

Behold, I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

(Rev 21:5)



A Pastoral Letter on the
**YEAR OF PRIESTLY SPIRITUAL RENEWAL
AND PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS**



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BISHOP OF KALAMAZOO



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The Feast of St. Augustine of Hippo,
Patron Saint of the Diocese of Kalamazoo — August 28, 2022



BY THE MOST REVEREND PAUL J. BRADLEY, D.D., M.S.W.
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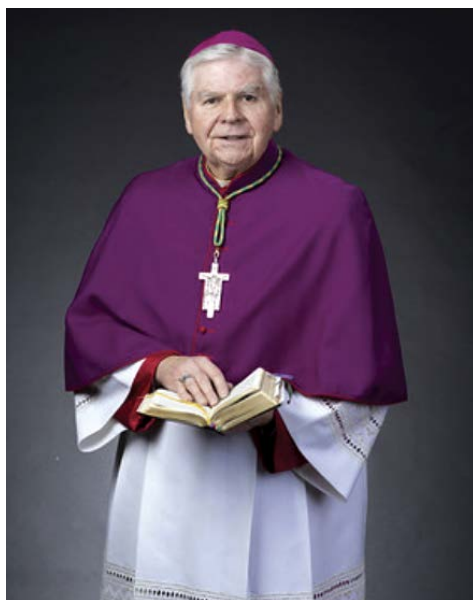
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MOST REVEREND PAUL J. BRADLEY

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Peace be with you!

This is the greeting our Risen Lord shared with His disciples when He encountered them on Easter Sunday evening, following His passion, death, and glorious resurrection. You will recall the disciples were living in fear, in a chaotic time of social unrest not unlike our own experience today. They were like sheep who had lost their shepherd, even after witnessing their Risen Lord and spending 40 days with Him after Easter. It was not until they received the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost that they came to truly experience the peace of Christ in its fullness and were empowered. Then they were renewed in mind, body, and soul, ready to carry out their mission as Spirit-filled evangelizers, on fire with love and totally dedicated to being good shepherds (pastors) for God's holy people.

On this Feast of St. Augustine of Hippo, the patron saint of our beloved diocese, in what most likely will be my final pastoral letter as Bishop of Kalamazoo, I proclaim that powerful greeting once more, *Peace be with you!* with the joy of Easter and the ardor of Pentecost to all of you. My first pastoral letter, *What I Have Seen and Heard*, was published nearly twelve years ago on October 20, 2010. It was my response to all the things I had heard from you

— the clergy, religious, and lay faithful in the nine counties of southwestern Michigan that make up our diocese. I tried then to summarize what I had witnessed and heard, but I also tried to use this information to help us set a direction for the future and emphasize our relationship with each other and our beloved Church:

“I have learned how very much I have come to love this part of the country. I love being so near to Lake Michigan and being surrounded by so many other lakes as well. I love the cities, the small towns, and the rural and agricultural areas that make up our diocese. I love driving through these nine counties and seeing life wherever I look. I love the diversity of the nearly one million people who live here. I am so grateful to all those who have helped me to establish myself here in southwest Michigan and learn the lay of the land.



“Even more importantly than establishing myself and learning the geography of our nine-county region, however, is the process of building new relationships. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*, Pope St. John Paul II addressed the role of the bishop. ‘He is called above all to foster relationships inspired by the respect and esteem befitting a family where love flourishes, in accordance with the exhortation of the Apostle Peter: *Love one another deeply, from the heart for you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God*’ (1Peter 1:22-23).



“I have taken those words very seriously during this past year, as I have not only been assigned to be your bishop, but I have tried to **become** your bishop, one who has been given the great privilege and the very serious responsibility of shepherding the flock of Christ in this local Church.”

Looking back over the past dozen years since I first wrote these words, I can now appreciate even more deeply how important it is for a bishop to fall in love with his priests, his people, and the communities and geography that make up the physical boundaries of his local Church, his diocese, as I have certainly done. Out of this love comes a fervent desire to serve the pastoral needs of God’s people and to respond wholeheartedly to Jesus’ command to His Apostles, “*Follow Me!*”



Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations

Having just completed the “Jubilee Year of the Holy Spirit” on the Feast of Pentecost, June 5, 2022, I am prayerfully convinced the Holy Spirit is leading me to proclaim a special “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations,” which is to begin on September 8, 2022, the Feast of the Birthday of our Blessed Mother, and last until the Solemnity of Pentecost on May 28, 2023, the Birthday of the Church. I believe the need for spiritual renewal in general is becoming more and more necessary in light of the world situation we are all witnessing and experiencing. I am urging all our priests to join me during this year of prayer for spiritual renewal of ourselves; in addition, I am encouraging every member of the faithful, to pray for your priests in a particular way during this year and to pray for a renewed faith for all of us. It is my fervent prayer that this “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal” will, in turn, lead to a renewal of the entire local Church through our revitalized love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and our following the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The world situation to which I referred above can be characterized in three words: secularism, factionalism, and animosity. The shocking and tragic cases of mass shootings claiming the lives of so many innocent people in-



cluding children, makes clear to me something has gone very wrong with the soul and spirit of our country. Violence, animosity, and polarization, along with a significant deficit in mental health resources and a general disregard for the sanctity of life, all contribute greatly to this epidemic of indiscriminate violence that is of great concern. Finally, there seems to be a growing inability to converse with one another with courtesy and respect, replacing it with bitter and hateful discourse.

