



Most Reverend Robert W. Finn

Bishop

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Opening Remarks to the Faith Formation Commission

May 23, 2007

Good afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to serve on this important Commission. When I became the Ordinary of the Diocese two years ago, I initiated a study of the needs of the people of God in our parishes in the vital area of adult education. That study commission produced a needs assessment report which you have in your folders today and which I hope you will study carefully because I believe, to a large extent, it still reflects the needs of the people of the Diocese. It was a valuable aid for the Planning Commission that followed.

That Commission produced a recommended plan of studies, which is the basis of the curriculum being taught by the Bishop Helmsing Institute today to 168 students and to high school teachers at our Catholic high schools. That vital work will go on and expand next year opening up 6-8 new parish locations, offering some classes of shorter duration designed to reach even more of our adults, who may take a single enrichment course of 3-4 weeks or the full three year curriculum. This, however, by no means exhausts the responsibility of the Diocese to foster an environment of adult education and to provide direction and resources for our parishes in this vital area.

When I addressed our Planning Commission I noted that in his 1998 apostolic exhortation on the *Vocation of the Lay Faithful, Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II echoed the Second Vatican Council by lifting up the call to holiness as “an undeniable requirement arising from the very mystery of the Church.” Lay men and women respond to the universal call to holiness primarily and uniquely in the secular realm. As *Lumen Gentium*, the Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* noted, they are called by God to “contribute to the sanctification of the world from within, like leaven, in the spirit of the Gospel, by fulfilling their own particular duties.”

Dear friends, there will always be a need for some lay people to assist with Church ministries: administration, catechesis in our Catholic schools and programs, in some liturgical ministries proper to the laity. The authentic vocation of the laity, however, must engage the great majority of lay men and women in the midst of the secular arena: the home, the workplace and the marketplace; in the political world and in the professions. The laity enter these places which, for the most part, the clergy cannot be so present.

How will the scientific world be fully engaged but guided by moral principles? How will the secular media be infused with a deep respect for the balance between privacy and legitimate disclosure? Will lawyers and judges bring their faith-filled beliefs about human dignity into their deliberations? Can lawmakers and elected officials live and promote a consistent ethic of life at all stages and still fulfill their oath of office?

The huge frontier of lay witness is before us, and the faithful need academic and spiritual formation if they are to live their Catholicism beyond the pew on Sunday morning. Without this full engagement of the lay vocation for the transformation of the world, the work of the New Evangelization will not be realized. The foundation for this apostolic work must be an adult faith formation which supports growth in holiness, virtue, knowledge of the Faith, and a strong sense of the sacramental and communal nature of the Church.

How can we best foster this vision in our lay people? The US Bishops asked for a new focus on **adult faith formation** with the publication of *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us* in 1999. They spoke of John Paul II's call for a new evangelization and a new apologetics, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is an apologetics, properly understood, as the work of elucidating the articles of faith and explaining their authentic history and profound meaning. Pope Benedict XVI recently urged Christians to be able to give reasons for their faith in Christ, following the example of the second century Greek Father, Clement of Alexandria. For Clement, "the knowledge of Christ is not just a thought, but a love that opens the eyes, transforms the person and creates communion with the 'Logos,' the divine Word that is truth and life."

The Needs Assessment Commission found that there is a real hunger among Catholics to become more knowledgeable of the richness and beauty of the deposit of faith. The bishops note that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and now the *Compendium* as well, are "an indispensable resource in our time for helping adults become stronger in their relationship with God and grow in their knowledge of faith."

Nor should we forget that responding to the call for holiness with sound adult faith formation benefits our families, children and youth. It nurtures Christian men and women who become leaders in the Church, men and women of compassion, working to establish a more just society. It forms men and women willing to stand together for the dignity and sanctity of human life from birth to natural death and more ready to turn back the assault on marriage and the family. It develops men and women willing to work to overcome the widespread ignorance of and indifference to the dignity of persons, the cultural gifts of different people, and to stand up for Catholic moral and social teaching.

The bishops also refer to Pope John Paul's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* and their own publication, *Go and Make Disciples* and say such missionary efforts cannot be successful unless adult believers are motivated to share a faith they understand, embrace and live. They emphasized that "adult faith formation, by which people consciously grow in the life of Christ through experience, reflection, prayer and study, and become active members of the Christian Community prepared to act as disciples in mission to the world, must be the heart of our catechetical vision and practice."

Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us is subtitled "A Pastoral Plan for Adult Faith Formation in the United States ." It calls for Dioceses to appoint a Commission which is charged to shed the light of Christ upon an all too often neglected priority, namely, ongoing lifelong adult faith formation. Our Faith Formation Needs Assessment Commission called for full implementation of this document, including forming a Faith Formation Commission like yourselves that would, among other tasks, develop and, most importantly, implement, "a pastoral plan for adult faith formation that has been formed in consultation with diocesan and parish leaders."

This is no small task. It will require devoted prayer, systematic and thorough study, hard work and dedication, as well as good communication skills to implement. The bishops said that "it is

crucial that parishes have reliable assistance in forming parish leadership teams," that is, faith formation teams. Some parishes have already done this, but many have not and many lack the staffing to do so except by marshalling capable, spiritually motivated volunteers. We are proud of what our parishes have accomplished but there is much yet to be done. This all represents a great challenge to this Commission and an important and vital task which I lay upon your capable shoulders today. I urge you to work and pray together and to build a spiritual team effort that in concert with our pastors and parish staffs will make this a reality for our Diocese.

I know you will leave no stone unturned in your research of the work of our parishes and other dioceses, consulting magisterial documents, and in sharing your combined experiences, as well as, capturing some of the experiences of our pastors and parish leaders. This work must be uniquely fitted to the needs of our diocese and to the needs of all our people. You must take into account the Hispanic and Vietnamese communities, for example, in your deliberations and implementation. This cannot be a rush job or hurry-up project. It must be well thought out and presented to me in its final form for approval and subsequent implementation throughout the Diocese.

In his recent visit to Brazil and with Latin American bishops the Holy Father spoke of the problem of "those Catholics who have abandoned the life of the Church." He identified the principle cause as "the lack of an evangelization completely centered on Christ and his Church." This evangelization begins with adult faith formation that produces conversions of heart. We seek to enhance and develop parishes that are centers for adult faith formation. We seek to form adults who utilize to the fullest extent their Baptismal graces and Eucharistic communion to become apostles, sent by Christ into the world. Nourished by the Word of God, the sacraments and communal life, they will share the Gospel in their homes, neighborhoods, places of work and centers of culture.

I thank you for the effort that, beginning today, you will be undertaking for our Diocese. I again, urge you to make prayer a part of everything you do. You are helping to provide a foundation for the future of our diocese. You have my gratitude, my prayers and my blessing.