Faith

a Gift Received

a Treasure to Be Shared

YEAR OF FAITH PASTORAL LETTER
Most Rev. Robert J. Cunningham

Feast of Christ the King • November 24, 2013
Dear Friends in Christ,

“Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy. It makes us fruitful, because it expands our hearts in hope and enables us to bear life-giving witness: indeed, it opens the hearts and minds of those who listen to respond to the Lord’s invitation to adhere to his word and become his disciple” (Benedict XVI, Porta Fidei, 7).

As we have moved through this Year of Faith I have reflected often on the past, pondered the present, and looked ahead to a challenging future. This Year of Faith has encouraged us to rediscover our faith, open our minds and hearts to God’s word and deepen our personal relationship with Christ. Here in the Diocese of Syracuse we have tried, during this year, to know and live our faith and to share it within our family circles, in the parishes, schools and numerous institutions which are a part of our life and in the larger community where we are called to be responsible citizens.

Although the Solemnity of Christ the King which we celebrate today marks the conclusion of the Year of Faith, we know our journey of faith continues beyond today. We must be disciples of the Lord committed day by day and year by year to know, live and share our faith. Throughout our lives there will be times of joy and hope; there will be times of challenge and difficulty also. But the way is clear. “I am the Way . . .” (Jn 14:6) Jesus told His disciples and He promised to be with His Church always. We move forward, therefore, with hope remembering that people who have hope live differently (Cf. Spe Salvi, 2).

By virtue of our Baptism we share a common vocation, the call to holiness. The universal call to holiness is expressed clearly in the Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council (Cf. Chapter 5). All of us, bishops, priests and deacons, consecrated persons and lay faithful, are called to holiness through the perfection of charity, the love of God and neighbor. When we are faithful to the grace of our Baptism, we build up the Body of Christ. Each member of the Church shares this responsibility and sacred duty.
It is our first vocation, and it remains primary during our entire journey of life and faith. Our response to this call impacts our eternal destiny.

In thinking about this call to holiness, I am reminded of the courageous immigrants, some of whom may have been your family ancestors, who left behind everything that was familiar to them to begin a new life in this land of opportunity. Most of them were poor by the world’s standards, but they were rich in faith. Bringing the treasure of their faith with them, they passed it on to their families and, at great sacrifice, built our parishes, schools and institutions to assist them in this sacred task. Pope Francis in his recent encyclical letter, *Lumen Fidei*, noted that handing on the faith travels through time, passing from one generation to the next. In this process, faith lights up our journey and “through an unbroken chain of witnesses we come to see the face of Jesus” (Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 38).

In early 1887, when Patrick Ludden traveled west to become the first Bishop of the newly created Diocese of Syracuse, he found a Catholic population of approximately 60,000 people. About 35% of that population lived in the Syracuse area and almost two-thirds of the Catholic people lived in the 5 major cities of Syracuse, Utica, Oswego, Binghamton, and Rome. There were 50 parishes, 24 missions with churches but no resident pastor, and approximately 45 stations where Mass was celebrated occasionally in private homes or rented halls. Sixty-one diocesan priests and 9 Franciscans served these communities. There were 17 schools of varying size and quality. (Cf. David O’Brien, *Faith and Friendship*, p. 105)

Through the years, our population grew as more and more people, mostly from Europe, moved to our area. In the years after the Second World War, continued expansion was ever present. The Catholic Directory for 1960 tells us that the diocese consisted of 350,600 Catholics, 151 parishes with resident pastors and 31 missions. Over 1,000 sisters and 27 brothers served our Catholic schools and other institutions. Eighty-nine young men were studying for the priesthood.

The reality is much different today. Many of our communities have a declining population with an accompanying decline in Catholics. Today, our Catholic population is approximately 272,500. We have 132 parishes and 11 missions. Of those parishes, 103 have resident pastors. There are 210 diocesan priests; of that number 121 are active in the diocese and 7 work outside the diocese. Many of our 82 retired priests remain “active” by helping out in our parishes and institutions. We also have 34 priests who are members of religious communities. Nine brothers and 291 sisters live and serve in our diocese. There are 71 permanent deacons. Almost 5,000 students attend our Catholic elementary and secondary schools and approximately 25,000 children and young people receive religious education in various faith formation programs.