Perhaps at the root of this world situation, is the growing trend of people losing their belief in, or even awareness of, God. As a result, we no longer understand we are all sisters and brothers, members of the one family of God, and we are increasingly divided into factions that are hostile toward one another. Yet, my dear sisters and brothers, we are **united** — each of us made in God's image and created by Him to be members of the Body of Christ.

This "Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations" is intended to be a prayerful response to the crises we are facing today. Through this special "Year," I ask all of us to pray for the conversion of the soul of America, beginning with prayer for a conversion within each of ourselves, and starting with authentic spiritual renewal for me as your bishop, and for our priests, as well as for our deacons, consecrated religious, and all the faithful of our diocese.



A Time of Grace for Our Priests

My immediate hope is that this special “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations” will be a time of special grace for all the priests serving in our nine counties of southwest Michigan. We know it is not easy to be a priest today. The sexual abuse scandals, secularism, misconceptions about priestly identity, and the day-to-day challenges of priestly



life and ministry can seem overwhelming. Too often, we take our priests for granted, forgetting that these are men who have been chosen by Christ to do what no one else can do. They have been called by name, and empowered by the grace of Holy Orders, to be the instruments of the Holy Spirit in making Christ present in the sacraments — especially in the Holy Eucharist, and the Sacrament of Penance, as well as through their preaching and in their pastoral ministry. Without our priests, our diocese would be severely diminished — paralyzed, really — in its ability to carry out her mission to bring Christ to the world. The Church needs good, holy, and zealous priests.

During my 13 years as your bishop, I have written seven formal pastoral letters and several other letters addressed to the clergy, religious, and lay faithful members of our beloved diocese. Looking back at these communi-

cations from me as your pastor and chief teacher, I am struck by the consistent themes that are woven within each one, themes of the gift of the Eucharist, renewal in the Holy Spirit, and the call to move forward in hope. I have also consistently encouraged devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and our diocesan patron, St. Augustine. What's more, as the world situation described above has become more serious and of greater concern year after year, my admiration for and confidence in the holiness of our priests, deacons, consecrated religious, and lay faithful proportionately has also grown. It became very clear to me in this retrospection that we, all God's people striving to live the Gospel, are ready for a true spiritual renewal and a deepening of our faith.

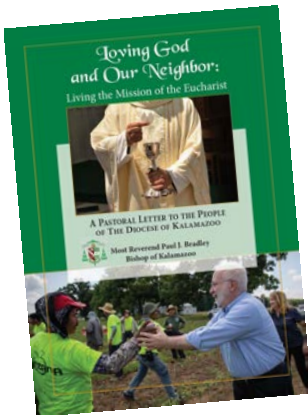
As such, this "Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations" is intended to build especially on the experiences of these last several years since our Eucharistic Congress in 2019, which drew more than 1,000 members of the faithful, and the "Year of the Eucharist" that followed it. You may recall we had some unforeseen obstacles to overcome during that jubilee year. A worldwide health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, sadly caused innumerable deaths; it also caused unprecedented medical, economic, social, and political turmoil in our communities, as well as effectively disrupted access to parish worship and ministries. To observe a "Year of the Eucharist" when the majority of our people were unable to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion was an obstacle no one anticipated. Still, by the grace of God, we completed the jubilee year successfully and followed it with another year of grace devoted to the Holy Spirit. We truly learned God is with us in spite of all obstacles!





Living the Mission of the Eucharist

In my 2019 Pastoral Letter, *Loving God and Our Neighbor: Living the Mission of the Eucharist*, I wrote:



“By receiving the Holy Eucharist, God’s grace fills us to overflowing. As stewards of this grace, we are compelled to share it generously with all God’s people. This is what ‘living the mission of the Eucharist’ means. Together with the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and penance (confession), the Eucharist makes it possible for us to receive our Lord with a clean heart and to accept His invitation to be missionary disciples in service to others. Allowing Jesus to transform us to be more like Himself, and the Gift of Himself

for us on the Cross, to give ourselves to Him and to others, is at the heart of missionary discipleship.”

It is impossible to imagine “living the mission of the Eucharist” without the ministry of our priests. Not only would we be missing the sacrament itself, but we would also be without the spiritual guidance and accompaniment of those who have been chosen by Christ to walk with us and help us discern the Way. In order to achieve the genuine spiritual renewal that is needed for the entire “Community of Faith” here in southwest Michigan, we need priests who are not worn down, disillusioned, or confused about their role as uniquely gifted servant-leaders called to make Christ present in our troubled world. We need priests who are on fire with the love of Christ and who are eager to live the mission of the Eucharist. We need priests who have been renewed spiritually and who can lead and guide the rest of us on the road to spiritual rebirth in Christ.

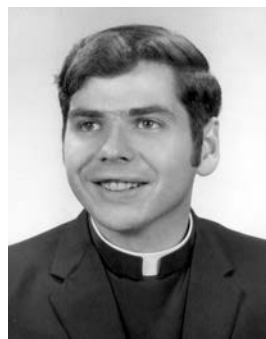
When we speak of “living the mission of the Eucharist,” we mean something quite specific. We mean living for others, rather than living for ourselves as individuals, families, and communities. The intimate communion that is ours because of Jesus’ Gift of Himself to us in the Blessed Sacrament

of His Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, compels us to loving service, acts of charity, works of mercy, and advancing the cause of divine justice in building up the Kingdom of God among us. Living the mission that Christ has given to us is an obligation that flows from the Eucharist – from the very Heart of Jesus – for all of us, priests and people.



