Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony to contemporary Christian music.
 - iii. **Sacred Art and Architecture**: to afford those interested ongoing opportunities to encounter the concretization of divine beauty through expressions of sacred art and sacred architecture.
 - iv. **Pilgrimages**: Pilgrimages have long constituted a privileged manner of experience the sacred sites of our faith in a prayerful, reflective manner. Such "sacred journey," whether it be on a diocesan, regional or global scale can provide unique opportunities for pilgrims to encounter the grace of the Lord and opening their hearts to His message of conversion and love.
 1. A variation of pilgrimages can include a guided spiritual reflection in nature, inviting an encounter with the Divine Creator through the beauty of His creation

v. **Prayer:** While prayer transcends the single category of beauty, its categorization as an encounter of sacred beauty reminds us of the “communion” that prayer seeks. It is a time of sacred communication with the Lord who is our Beloved, inviting Him to touch our minds, hearts and wills in response to His mercy and forgiveness.

1. Our Church has a rich tradition of ways of spending time in prayer that can assist us in our individual and collective journeys of faith, such as the following:

- a. To **learn the various traditions of prayer** and the various spirituality traditions that have enriched our Church through the ages.
- b. The **study of Sacred Scripture** through classroom lessons and lectures, Bible sharing groups, *lectio divina*, and introducing the faithful to the various schools, meaning and methods of prayer.
- c. Providing **communal experiences of prayer** in as many varieties as feasible.
- d. Offering **retreats** of various lengths for those who wish to attend.
- e. Other sources of prayer can include **reflection upon Magisterial teaching**, the writings and lives of the saints and contemporary spiritual writings.
- f. Offering opportunities for the faithful to participate in the **devotional life of the Church**, including but not limited to the Liturgy of the Hours, Eucharistic processions, novenas, 40 Hours devotion, Stations of the Cross, and the festivals of the saints.
- g. Offering opportunities for the faithful to be instructed in the **Liturgical traditions of the Church** and how best to live an authentic liturgical spirituality.

b. Resource: Office of Liturgy and Worship; the Guild of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

3. **Goodness and the call to live human virtue.** Since grace builds on nature, every occasion by which a person can learn and live the human virtues provides an opportunity to experience the presence of God as He calls us to holiness in Christ.

Among the opportunities to encounter goodness are:

- a. Discerning each **person’s gifts and talents** within a larger understanding of stewardship that invites them to put those gifts at the service of others.
- b. Learning **the human virtues** and establishing them as the guardrails of one’s daily life.
- c. Providing opportunities for the **corporal and spiritual works of mercy**.

- i. This would include offering opportunities to serve those in need both in our ecclesial communities and in the larger community. This would be most effective if done in an inter-generational manner.
- d. **Recreation and friendship:** Given the fact that the human person is an embodied spirit, any engagement in physical activity, sports and recreation can become moments of encounter with the Word made flesh, inviting virtue to be lived out in concrete ways. Such occasions include:
 - i. Providing opportunities for young people to recreate in a faith-oriented environment can be a powerful formative presence for them.
 - ii. Creating social gatherings that facilitate the creation of friendships among peers that will allow disciples to accompany one another in the life of faith (see Part II below).
 - iii. Any gathering that is intentionally intergenerational in nature provides an opportunity for the “elders” in faith to be a formative presence to those who are younger and for younger generations to emerge as a source of hope for older generations.
 - iv. Offering effective invitation ministry to those who have not yet returned to Sunday worship or have disengaged from the life of the Church
- e. **Resources:**
 - i. Diocesan Young Adult Council
 - ii. Assisi Center for Environmental Stewardship
 - iii. Family and Parenting Center: to provide resources to support young families
 - iv. Marian Center for Life
 - v. Renewed Catholic Service Corp
 - vi. Ambassador Program
 - vii. The Bridge
 - viii. The Saint Luke Guild for Health Care Workers
 - ix. Catholic Schools
 - x. Men’s and Women’s Ministry Groups

4. **The Summit of Our Encounter with the Lord:**

- a. The greatest occasions for a graced encounter with the Lord are precisely through participation in **the celebration of the Sacraments**, with its culmination in the **Holy Sacrifice of the Mass**.
- b. It is during the **celebration of Mass** that we are invited, through Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, to experience the Lord’s presence, enter into the Mystery of His Death and Resurrection and receive His Sacred Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. Such an encounter is entering into Divine Communion by receiving Holy Communion.
- c. The “seeding” of individual occasions of encounter with Christ must always be oriented to and seek ways to invite every baptized member of the Church to participation in the celebration of Mass.

- i. Thus, establishing an ecclesial culture of evangelizing catechesis is an essential ingredient in our diocesan commitment to a sustained Eucharistic Revival for our diocesan church.

II. Graced Accompaniment:

To nurture a life-long and deepening relationship with the Lord through His Mystical Body, the Church, it is imperative that **effective means of accompaniment** be provided for every person of every age in their personal journey of faith. Such accompaniment provides the context within which a person can confront their own sins and wounds towards healing, seek answers to the questions of faith and life that occupy their minds and hearts and receive encouragement, reassurance, support and love as they seek to engage the world as missionary disciples.

If the opportunities of encounter are not supported by active accompaniment, a person's relationship with Christ can easily devolve into a private one, divorced from the ecclesial community of the Church that is the universal sacrament of salvation.