Just as Bishop Ludden had a plan for the diocese in its early days, and Bishop Foery had a plan in the postwar years, so it is necessary for us today to plan for the present and the future. How can we best use the resources both human and financial available to us? How can we continue to serve God’s people to the best of our ability? How can we create a culture which supports the vocation to holiness? How can we invite men and women to give their lives to God and the service of His people as priests or religious? How
can we support our lay faithful so they can take an active role in the Church and assume their rightful place as disciples of the Lord? How can we further the work of the New Evangelization?

We have addressed and will continue to address these issues and others that will arise as we evaluate our current resources: personal, financial, material and spiritual. Over time pastoral planning will require changes which affect our institutions and the use of personnel. However, whatever accommodations we make to further the mission of the Church and ministry to God’s people, we are all called to continue the journey of faith. The essential question is: How do we know, live and share our faith in the present day as we look forward realistically and hopefully to our future?

Our recent popes, beginning with Pope Paul VI, have summoned each of us to be agents of the New Evangelization. The “newness” of the New Evangelization consists in the new circumstances in which evangelization takes place. Evangelization is meant to be “new in its ardor, new in its methods and new in its expression” (Blessed John Paul II, Address to Bishops of Latin America, 1983). Simply put, the New Evangelization calls us to announce the Gospel with enthusiasm and ardor in the circumstances of our day using the most effective methods available to us. We are called to take up anew the mission which has always been part of the Church’s identity.

Credible agents of evangelization accept the Gospel and have a personal relationship with Christ. All of us need to develop this personal relationship through prayer and study. Before we can evangelize others we must be committed disciples of Christ. We must know and love Him as the true source of enduring happiness. Only then can we proclaim Christ to our family and friends – many of whom are hungry for a deeper relationship with God.

Our focus during the Year of Faith has been three-fold: to know, live and share our faith. This focus should not end with the conclusion of this special year. Moving forward I offer three considerations which can support our efforts to know Christ, live our faith and share it with others: Sunday Mass, Handing on the Faith and Vocations.

SUNDAY MASS

Our full and active participation in Sunday Mass is our best teacher. Sunday after Sunday we gather with people who share our values. We listen anew to the history of the chosen people, the familiar stories in our Lord’s life and rejoice in the eternal newness of the Gospels. We are nourished by the worthy reception of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. We receive the strength we need to walk with the Lord during the course of the week, for Sunday Mass radiates meaning to all we do. The endless succession of Sunday Mass forms us as we continue the journey of faith.

All of us should bring our best to Sunday Mass. As a celebrant at the Liturgy I need to prepare prayerfully for the celebration. My homily should reflect the teachings of the Church and speak to the needs of the people and the challenges they encounter in living their faith. This is a solemn responsibility shared by our priests and deacons when they celebrate the Liturgy and preach the homily reaching thousands of people throughout the seven counties of our diocese each week.
A not uncommon question asks, “How can I get more out of the Mass?” A partial answer to that question rests in what I am willing to bring to the Mass. Do I realize I am entering a sacred space where God is present in His sacred word, in the community and in the Body and Blood of Jesus? Am I on time for Mass, spending a few moments in quiet prayer before Mass and remaining until Mass ends? Have I read the Scripture readings before Mass so that I am better prepared to hear them? Do I listen carefully to the proclamation of the readings from Sacred Scripture during the Liturgy of the Word? Am I attentive to the words and actions of the celebrant as the mystery of our faith unfolds? Do I participate actively in the music and prayer that is part of our common worship?

The Eucharist and the New Evangelization are intimately related. The Eucharist nourishes evangelization, while evangelization leads to the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the source of evangelization because the encounter with Christ leads us to proclaim Him to others. “No Christian community can be built up which does not grow from and hinge on the celebration of the most holy Eucharist” (Presbyterorum Ordinis, 6). Our faithful participation in Sunday Mass prepares us as individuals and community to proclaim Christ to others.