Reflections on Priestly Identity

When I was in the final stages of priestly formation more than 50 years ago, preparing for my ordination on May 1, 1971, one of the things that I had to do was to design my ordination invitation. From all the inspiring scripture passages that refer to what a priest of Jesus Christ is, the one that resonated most profoundly in my heart was this quotation from the Letter to the Hebrews:



Every priest is taken from among men to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with sinners for he himself is beset by weakness and must make offerings for himself as well as for the people (Heb 5:1-3).

As I was approaching that awe-filled moment in my life, for which I had been preparing for so many years, I was very aware of my unworthiness and human weakness. Yet this scripture passage inspired and encouraged me, assuring me that in spite of my weakness, through the grace of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, I would be able to help bring the healing, mercy, and love of Jesus to all I would meet throughout my priesthood.



That has been a comfort, and also remains a challenge, throughout these five decades of priestly, and now episcopal, ministry.

The “journey of faith” in this world is one all people baptized into Christ share together; it’s one in which we all must respond to Jesus’ invitation and great challenge: *If you want to be My disciple, you must deny yourself, take up your cross each day, and follow Me* (Mt 16:24). This intimate challenge from Christ remains the daily, minimal expectation for ordained priests. His further instruction to all His followers applies most particularly to those of us who are ordained to bring Christ to others: *You must become perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect* (Mt 5:43).

Most of us are diocesan priests, and do not take the vows of the evangelical counsels as do those serving with us who are part of religious orders and communities; nevertheless, our priestly promises at ordination commit us to live according to those same evangelical counsels for the sake of the Gospel: poverty (denying ourselves and being detached from worldly goods), chastity (taking up our cross each day in purity of heart, mind, and body after Christ’s example), and obedience (following Jesus faithfully and conforming our wills to that of the Father under the direction of our superiors out of love). These evangelical counsels, as all virtues, must not be seen from a negative perspective, or as something restrictive; rather, they must be seen as God sees them and intended them, as a primary means to free us to follow Jesus more whole-heartedly. The promise of celibacy, tied so integrally to the virtue of chastity, enables us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor, indeed all people, as Jesus loves them, because we are committed to Jesus, the Fount of all Love. As such, this gift allows priests to live in this world as we will in the Kingdom of Heaven, and, as Pope St. John Paul noted, be “witnesses to the Invisible.”

In addition to pursuing these virtues in the ways we live, we priests also need to be committed to a regular and devout life of prayer, and to embrace it with renewed fervor as our primary duty to God and fatherly charity to those entrusted to our care. In the words of St. John Vianney, the patron saint of priests: “To be loved by God, to be joined to God, to walk before God, to live for God — what a blessed life! Ardent prayer, addressed to God: this is man’s greatest happiness on earth.” We must see the basic life of prayer required of us through our ordination promises to be so much more than an obligation, and recognize it as our spiritual lifeline with Jesus Himself, through which we continue to develop and deepen our personal relationship with the One Who has configured us through ordination to act *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”). Our daily meditation, regular visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Holy Hour of Adoration, daily praying of the rosary, daily examination of conscience, frequent confession, and the prayerful recitation of the Divine Office throughout each day — all of those are ways to keep our relationship with Jesus alive and strong, and to regularly intercede on behalf of those people for whom we have been ordained.

Of course, the most central and indispensable part of every day for a priest is the devout and fervent celebration of the Holy Eucharist. As priests, we are configured to Christ, the Head of the Body. Accordingly, everything about our priestly ministry is directed toward the worthy celebration of the Holy Eucharist, and “finds its consummation in it” (Introduction, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*). It is through presiding at the



Holy Mass that we teach the importance of God's life-giving Word, and then we are privileged to be Jesus' instrument through which the Holy Spirit gives us the Real Presence of Christ through the consecration and transubstantiation of the Bread and Wine into the very Body and Blood of Christ, as Jesus gives Himself to us to be our spiritual Food and Drink.

As Pope St. John Paul II frequently reminded us, the Holy Eucharist truly is the "source and summit of our faith." However, we priests must guard against becoming overly familiar with the celebration of the Eucharist, or making it become routine, something we take for granted. We can never forget **Who** it is we are touching, consuming, and drinking — the very Presence of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We must be devout, attentive, and prayerful in our personal disposition, and in the way we talk about the Sacred Species.

In addition to our daily and awe-filled responsibilities of celebrating the Holy Eucharist, every priest receives the three equally important *munera* (offices with corresponding responsibilities) of **teaching, sanctifying, and governing**. Through the teaching office, we priests are charged with "preaching the Truth with love", and to proclaiming the fullness of Jesus' teaching in and through the Church, His Bride. In teaching the faith, the priest is not given an academic mandate, but is entrusted with fostering that personal relationship with the Person of Jesus, Who is the Truth, and each human person. The sanctifying office requires the priest to build up that portion of the Kingdom of God entrusted to pastoral and sacramental care. This means he is responsible for assisting souls to grow in holiness, especially through the Sacraments and the life of the Church. The governing office, best depicted by the image of the Good Shepherd, reminds us to always be attentive to the words of St. Peter in his first Letter in speaking to his presbyters (priests) *Tend the flock of God in your midst, not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it; not for shameful profit but eagerly. Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock.* (1 Peter 5:2-3) Priests must find ways to lead by example, forming our parishes into true Christian communities, centered on the Eucharist, and making our parishes places where all people are welcomed, with a spirit of Christ-like hospitality, even as we reach out to those who are irregular or lax in the Faith, those who have fallen away from the practice of the faith, or those who have never heard the Good News of Jesus. We must build and grow strong parishes, even as we **go on mission** to those who do not know Jesus.

