



## *"...until Christ be Formed in You"*

### A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN THE DIOCESE OF TYLER

I am very grateful for the warm welcome I have received here in the Diocese of Tyler. This has been true ever since being installed as your bishop on February 24, just over 100 days ago. Since that time, I have traveled around many parts of the diocese and have met many of the clergy and people who make up this local Church. I have many more places to visit and people to meet in order to understand as fully as possible the reality of the diocese and how best to serve you as your bishop.

As I have been getting to know the clergy and people of the diocese, I have also been pondering what the mission of this local Church is at this time. Of course, the mission is given to us by Jesus. It isn't something to be determined on our part as much as to be discovered, received as a gift, and responded to in faith, hope and love. I have also been praying to know what conversion of heart is needed on my part to serve the Lord here and to serve you in His name.

Pope Leo XIV offered some guidance on this

at the end of his first homily on May 9, the day after his election. Addressing the cardinals in the Sistine Chapel and speaking about those, himself included, who have positions of authority in the church, he spoke of the need "to move aside so that Christ may remain, to make oneself small so that he may be known and glorified (cf. Jn 3:30, "he must increase; I must decrease"), to spend oneself to the utmost so that all may have the opportunity to know and love him."<sup>1</sup>

Saint Paul showed this same attitude in his ministry of preaching, teaching and suffering to bring Christ to birth in those to whom he was sent. He speaks of himself as a mother in labor "until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4:19).

How is it that Christ is formed in us? How can the Word of God become flesh in us anew so that we begin again each day to follow the Lord? How do people in our culture and time encounter the beauty of Christ and allow their hearts to be captivated by Him anew as He makes all things new (cf. Rev 21:5)? And how do we share this treasure with others, especially those who live without it, by giving an account for this hope which is ours (cf. 1 Pt 3:15)?

The Lord invites us to become missionary disciples of hope. Pope Francis reminded us of this often:

*Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are "disciples" and "missionaries", but rather that we are always "missionary disciples". If we are not convinced, let us look at those first disciples, who, immediately after encountering the gaze of Jesus, went forth to proclaim him joyfully: "We have found the Messiah!" (Jn 1:41)*  
- Evangelii Gaudium, 120

In this pastoral letter I would like to offer some brief reflections on being missionary disciples and people of hope.

### **Our Mission in East Texas: Missionary Disciples of Hope**

What is our mission as the Church in East



Texas in 2025, where Catholics make up only 8-10% of the population? How do we go out to others in Jesus' name, with the power of his Spirit, and with a hope that burns in our hearts? How do we keep our eyes on him, and keep him at the center of our hearts?

In that same homily on May 9, Pope Leo reflected on Peter's response to Jesus "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God" from Matthew 16:15. Pope Leo noted that Peter understood two things: the gift that had been given to him; and the need to allow himself to be changed by the gift.<sup>2</sup>

God has also given a gift to each of us as individuals, and also to all of us together. The gift to work together in this time and place, to labor with the authority each of us has, to spend ourselves to the utmost so that others may have the opportunity to know and love Jesus. This is not the work and concern of only a few. Rather, it is the mission of each of the baptized. We are called to discern and live this mission together.

## The Centrality of Hope

Recognizing that we are missionary disciples leads us to consider the central importance of hope, and how hope fundamentally defines our lives as Christians. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical on Hope, *Spe Salvi*, reminded us:

*We see how decisively the self-understanding of the early Christians was shaped by their having received the gift of a trustworthy hope, when we compare the Christian life with the life prior to faith, or with the situation of the followers of other religions. Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12). Of course he knew they had had gods, he knew they had had a religion, but their gods had proved questionable, and no hope emerged from their contradictory myths. Notwithstanding their gods, they were "without God" and consequently found themselves in a dark world, facing a dark future. In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus (How quickly*

*we fall back from nothing to nothing): so says an epitaph of that period...we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present well...The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.*

- *Spe Salvi*, 2

Divine Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Rom 5:19). That life becomes manifest in our own life of faith, which begins with Baptism, develops in openness to God's grace and is enlivened by a hope constantly renewed and confirmed by the working of the Holy Spirit.

By his perennial presence in the life of the pilgrim Church, the Holy Spirit illumines all believers with the light of hope. He keeps that light burning, like an ever-burning lamp, to sustain and invigorate our lives. Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God's love.

Hope "does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our lives through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5: 5). Here we see the reason why this hope perseveres in the midst of trials. Founded on faith and nurtured by charity, it enables us to press forward in life. As Saint Augustine observes, "Whatever our state of life, we cannot live without these three dispositions of the soul, namely, to believe, to hope and to love" (*Spes non Confundit*, 3).

## Unity of Mission

In coming to know the wonderful people and the vast territory of our diocese, I recognize there is a great desire for unity of mission in



service of Christ and His Church. When the Diocese of Tyler was established in 1987, the area was recognized as part of the “bible belt” of the United States. Yet now secularization has taken a toll on the culture of East Texas, and we find ourselves in an increasingly post-Christian milieu. It is in these circumstances that we have received a mandate to be missionary disciples of hope, to bring the light of the Gospel to people who have never heard it or don’t think they have anything to gain from it.

