



MAKE

A Pastoral Letter for the People
of the **Diocese of Joliet**

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**A Pastoral Letter from Most Reverend Ronald
A. Hicks for the People of the Diocese of Joliet**

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Prayer to MAKE Disciples

Ever-loving God, maker of all good things, you made us in your image and called us through baptism. Give us now the grace to be made into your disciples, and grant that in being so made, we will do as you have commanded—to go and make other disciples as we catechize, evangelize, and put our faith into action. Through the intercession of our patron, St. Francis Xavier, St. Joseph, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints, we humbly make our prayer. Amen.

Introduction

God So Loved the World

I love Jesus! I wholeheartedly believe that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). *God* loves us so much that He wants us to be saved eternally through His Son. This salvation comes through an encounter with our Lord in the Church and the Sacraments, particularly through His life, suffering, death, and resurrection. With all my heart, I desire that all people may be saved by knowing, loving, and serving God.

In 2018, Bishop R. Daniel Conlon presented his pastoral letter, *Go*, to the people of the Diocese of Joliet. In that letter, he prophetically called us to embrace the Church’s missionary mandate. He emphasized the critical need for a renewed focus on evangelization and the salvation of souls, especially in response to the shifting cultural tides and the challenges facing our faith today.

Building on Bishop Conlon’s foundational message, I would like my first pastoral letter to take the next step, moving from the word *go* to **make**. “Make” is not just the *next* word, but also an urgent word for today. In the Great Commission, Jesus exhorts us, **“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age”** (Matthew 28:19–20).



Having fallen in love with Jesus, we are impelled by a sense of mission to share His unfathomable love with everyone we meet and to serve others. He now sends us to put our faith into action.

The first step is to go into the world, which is so desperately in need of salvation through Jesus. And once we go, what comes next? Jesus answers that question by calling us to make disciples of all nations. Everything now hinges on a single verb: **make**. This raises an important question: Beyond baptizing, how do we actually make disciples? Many of us are searching for practical guidance on how to live out His mission in our daily lives. Yet most of us feel incredibly ill-equipped to make disciples.

We have just concluded a diocesan-wide process of targeted restructuring and pruning of our pastoral center, parishes, and schools. Now, if we are to grow as a thriving, vibrant Church, one serious about passing on the faith to future generations, we must move from maintenance to mission. To make this shift, I have invited everyone to follow a vision focused on three essential paths summarized in five words: *Catechesis, Evangelization, and Faith into Action*.

Catechesis puts us in touch with who Jesus is. For many of us, learning about Jesus began in childhood. In reality, coming to know Jesus in a personal way is a lifelong process. As we deepen our knowledge of Jesus, we also discover His invitation to enter into a loving, personal relationship with Him. This is evangelization, which opens our hearts to His love and intimate friendship. Finally, having fallen in love with Jesus, we are impelled by a sense of mission to share His unfathomable love with everyone we meet and to serve others. He now sends us to put our faith into action.

These three paths—*catechesis, evangelization, and faith into action*—guide us toward fulfilling our mission and help us understand how each of us is to live out our faith. Throughout this letter, I will provide a roadmap for how we can make this a lived reality.

Through the intercession of the **Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph Guardian of the Redeemer**, and our patron, **St. Francis Xavier**, may we as a Church be strengthened and inspired by the Holy Spirit to engage ever more fully in Christ’s mission to make disciples.

A Renewed Focus on a Changing Landscape

I want you to love Jesus too! This is the deep desire of all who accept the Lord's invitation to go and make disciples.

Since that moment on the mountain when Jesus instructed them to go and make disciples, these words became the focus for what they were to do next. To make something usually means to form or create it. But when it comes to people, what does that really mean? We might think of a coach telling undisciplined athletes that he will make them a team, or a culinary instructor who trains beginners to make them chefs, or a drill instructor who shapes raw recruits to make them Marines. In each case, "make" points to a process of **real transformation**.

Yet, it seems something has been holding us back. In his 2018 pastoral letter, Bishop Conlon reflected on the shifts in our diocese, from growth to decline. He noted reduced Mass attendance, fewer infant baptisms and confirmations, a decline in priestly and religious vocations, fewer couples choosing marriage in the Church, and the reduction and closing of parishes and Catholic schools.