Yes, we priests are indeed "taken from among men" and ordained to do these "works of God". We must be aware of that constant challenge of not

being conformed to this age (Romans 12:2). And yet, we must live in the midst of this world as those who call others to Christ, living lives of holiness and pursuing perfection by following Jesus. As St. Paul continues in that same passage from his Letter to the Romans: *...you must be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.* We must be one with our people, and, as Pope Francis likes to say, make sure to “have the smell of the sheep” on us, even as we try to help them to pursue the “odor of sanctity”. And always, and in all ways, we must place our *trust in the Lord, Who is our help and our shield* (Psalm 115:9), and heed Jesus’ calm advice: *Do not be afraid; I have overcome the world* (John 16:33).



A Special Year for All

This is to be a special year of spiritual renewal for priests, but it is also a year of special prayers for renewal of the faith for all of us, and it is a year devoted to praying for our priests and for more vocations. All of us — clergy, religious, and lay faithful are responsible for nurturing priestly vocations. We are all challenged to pray for bold and courageous leaders, who will follow the example of St. Peter and all the Apostles who said “yes” to the Lord’s invitation to leave everything and follow Him.

I sometimes fear the concept of a priest shortage has become so familiar that we have become complacent, almost accepting of it. The fact of the matter is, the Lord has never failed, in any age, to call enough men to the priesthood to care for His people. He is calling those sons and brothers



among us, whom He has created to be His priests. Yet, the decline in the number of those willing to accept and respond to vocations to the priesthood – and to the consecrated life – is quite serious. The lack of response threatens the life of our Church in many serious ways, and it makes it extremely difficult to minister to the growing spiritual and pastoral needs of *all* the people who live in our nine counties of southwest Michigan. While a few of our parishes have produced many vocations, there are many parishes in our diocese who have never generated a priestly vocation or inspired a vocation to the consecrated life. Why do some of our parishes produce multiple vocations and others generate none? Where do we find more priests?

The obvious reality is, they come from our own families, our parishes, and our communities. How do they overcome the many obstacles placed in their way? By the prayerful fostering of priestly and religious vocations by holy parents, along with the support and encouragement of family members, friends, priest-mentors, parishioners, seminary staff, fellow seminarians, and by the entire Church. We know God continues to call future priests by name. It is our responsibility to help those who are being called to hear and recognize the “call”, and to respond generously, knowing with confidence God’s grace will sustain them before, during, and long after their ordination as priests, or their final vows in a religious community.

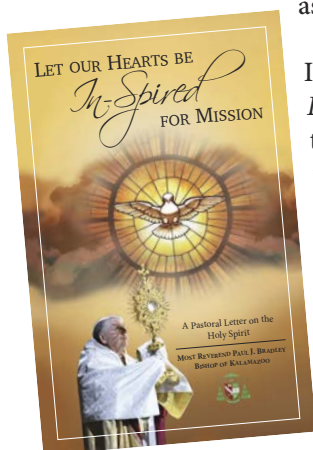
When Jesus sent His Apostles on a mission as *lambs in the midst of wolves*, He also forewarned them that they will *be hated on account of My Name*. Jesus told them their response to hatred, persecution, and a refusal to be welcomed was simply to *shake the dust from their sandals* and move on.

Jesus urged them, and us, to be *shrewd as serpents and simple as doves* (Mt 10:16-23). We are not to respond to violence with violence, but with love and compassion; we are not to respond to hateful discourse using the same tactics, but by relying on the Holy Spirit to inspire us with what to say.



Priests Must Be Renewed Continually

To be courageous missionary disciples, who can lead us in times of persecution and adversity like the present, our priests must continually be renewed by their prayer, by frequent reception of the sacraments (especially the Eucharist and penance), and by the fraternity of their brother priests and fellowship with members of the laity. Priests are not supposed to be “Lone Rangers” operating on their own without backup or fraternal support. To the extent that a priest is close to Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, he is never alone. To the extent that he acknowledges his membership in the presbyterate of our diocese, he can always be confident in the love of his bishop and his brother priests. And to the extent, that a priest can empty himself of self-seeking, and humbly give himself to the service of God’s people, he will never be isolated from the flock he has been asked to tend as a pastor modeled on Jesus, the Good Shepherd.



In my most recent pastoral letter, *Let Our Hearts Be Inspired for Mission*, issued one year ago today, on August 28, 2021, the Feast of St. Augustine, I wrote:

“When we recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of our beloved Diocese of Kalamazoo on July 21, 2021, I described our diocese’s mission as we move into our second 50 years as follows: ‘To transform the world by sharing the love of Christ with our neighbors.’ To accomplish this



mission, we must be centered on the first extraordinary Gift that Jesus gave us: the strength and spiritual stamina we receive from the **most Holy Eucharist**. Our hearts must be on fire with love for Jesus and with a willingness to continue Jesus' vision of establishing God's Kingdom here in the nine counties of southwest Michigan and throughout the whole world. And the only way we can do that is by relying on Jesus' **second, extraordinary Gift of the Holy Spirit** to lead us boldly and confidently into our next half century as the Diocese of Kalamazoo."