HANDING ON THE FAITH

In addition to our participation in the Sunday Mass, we need to examine our efforts in handing on the faith to those who will come after us. In the Rite of Baptism, there is a beautiful reminder to parents that they are the first teachers of their children in the ways of faith. At that time we pray also that they will be the best teachers.

Our faith comes alive in the Church. As a mother the Church nourishes and strengthens, forms and educates us so that we can become a link in an unbroken chain of witnesses. The Church assists parents and others in handing on the Catholic faith through our Catholic schools and in our faith formation programs.

Our Catholic schools exist to pass on the Catholic faith and to impart the human knowledge and skills that help to form good citizens for our country and the world. Catholic schools recognize that the human person, created in God’s image and likeness, has an eternal destiny. Thus, they educate students for this world and for eternal life in the happiness of heaven. As communities of faith our schools provide the sacred place where students encounter the living God in Jesus Christ and, through the light of the Gospel and the guidance of committed teachers, engage in the dialogue that integrates faith and life.

Our schools fulfill a primary role in the Church’s mission of evangelization. They need the support of the entire ecclesial community. Not only parents who support our schools through tuition, or parishes and regions which maintain a school through generous financial support, but parishes without schools and indeed all the faithful need to support our schools. This support can be given in various ways: prayer for their continued vitality; financial donations and contributions; gifts of time and talent. Past generations built our Catholic schools. Our generation, no less in need of them, must make them available and accessible for parents who choose them for their children.
The children and young people who do not attend Catholic schools receive their faith formation through programs of religious education in our parishes. Through instruction, prayer and activities these programs assist parents in their primary responsibility as teachers of the faith. I have asked all of our faith formation programs to provide a minimum of 30 hours of catechetical instruction per school year.

I am grateful to the large number of directors and coordinators of faith formation programs and catechists who offer religious education throughout the diocese. Acknowledging the vital role faith formation programs contribute to the mission of the Church, we need to provide increased opportunities for continuing education and certification for our catechists and catechetical leaders. It is imperative that those charged with passing on the faith be competent and qualified for this important task.

As I travel around the diocese for Confirmations and witness the family joy at Baptisms and First Communions, I recognize the indispensable role of grandparents in handing on the faith. I see this in the pride they experience in their grandchildren and in the joy on the faces of the young as they share these special moments with grandparents. I hope our grandparents never underestimate the influence for good that they possess, especially through the example of their practice of the faith. This is a powerful witness to their grandchildren and a cherished means of passing on the faith.

Our faith is a priceless treasure which we wish to impart to others. When we think of passing on our faith, we naturally think about the young. But faith formation is an on-going, life-long process. I encourage you to participate in diocesan and parish retreats, conferences, seminars and course offerings which can develop and strengthen your faith. The New Evangelization, about which we hear so much today, calls each of us to deepen our faith, believe in the Gospel message and go forth to proclaim the Gospel. We all need to continue our efforts to know and live our faith and then go forth to evangelize.

Sadly, a number of our people who are baptized, for whatever reason, choose to participate in the life of the Church only occasionally or perhaps not at all. In a special way we need to reach out to them and to those who have fallen away from their faith or experienced a crisis of faith. Very often these people are within our circle of friends and acquaintances, family members, neighbors and colleagues in the workplace. The sincere witness of our love for and practice of the faith may move their minds and hearts to revisit their Catholic faith.

Vocations

Earlier I wrote about our common vocation – the universal call to holiness. For most of us this call is lived out in a loving family. In the majority of situations, the family unit, the domestic Church, begins with the Sacrament of Matrimony. In that sacrament, a man and a woman pledge their life and their love and promise to cooperate with God in the creation of new life. Their love gives life to the Church and to the world. Christian marriage is a lofty calling to which most Catholics are called and through which they live out the call to holiness.

I want, at this time, to address especially another path to holiness – the vocation to priesthood or consecrated life which assists the Church and our families in the transmission of our Catholic faith.

Vocations to the priesthood are especially important in order that Mass can be celebrated and the sacraments available for all our people. We need to create in our homes a culture that will be open to the recognition and support of a vocation to the priesthood.