Accompaniment in this context is different from any other form of mentoring, friendship or socialization that marks secular life. Rather, **accompaniment refers to "walking with another person in love"**, fostering opportunities for the Lord to make His presence felt in another person's journey of life. Like moments of divine encounter, "**graced accompaniment**" is at the service of the power of the Holy Spirit who will choose the time, means and events by which questions can be asked and answered, wounds revealed and healed, and challenges overcome. The person who accompanies another in faith must be at the service of the Holy Spirit and become a vehicle of discernment at the disposal of grace. For this reason, it is called a "graced discernment."

We must also recognize that accompaniment is a mutually enriching process. More specifically, those who accompany others are themselves accompanied by the person with whom they walk in faith. This is especially true for those missionary disciples who follow the Church's preferential option to accompany, assist and support the materially, physically, psychologically, and spiritually poor in our midst. We can never forget that the poor provide spiritual riches that others do not have to share.

At the heart of all accompaniments is the need for each baptized person to be supported by the communities that form the fabric of his or her life. More specifically, there are two communities that can nurture our human and spiritual lives: (1) our **nuclear and extended human family** and (2) our **parish and diocesan ecclesial family**. Correspondingly, these two communities, and the leaders that animate them, are essential pillars in the work of accompaniment.

Those who are leaders in this work must understand that they cannot accompany where they themselves have not gone. As a result, as Pope Saint Paul VI observed, the key qualification for those who wish to accompany others in faith is that they be committed to be witnesses of faith in Jesus Christ, in and through His Church. For if they do not take their own discipleship seriously, they will be unable to assist others in their relationship with the Lord.

Finally, it is often the **experience of suffering, tragedy or loss in one's own life** or the life of a loved one that provokes the need to address the existential questions of life, including its meaning, purpose and destiny. These moments also provide powerful opportunities to accompany a person in Christian charity, especially those who suffer and to witness to the healing power that comes in and through Jesus Christ.

- 1. Nuclear and Extended Human Family:** Accompaniment in the life of faith begins in the family, as parents are to serve as the prime witnesses of faith to their children and to one another. Many parents have not been afforded the opportunities to encounter the Lord and to grow in a living relationship with Him. How can we ask them to serve as witnesses of faith to their children if we do not serve them as well? As a result, a prime objective of a renewed ecclesial culture is to create ongoing opportunities for encounter with Christ for all adults, especially parents and to invite them into accompaniment of faith.

Formation and support opportunities must be created, with diocesan assistance and resources, for **engaged couples, newlywed couples, parents** (i.e., providing them formation and support in their personal lives of faith and in their vocations as parents) and for **grandparents and family elders**.

Special attention will be given to a renewed formation associated with the **sacrament of Baptism**. Such formation must seek to establish a sustained relationship with parents as their infants grow and when they begin to face the early challenges of parenthood. Such relationships with the Church, when established in these early years, has the greatest likelihood of continuity as children mature.

2. Parish Community as an “Ecclesial Family of small faith communities”

A proven method of graced accompaniment is to empower members of existing small faith communities to accompany their members in faith. Such small communities naturally exist in every parish in various forms (i.e., men's group, Walking with Purpose, sports teams, liturgical ministers, youth groups, etc.). What is needed is a pastoral strategy by which these groups can be formed, trained, and challenged to accompany their own members in the life of Christian faith (and not solely by social activities, recreation or works of service).

Within this vision of “evangelizing catechesis, the larger parish community is seen as the privileged “hub of encounter” where smaller communities of faith that live within the parish come together in common prayer, worship and celebration. For this reason, a reaffirmation of the centrality of the Eucharist as the purpose and mission of each parish community is essential.

Such a vision fosters a dual dynamic. The parish serves as the nexus for a graced accompaniment of its member both as members of small communities and as a total worshipping community. The parish is also the community that sends its members out in mission to bring God's love and mercy to everyone willing to receive it.

Vital to realize this vision will be to engage, form and train parish leaders in the art of spiritual accompaniment by offering them ongoing opportunities to encounter the Lord through truth, beauty, and goodness. This includes clergy, in their role as spiritual fathers in faith, all parish and catechetical leadership (especially Catholic school teachers and parish faith formation staff/catechists), liturgical ministers and all pastoral and administrative leaders.

Providing opportunities for spiritual direction to those in leadership is of paramount importance to learn the art of discernment that is of critical importance in the work of accompaniment.

Resource: Murphy Center for Ignatian Spirituality

3. Possible Elements in any Strategy for Parish Renewal

- a. **Identifying** small new faith communities within the larger parish community
- b. **Inviting** the presence of Ecclesial Movements and Communities can be a powerful leaven for parish renewal
- c. **Establishing** Missionary Discipleship as the litmus test of a parish's true vitality that includes an outreach to the larger world, especially the poor.
- d. **Fostering Regional Parish Collaboration** that will the sharing of personnel and resources
 - i. Resource: Seton Collaborative
- e. **Giving pastoral attention** to those members of the community who are facing the greatest challenges in our secular world, including: middle school/high school teenagers, young adults, and the elderly.
 - i. Resource: Diocesan Young Adult Council
 - ii. Opportunity: Catholic School Communities as Centers for Graced Accompaniment
 - iii. Opportunity: Parish Retreats, Emmaus Retreats, Cursillo retreats