These two extraordinary gifts we have received as missionary disciples of Jesus Christ are the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit. By opening our minds, hearts, and bodies to the graces given through our intimate communion with Jesus in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood, and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit made possible by our prayer and our reverent reception of all the sacraments, we allow ourselves to be renewed spiritually. Indeed we are "born again" when God's grace dwells in us — especially through the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit.

Priests who wish to be renewed spiritually, and then to lead their parishioners in word and example, do well to rediscover the importance of the Holy Eucharist in their priestly spirituality. The Gift Jesus gives to all of us in this great Sacrament of Love is especially precious in the life of His priests. We who have been chosen by Christ and given the power (by the working of the Holy Spirit in us) to make Him present, have a special responsibility to remain close to Him and to allow His grace to inform

everything we think, say and do. If we drift apart from Him, we fall into the danger of having only ourselves to rely upon, but if we cling to Him in confidence and hope, He will work in and through us always.

The Eucharist and the Holy Spirit are the two immeasurable Gifts that Jesus has given us. May we never take these for granted. May we pray constantly to our Father in heaven giving thanks to Him for these abundant blessings and to accept with all humility the obligations that accompany these great gifts of God's love.

I believe we must all ask ourselves: How do we use God's gifts most effectively? How do we open our minds and hearts and bodies to Christ's Gift of Self to us in the Holy Eucharist? How do we allow the Holy Spirit to dwell within us? How can we foster prayer and reverence toward the sacraments? What steps can we take to become renewed spiritually?

These are fundamental questions, of course. They address our ability to grow in holiness and to advance in the spiritual life. We can gain much insight into these questions by looking closely at the lives of those who have gone before us — specifically the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Peter.

Two Models of Faith for Priestly Spirituality



As I have been reflecting prayerfully on the importance of spiritual renewal for our priests, as a necessary first step in the spiritual rebirth of the entire Catholic community here in southwest Michigan, two complementary models of faith stand out for to me, Mary the Mother of God and Our Mother (to whom I entrusted the care of the diocese in December 2018) and St. Peter the Apostle, the man appointed by Christ to lead His Church. Both were called to open their hearts to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Both said “yes” to the Word of God in spite of many obstacles that were placed in their way; but the way they each responded was very different.

Mary Immaculate



The first model, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Immaculate Conception, is the perfect symbol of the Church seen as the holy and spotless Bride of Christ. Because Mary is sinless, and because her “yes” to God’s Word makes her the model for all who are called to follow her Son, every priest is a son to Mary in ways that are new and refreshing. To be renewed spiritually, we priests are strongly urged to remain close to Mary our Mother. She walks with us, encourages us, comforts us, and challenges us to be bold, courageous, and persevering in our efforts to live the mission of the Eucharist as priests.

Today, of course, the image of the Church as the spotless Bride of Christ has been obscured. Decades of attention given to the corrupt, sinful, and criminal behavior of some of us — priests and bishops — has caused many to doubt the holiness of the Church, at least as seen in the personal lives and public ministry of some ordained ministers. All of us priests and bishops bear the scars inflicted by the few who have committed unspeakable crimes against God’s most vulnerable children.

Today especially, we know we cannot possibly live up to the past stereotypes of priests and bishops who were placed on pedestals and thought to be superhuman in their holiness and in their perfection as men of God. As Pope Francis said in all humility during his recent trip to Canada in July 2022, “in the name of the Church and all priests, we beg forgiveness from any victim of sexual abuse by a member of the clergy, and we pray fervently that this sinful, scandalous behavior will never again be repeated.” Once again, I take this occasion to add my voice to that of our Holy Father and beg forgiveness of anyone who may have been sexually abused by any of our priests, or agents of the Church, in the past. May those sinful actions of the past never be repeated again.

In fact, we priests and bishops are weak, sinful human beings: men chosen by Christ to make Him present to a weary, chaotic, and broken world, wounded by sin. Like the Apostles, we are far from perfect. But in spite of

our weaknesses, we too have said “yes” to the Lord’s invitation to follow Him; with His grace, we can be confident it is actually possible for us to do what would be impossible by ourselves.

One of the many reasons we turn to Mary is because she shows us how to live a life of humble obedience in response to God’s call. She is the only sinless disciple of her Son, Jesus. While we cannot hope to imitate her perfectly, we do find comfort and encouragement in the words and actions that flow from her Immaculate Heart. As Our Lady said to St. Juan Diego in Guadalupe, “Am I not your mother?”

St. Peter



A second model I believe is important to the spiritual renewal of our clergy is that of St. Peter, the man Christ chose to lead the Apostles and to be the rock on which His Church was to be founded. There is no question that Peter was a weak, sinful man, in spite of his bold promises and generous intentions of heart. He denied Jesus three times and then wept bitterly because of his betrayal of the Lord he had sworn never to abandon. No one looking at Peter would suggest he was flawless, but in the face of his serious sins, he was able to repent and return to the Lord, who never wavered in His choice of Peter to be His Vicar on earth.