Some men and women are called to the consecrated life, where they assist in the charitable, educational and pastoral needs of the Church. In a variety of ways, they are committed to the Church’s mission. In addition to the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments, they reach out to others through works of charity, a constitutive element in the life of the Church.
I am confident God is calling men and women to the priesthood and the consecrated life. I am asking parents and family members to help create a culture which supports these vocations. Encourage your children and relatives to consider these vocations, to recognize that God has a plan for them and to listen to the Lord’s still quiet voice that reveals His plan for them. Often we ask our children and youth what they want to be when they grow up. Let me suggest we phrase the question differently and ask them: What does God want you to be? It is a simple change but it acknowledges that God should be part of the conversation when a person is discerning a vocation.

Many priests, myself included, thought seriously about priesthood because someone asked us to do so. I imagine many religious have had a similar experience. Have you ever had the courage to ask a young man to consider the priesthood or a young man or woman to consider the consecrated life? Please consider helping our young people discern God’s plan for them by putting forth the question.

When the Year of Faith concludes how will we in the Church of Syracuse move forward in hope? How will we continue to know, live and share our faith?

Know Our Faith:
I have asked our Office of Faith Formation to make resources on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* available to the parishes. We know our personal relationship with Christ is the primary object of our faith. More than a theory or abstract knowledge, our faith rests in a personal encounter with a person. However, every relationship has a context. It has expectations and requirements that frame the relationship, help it to grow and sustain it. The *Catechism* systematically presents the teaching of Sacred Scripture, the living Tradition of the Church and the authentic teaching of the Church to allow for a better knowledge of the Christian mystery and for enlivening our faith. It helps to illumine, with the light of faith, the new situations and problems which we face in our current times. It offers the beauty and truth of God’s revelation and sets forth the requirements for a relationship with Christ and the means to nourish it.

I ask pastors and others who collaborate with them in the important ministry of handing on the faith to use these resources in parish adult faith formation programs. I ask parishioners to participate in the opportunities which the parish provides. We always need to renew and refresh our knowledge about our faith so that we can strengthen our relationship with Christ.

As we learn more about our faith we realize it is sometimes difficult to believe what we cannot fully understand. Faith calls for our personal commitment, intellect and will, to the God who reveals Himself. It requires a commitment to what is not yet fully realized. It requires that we accept the official teachings of the Church which at times may cause confusion, challenge or difficulty. The Church is called to proclaim the Kingdom of God and the good news of salvation through Christ. She does this by presenting the Gospel in its fullness, without shortcuts and without diluting the word.

“To obey in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 144). Our Blessed Mother is the “perfect icon of faith” (Lumen Fidei, 58). She most perfectly embodies the
obedience of faith. She welcomed the message of the angel Gabriel by believing that “with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:37). She gave her assent: “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). Throughout her life and until her last ordeal when Jesus her son died on the cross, Mary’s faith never wavered. She never ceased to believe in the fulfillment of God’s word. We turn to her when we wrestle with our faith and struggle to understand the teachings of the Church. With a maternal heart she will guide and assist us.

Live Our Faith: Be disciples. This is our challenge in the days and years ahead: to live our faith in word and action; to be disciples who have a personal relationship with Christ. Disciples hear the word of God and act upon it. They do not merely follow Christ. They imitate Him and pattern their lives after His. We cannot live as disciples without God’s grace. So if we are to be disciples we need to avail ourselves of the primary means of grace which Christ gave us. Sunday Mass, indeed every Mass, is a rich deposit of God’s grace. Commit yourself to attendance at Sunday Mass and give your very best through a full, active and conscious participation in this great mystery of our faith.

At the end of Mass one of the dismissals exhorts us to “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.” Another says, “Go in peace glorifying the Lord by your life.” After the encounter with the Lord in His word, His sacred Body and Blood and the community gathered in worship, we are sent forth.

When we live our faith we carry it, or more accurately, we carry Christ into the world – the world of our home, our neighborhood, our workplace, our community. We become living signs of the presence of Christ in the world, credible witnesses who are capable of opening the hearts and minds of others to the desire for God and for true life, life without end (Cf. Porta Fidei, 15).