In considering how to put into words the mission of our Church, I want to refer to Pope Leo’s address to the cardinals on May 10, two days after his election. He said the following:

*I would like us to renew together today our complete commitment to the path that the universal Church has now followed for decades in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis masterfully and concretely set it forth in the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, from which I would like to highlight several fundamental points:*

- 1) *the return to the primacy of Christ in proclamation (cf. No. 11);*
- 2) *the missionary conversion of the entire Christian community (cf. No. 9);*
- 3) *growth in collegiality and synodality (cf. No. 33);*
- 4) *attention to the sensus fidei (cf. Nos. 119-120), especially in its most authentic and inclusive forms, such as popular piety (cf. No. 123);*
- 5) *loving care for the least and the rejected (cf. No. 53);*
- 6) *courageous and trusting dialogue with the contemporary world in its various components and realities (cf. No. 84; Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes, 1-2).<sup>3</sup>*

This complete commitment to the path of our Holy Church is the proper response to the mandate of Jesus Christ. As the Diocese of Tyler approaches its 40th anniversary in 2027, it is a good time to take a fresh look at how we live out our response to the mission, and how we should live as missionary disciples of hope.

## Some Next Steps

This brief pastoral letter has expressed in a preliminary way the reality of our identity as missionary disciples of hope. The following are some first steps that we will undertake to develop a pastoral plan to support our missionary work of proclaiming Jesus Christ. Some are upcoming events already scheduled, that will help with the further unfolding of this plan and serve to develop a common vision: Missionary disciples of hope. Others are in the initial planning stages:

1. Upcoming events:
  - Diocesan Formation Conference on Saturday, August 2
  - DCYC (Diocesan Catholic Youth Conference) on Saturday, October 4
2. A taskforce to be established to focus on mission and vision for our Church.
3. The diocesan Offices of Family Life and Faith Formation will be working in close collaboration to best foster faith-filled disciples and holy families.
4. As a follow up on the self-assessments the parishes provided before my arrival, work will begin on developing a diocesan-wide process for listening.

## Pentecost

As we celebrate Pentecost and I complete my first 100 days as your bishop, I am filled with gratitude for the opportunity given to me to serve you in this ministry. I have many times been deeply moved in meeting so many good people of faith, and hearing of their joys and sorrows, and of their deep love for Christ and His Church. Let us be united in prayer that we may all have an openness to the Holy Spirit as we begin to intentionally focus on growing as a community of missionary disciples witnessing to the saving hope which is Jesus Christ. May our efforts be fruitful to the Glory of God.

At the end of his life, ill and dying, Saint Francis of Assisi told his fellow friars, “Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord God, for up until now we have done little or nothing.” His first biographer Thomas of Celano comments





on the saint's exhortation: "[Francis] did not consider that he had already attained his goal, but tireless in pursuit of holy newness, he constantly hoped to begin again."<sup>4</sup>

My brothers and sisters, let us begin again. As Jesus said to the Apostles, he says to each of us "You did not choose me; I chose you" (Jn 15:16); to be genuine disciples committed to the mission of Christ. To begin to understand the gift of Christ's life in us, initiated in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, nourished constantly by the Eucharist, and purified by Penance. Following our Holy Father's first homily and his reflection on Peter, we can pray to see the gifts God has given each one of us, gifts as unique and irreplaceable as that given to Peter and to his successors through the centuries, gifts of fundamental importance, with consequences in our lives in time and in eternity, and to receive fully these gifts and to allow ourselves to be changed by them.

As we celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost, we recall the initial gift of the Holy Spirit to the apostles for the mission to the ends of the earth. This gift is given to us anew and is poured out each day upon us, in abundance, for the mission that is given to us now in East Texas.

We live in this world as pilgrims for only a short time. This world which struggles in so many ways is very quickly passing away. As Pope Francis wrote in his initial Apostolic Exhortation in 2013, *The Joy of the Gospel*:

*The Holy Spirit works as he wills, when he wills and where he wills; we entrust ourselves without pretending to see striking results. We know only that our commitment is necessary. Let us learn to rest in the tenderness of the arms of the Father amid our creative and generous commitment. Let us keep marching forward; let us give him everything, allowing him to make our efforts bear fruit in his good time.*

- *Evangelii Gaudium*, 279

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leo XIV, "Homily at the Holy Mass *Pro Ecclesia* Celebration by the Roman Pontiff with the Cardinals" (Rome, May 9, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Leo XIV, "Address of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV to the College of Cardinals" (Rome, May 10, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Horan, Daniel P. "Making All Things New and Beginning Again." *America Magazine*, November 26, 2013.

May Almighty God bless us, our families, and all those in need. May He stir into flame the gift of the Holy Spirit given to each of us. May our dear Mother Mary accompany us with her prayers and inspire us to make her example of trusting faith our own. May she accompany us along every step our pilgrimage in this life.

*Ven con nosotros a caminar,*

*Santa Maria, ven!*

*Come with us on this journey,  
O Holy Mary, come!*

Given on the Solemnity of Pentecost in the Jubilee Year of Hope, 2025.

*+ George Kelly*