The scene in St. John’s Gospel (Jn 21:15–17) is worth recalling in its entirety. It reads as follows:

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “**Feed my lambs.**”*

*He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” He said to him, “**Tend my sheep.**”*

*He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” [Jesus] said to him, “**Feed my sheep.**”*

What we are witnessing here is the **spiritual renewal** of St. Peter, and a clear articulation of his mission to tend and feed God's chosen people. His miraculous conversion took place when he encountered the Risen Lord by the Sea of Galilee and was tested by Jesus' threefold question: "Do you love me more than these?" This renewal of spirit, and the re-commitment to Peter's Apostolic mission, will be confirmed by Jesus' Gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. At that time, a very different Peter will stand up and boldly proclaim his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in His Church.

Perhaps if we look again at the two figures who represent the Church for us — Mary and Peter — we can better understand how the peace of Christ can be both soothing and unsettling. Mary accepted the very disturbing truths revealed to her by the Angel Gabriel, by the old man Simeon, and by her Divine Son. She was at peace in the midst of great uncertainty and turmoil, that lasted throughout her entire life, because she trusted God's promises to her, and to all humankind, would be fulfilled.

Peter's faith was more erratic. He would boldly declare his loyalty to Jesus, and then falter in his ability to follow through. He wanted to be faithful and true, but without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, he simply could not help himself. Still, Jesus loved Peter, and he entrusted him with critically important pastoral responsibilities to "feed my sheep," as if to say, "guard and protect my little ones."

Imperfect Witnesses



We priests and bishops are imperfect witnesses to the Truth of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We are sinners who have been called by name, like Peter and the Apostles, to make Christ present to a world that longs for Him — often

without realizing it. Our own imperfections, like those of the first bishops and priests, make it clear that the truth and credibility of the Gospel and the success of the Church's mission are not of our own human making, but an intimate participation in the Divine Plan for the Church and for the world, revealed by and guaranteed by the Crucified and Risen One. As such, we have been sent to live the mission of the Eucharist as *lambs in the*

midst of wolves and although it pains us greatly, we too must be prepared to be hated on account of My Name (Mt.10:16-23).

Trying to live this mission on our own power is foolish and, ultimately, impossible. To succeed, we must be **spiritually renewed** by our closeness to Jesus in the Eucharist and the other sacraments, by our fervent prayer, and by our re-commitment to be pastors who are willing and able to “feed my sheep” as Jesus has commanded us to do.

In my pastoral letters, homilies, and other messages during the past 13 years, I have consistently said we priests need to recapture the zeal of the day of our ordination; however, upon further reflection, I have come to realize we need to do more than that. I think we must find a new zeal, one that comes from the lived experience each of us has had since that day of our ordination, in my case 51 years ago, and allow all of the ways we have been *alter Christus* (another Christ) to so many make us renewed in our efforts to find a new zeal, a deeper love, a more fervent devotion to Christ that will draw us out of any sense of complacency, and once more to be “set on fire” with love for Jesus and His Church.

Three Challenges to Authentic Spiritual Renewal



Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, recently offered some powerful reflections on the challenges we bishops and priests face as we seek to *Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly* (1 Pt 5:2). Speaking to bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, seminarians, and pastoral workers in the Cathedral Basilica of Notre-Dame de

Québec, on his recent Apostolic Journey to Canada at the end of July 2022, the pope said:

“Dear brothers and sisters, the Gospel needs to be proclaimed if we are to communicate the joy of faith to today’s men and women. Yet this proclamation is not primarily a matter of words, but of a witness abounding with gratuitous love, for that is God’s way with us. A proclamation that should take shape in a personal and ecclesial lifestyle that can rekindle a desire for the Lord, instill hope and radiate trust and credibility.”

The Holy Father went on to describe **three challenges** that must be addressed and successfully overcome.



The first challenge is **evangelical**, that is “to make Jesus known”. This is the privilege, and the grave responsibility, we accepted when we were ordained. I firmly believe I we must find new ways to proclaim the heart of the Gospel to those who have not yet encountered Christ. This calls for a pastoral creativity that places “mission” far ahead of “maintenance,” and is capable of reaching people where they are living – not waiting for them to come – finding opportunities for listening, dialogue, and encounter. If we wait for people to come to us before they encounter Jesus in Word and sacrament, we will miss our best chances to introduce Him to those who either do not know Him or who have drifted away from His loving presence. To be missionary disciples, means to leave behind what is known and comfortable in order to bring Christ to others.



The second challenge that Pope Francis outlines for us is **witness**. As bishops, priests, and deacons, our most effective preaching is found in our actions, in the way we live. We have many important things to say — in homilies, in liturgy, in written and spoken communication — but what people hear from us most profoundly is not so much what we say, but what we do and who we are. Our witness to the joy of the Gospel comes through loud and clear when we live the Gospel in confidence and hope in spite of all the obstacles we face in our efforts to be good and holy priests who tend the flock entrusted to our care. We need our priests to embrace each person with a warm and welcoming spirit; ordinary men with extraordinary gifts to be open to all, to be compassionate, and care for their people with the loving and generous heart of the Good Shepherd.