Share Our Faith: As members of Christ’s body we have a responsibility to build up the Body of Christ. This may at times require us to speak explicitly and clearly about our faith. “Always be ready,” as the first letter of Peter reminds us, “to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1Pt 3:15).

Sharing our faith can also include active support for our Catholic schools and faith formation programs both of which are important vehicles for handing on our faith. Consider how you can actively support our schools and parish programs which educate and form our children and young people. Perhaps it could be through the gift of your time as a catechist; perhaps you could make a financial donation to provide scholarship assistance for tuition; perhaps you could volunteer in a school or parish program. The point is: make a conscious decision, within your means, to support schools and parish programs which share our faith with the youngest generation in our communities.

Recall how you received your faith. I imagine for many of you, parents, grandparents, the parish priest, Catholic school teachers and parish catechists shared their faith with you. This personal witness is vital if our faith is to be passed on. But so too is the support of those institutions and programs which systematically hand on the faith.

On October 11, 2012, I celebrated Mass in our Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception to begin the Year of Faith. At that time I said, “It is my hope that we will seize this moment of opportunity, the Year of Faith to rediscover our faith.” I suggested three words to guide our efforts. “During this year we commit
ourselves to know our faith, live our faith and share our faith” (Homily, October 11, 2012). At this moment I say, “Let us continue these efforts.”

Let us also recognize the urgent necessity of prayers for vocations. “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest” (Mt 9:38). When I hear or read this passage I think about the Church’s need for priests and men and woman in consecrated life. We all know about the declining number of priests and religious. We have personally experienced this diminishment in our parishes and institutions. I ask you to pray daily that the Lord of the harvest will bless our diocese and the universal Church with men who will respond to the call to priesthood and with men and women who will accept the invitation to follow Christ in the consecrated life. In addition to daily prayer for vocations, I hope you will join me in prayer and fasting for vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life on the First Friday of each month.

It has been my experience that young people today are particularly drawn to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. When I have spoken to them about this they often mention that the silence of adoration is particularly important to them. In a world where they can listen to music wherever they are, converse with others on their phones, reach out to others through the internet and be “connected” with others whenever they wish, they appreciate the silence of adoration.

We will be holding a holy hour of adoration on the First Friday of each month in a parish in one of our regions to pray for vocations. I invite all of you to participate in the hour of adoration when it is held in your region. Efforts will be made to invite and encourage our young people to attend also. In stillness and quiet, the Lord speaks. In the silence of adoration, we listen attentively to the Lord, experience His love and are assured that the Lord has a plan for each of us.

“The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few...”
CONCLUSION

The journey of faith continues. Pope Francis reminds us that "Faith is born of an encounter with the living God who calls us and reveals his love, a love which precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives" (Lumen Fidei, 4). When we are transformed by this love we see with new eyes. We see with a light that illuminates our entire journey, "for it comes from the risen Christ, the morning star that never sets" (Lumen Fidei, 1).

We journey not as isolated individuals but as members of Christ’s body in relationship with Him and with all other believers. As we continue our journey of faith, I ask you to join me in prayer that we might be part of that unbroken chain of witnesses, reaching back to the days when our Lord walked on earth and looking ahead to the “light coming from the future and opening before us vast horizons that guide us beyond our isolated selves towards communion” with God in the joy of eternity. (Lumen Fidei, 4).

I ask you to reflect on your own active participation each week in Sunday Mass; on your willingness to be agents of evangelization by doing all that you can to hand on the Catholic faith to those who walk with you now and those who will come after you. Finally, I ask you to join me in fervent prayer and fasting for an increase of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life throughout the Church but especially in our own Diocese of Syracuse.

We turn to our Blessed Mother, the patroness of our diocese, and ask her to accompany us on “the way” marked out for us by her Son. She, who now enjoys what we all long to possess, to see Him as He is, “face to face” (1Cor 13:12) will intercede for us so that as we treasure the gift of faith, we may advance in hope toward eternal life.

Cordially yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Robert J. Cunningham
Bishop of Syracuse