The third challenge is **fraternity**. The Church will be a credible witness to the Gospel the more its members embody *commun-ion*, creating opportunities and situations that enable all those who approach the faith to encounter a welcoming community, one capable of listening, entering into dialogue and promoting quality relationships. Each of our priests must have a strong, personal and vibrant relationship with Jesus, a healthy fraternity with their brother priests, and be united and in solidarity with me as bishop, and my successors. That will lead to a true and genuine love for the people entrusted to our care, which will then flower into a renewed diocesan family of faith. To confront the Evil One who constantly seeks to divide us from one another, and who is working overtime to separate us into opposing factions on every conceivable issue,



we must become what we truly are — sisters and brothers united with Christ and with each other in baptism, as members of His Mystical Body, the Church.

As we inaugurate this “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations,” let us commit ourselves to meeting these three challenges head-on in our prayer, in our sacramental ministry, and in our priestly fraternity. As Pope Francis reminds us:

“We are talking about living in a Christian community that in this way becomes a school of humanity, where all can learn to love one another as brothers and sisters, ready to work together for the common good. Indeed, at the heart of the preaching of the Gospel is God’s love, which transforms us and makes us capable of communion with all and service to all.”

When we “live the mission of the Eucharist, we ourselves encounter God’s love, and then we share generously that love with others here in our nine counties of southwest Michigan. God is never stingy with His gifts, and He invites all of us — clergy, religious, and lay faithful — to give freely of our time, talent, and treasure To transform the world by sharing the love of Christ with our neighbors.



Participation in this Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations for Priests and the Lay Faithful

For Priests

Dear Brother Priests,

I do not intend this “Year” to be weighed down with excessive content or programming. Rather, I urge us all to make an intentional decision to re-examine what, I trust, are already our daily spiritual practices, and consciously make every effort to renew and revitalize the way we pray our Liturgy of the Hours, Holy Hour, daily rosary, our time of meditation, and, most especially, the daily celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

This Plan for our “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations” is rooted in prayer, the Eucharist, and strengthening our fraternity among each other and with me (and at the appropriate time, my successor), in a true sense of what it means for us to be a presbyterate. We are praying to be renewed in our vocations, and to be better prepared to guide our people through these very challenging times we are all facing.

I see this “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations” to be so important that I will be requiring full participation in the following key aspects of this special “Year.”

Daily: Please join in solidarity with all our priests in praying the special prayer for priestly spiritual renewal and an increase in priestly vocations for our diocese;

Weekly: Please increase the opportunity for the parish communities to spend time in Adoration by dedicating at least an hour (but if possible, an extended period of time) for Eucharistic Adoration every Thursday, which is the day when we commemorate Jesus’ Gift of the Holy Eucharist and the gift of the priesthood.

Monthly: We will join together as brother priests for a time of shared discussion and enrichment on some aspect of priestly spirituality such as our priestly promises at ordination, Eucharistic renewal, and our own intimate communion with Christ. We will gather as a presbyterate, then on alternating months, we will gather with our brother priests within our designated deaneries.

Annually: We will participate in our annual Convocation and five-day retreat.

For the Lay Faithful

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Though this “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations” begins with a focus on our priests, that will not be possible without your prayerful support.

I also want to remind you of the unique and special role that belongs to you, though distinct from that of our ordained priests, but equally important. This special role flows from the sacrament of baptism, which unites all of us into the Body of Christ. The Vatican Council “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People” puts it succinctly and clearly:



“The laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ; they have therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God.” The decree continues: “The characteristic of the lay state being a life led in the midst of the world and of secular affairs, laypeople are called by God to make of their apostolate, through the vigor of their Christian spirit, a leaven in the world” (#2).

Pope Francis, put it like this: “We need well-formed laypeople, animated by a sincere and clear faith whose life has been touched by the personal and merciful love of Jesus. We need laypeople who take risks, who get their hands dirty, who go forward. We need laypeople with a vision of the future not confined to the little things of life. The Church needs laypeople who ‘dare to dream.’” (Pope Francis to the Pontifical Council for the Laity, June 2016)

From my perspective, I want to encourage you, dear members of the lay faithful, to be actively engaged not only in the practice of your faith, but also in the courageous witness to our faith in the ways you live your lives in the midst of this challenging world. We need to make sure we are motivated by Gospel values to challenge the ways of the world, rather than by confusing our faith with any particular political agenda. We must advance the Kingdom of God which Jesus established, and which He entrusted to His Church to promote.

Therefore, during this “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations,” I ask you not only to pray for our priests, but I also strongly encourage you to open your hearts to the Holy Spirit’s promptings for your own spiritual renewal during this special year.

In particular, I humbly ask that you consider the following suggestions:

Daily: Please pray for all our priests, especially those in your parish who are providing for your own pastoral and sacramental care.

Weekly: Please consider actively participating in the special times of Eucharistic Adoration provided by your parish to pray for your priests and for the general renewal of our faith as a diocese.

Monthly: Be aware that your priests will be coming together with their brothers in the deanery and/or the entire presbyterate for prayer and enrichment; please be patient in regard to the impact that may have on their availability during those times.

Throughout the Year: Please pray our priests will be spiritually renewed, and that the entire diocese will begin to also be renewed in faith. Please pray our young people will open their hearts to discern to which vocation God may be calling them: married life, ordained ministry, consecrated religious life, or a committed single life. Please encourage your own family members to consider what God is asking of them as more important than which profession, career, or job might be more lucrative or materially successful. Please encourage young men to consider the possibility of priesthood for what God might be calling them to do here in our diocese.

For the entire Church of the Diocese of Kalamazoo — A Diocesan Synod

When we approach the end of this “Year of Priestly Spiritual Renewal and Prayer for Vocations”, it is my intention that we will conclude with a Diocesan Synod, composed of representatives of our entire local Church — priests, deacons, consecrated religious, and lay leaders — to prepare a document, which all our priests will have a chance to approve, and which will serve as a “Guide for a ‘Way of Life’ for the Diocesan Priests” in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. This guide will be based on numerous consultations throughout this special diocesan year of both the priests’ and the lay faithful’s thoughts and concerns, hopes, and needs for priestly ministry and spirituality. The document will also address and include those ideas and way to promote more priestly vocations.



Setting the Earth on Fire

I began this pastoral letter with Jesus' words, "Peace be with you." But there is another passage in Sacred Scripture where Jesus speaks of peace in a way that appears to contradict our ordinary understanding of what peace means for us. In the Gospel of St. Luke, we read these disturbing words:

I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division (cf. Lk 12:49–51).

Most of us have a difficult time reconciling the meek and humble Jesus of the Beatitudes, who assures us that blessed are the peacemakers (Mt 5:9), with the prophetic Teacher who refuses to let us stay comfortable with the status quo, and who insists we allow ourselves to be roused by the blazing fire that comes to us through the intervention of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need to follow Jesus' example to both embrace God's peace while allowing ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit as we boldly set the world on fire with God's love.

Concluding Reflections

From the opening words of the Book of Genesis: *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth* (Gen 1:1) to the final pages of the Book of Revelation: *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth* (Rev 21:1), and throughout all of Divine Revelation, our Loving God proclaims: *Behold, I am making all things new.* (Rev 21:5). It was God's Word which brought all of creation — the heavens, the earth, and each human being to ever live — into existence. And it is God's Word made Flesh, Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of the World, Who has redeemed all of humanity. It is the Risen and Ascended Jesus in Whom we too *are made new* by sharing in His Victory over sin and death.

All of us — clergy, religious, and lay faithful — need to become spiritually renewed and fortified in the Holy Spirit, because the faith of the Church and our own devotion and steadfastness is under attack. We need only

listen to the daily news, and pay attention to what is happening in every aspect of our society, to be aware of that fact. The various “isms” of our culture, including materialism, individualism, and secularism; the outright battle being waged against any and all Gospel values, including the most basic value of human life; and the active attempts to marginalize God and God’s ways, are blatant signs of that outright attack.

It is my hope and prayer that our presbyterate will be renewed in our love for Jesus, and in so doing, that we will guide our people into a time of renewal of faith for our entire local Church. As St. John Vianney said so beautifully to his bishop: “If you want the whole diocese to be converted to God, then all the priests must become holy.”

Imagine the faith alive once this renewal is underway, where everything is made new again: our churches filled to capacity with those yearning for the Eucharist; our youth engaged in the faith; our seminarian class numbering in the dozens; our renewal leading us to better serve those on the margins and living out the Beatitudes — a diocesan family of faith nourished by our renewal and living our lives inspired by the Gifts of the Eucharist and the Holy Spirit.

Let us ask our Blessed Mother Mary, St. Peter the Apostle, and our diocesan patron, St. Augustine, to intercede for us as we seek to renew ourselves spiritually and to pray for vocations. May our priests grow in their commitment to live the mission of the Eucharist. May the Holy Spirit enkindle in us the fire of God’s love so that we can lead all of our people to live as bold and courageous missionary disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. And may our spiritually renewed and fortified diocese begin changing the world, finding a way to renew the soul of our country, and restoring God to His rightful place in our lives and in our world.

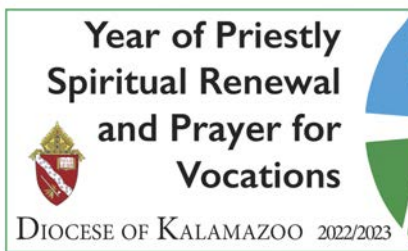
Jesus has won the Victory, and because of that, we can live in the midst of the challenges we face in this world with hope, and live our faith with joy and conviction, because in Jesus, we too are being made new in His Love.

To Him, be all glory, honor, and Kingship, now and forever. Amen!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Paul J. Bradley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Paul J. Bradley
Bishop of Kalamazoo



Being Made New in God's Redeeming Love

Heart of Christ, renew Your priests in Your love.
Help them to devote themselves more deeply
to building up Your Body, the Church,
so that we may all become one in Your life and love.

Let Your Holy Spirit rekindle the "fire of your love" within our priests.
Help them to "set the world on fire"
through the faithful practice of their priestly ministry.

May we support and encourage our priests with our prayer
as they strive to be good, holy, compassionate, and inspiring
priests for us who are entrusted to their care.
May we grow to be faithful and joyful witnesses
to Your presence in our world.

With your Word of blessing, help all our families to encourage each
other to respond to Your invitation to "Follow Me" in our unique
vocations. Help many more young men respond to Your call
to serve Your Church in priestly ministry for our diocese.

Loving and merciful God, since the beginning of time,
You have been "making all things new".
Call our world back to You. Deepen our faith. Renew our priests.
And guide our entire diocese, priests and people,
through this life, and into the everlasting life of heaven.

May we proclaim with all our hearts: "You are my Lord and my God,"
as You renew us in Your life-giving love, now and forever.

Amen.