These trends are not unique to the Diocese of Joliet. The religious landscape has changed dramatically from what many of us remember just a generation ago. Unexpected events, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have added momentum to this change, creating disaffection toward the Church in some, while awakening a deeper desire for faith in others. While some studies show that religious disaffiliation among adults may be leveling off, an obvious question remains: How are we to understand the changes we have seen in the world we once knew?

Scholars of culture and religion describe these dramatic changes as the end of the "Age of Christendom" and the beginning of a new "Apostolic Age." They point to a shift that actually began centuries ago. While scholars can debate the origins of this change, we now face an undeniable fact: Where once society supported a Christian worldview, today's dominant culture is often indifferent or even hostile toward it. This is the cultural reality and the challenge we face today. Even though the transmission of faith is no longer supported

by the culture and society as it once was, we must embrace new opportunities for people to have a personal encounter with Christ.

The end of Christendom does not mean the end of Christianity or the Church. Jesus Christ builds His Church on rock, despite the shifting sands of culture around it. We, His disciples, must now be made into the living stones (1 Peter 2:5) with which He builds. In 2025, we know the mission. We see the landscape. And we, united with Jesus and guided by the Holy Spirit, have work to do. This letter is not merely a reflection on our past or present; it is an invitation to each of you. My hope is that by offering practical suggestions on how we can live out Jesus' mission to make disciples, personally, within our families, schools, parishes, and across our diocese, we will deepen our love for Jesus and bring more people to salvation through Him.

First, Be Made

How do we build a Church that makes more disciples? An old Latin phrase gives us a clue: *Nemo dat quod non habet*—"You cannot give what you do not have."

So first, we must be made. The process of becoming a disciple of Christ looks a little different for each of us, shaped by our upbringing, opportunities, talents, choices, struggles, and personal prayer. **Yet our common bond is the person of Jesus Christ**, Lord and Savior of all, and His Church.

What, then, are these shared elements, or roadmap, which help us enter into the fullness of discipleship and become disciple-makers for Jesus? I will name four essentials for us and, later, add a fifth. It helps to see these four steps in order:

1. Conversion
2. Confession
3. Communion
4. Commission

We will look at the fifth essential separately, because it holds all the others together.

Conversion

For many of us, taking the first step to follow Jesus can be the most difficult. Nevertheless, if taken, it marks the beginning of a process of coming to know and love the Lord. We call it *conversion*, the moment when you receive an invitation from Jesus to enter into a personal, loving relationship with Him. It is that moment when you realize that God is real and not just a theory, and when you personally understand that God is connecting with and loving you to the point that you respond by deciding to follow Him forever.

You can be brought up in the faith and participate in many of the external expressions of Catholicism, such as going to Mass and attending various parish events, without ever becoming a disciple who leads others to Jesus. You will never become that disciple without taking an initial step, which is an acceptance of His invitation to follow Him.

There are many saints who experienced a conversion, many of which were not easy. One compelling example comes from the life of **St. Francis of Assisi** (c. 1181–1226). As a young man, St. Francis lived a life of privilege and worldly ambitions, but one day, after an encounter with a leper who had initially repulsed him, St. Francis saw Jesus in the man and was moved out of compassion to dismount from his horse and embrace and kiss the leper.

As the story of St. Francis illustrates, the more we personally know and love the Lord, the more our hearts will long for a deeper relationship with Him. Our faith will no longer feel like a matter of routine, but rather a joyful desire to participate in His Sacraments, to follow His commands, and to be continually transformed by His love.

If you have yet to experience this love, I encourage you to ask for it now in prayer. When you pray, know that I also pray with you and for you, that upon receiving this gift, you will take the next step as a true disciple of Jesus.

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Confession

Our conversion moves us to a deeper life of faith in Jesus and a desire to shape our lives according to His Gospel. In Jesus, we have a personal Savior who wants to forgive our sins so that we can live freely as beloved children of God.

Yet sometimes something holds us back from seeking the very mercy God so freely offers. To accept the grace of forgiveness, we must not only acknowledge our weakness but also recognize the tricks of the Devil, who wants more than anything to keep us trapped in sin. At times, we may be tempted to think, falsely, that our choices are not sinful because they do not appear to harm others. Or, over time, we might come to believe, also falsely, that we have fallen so deep into sin that we are beyond God's reach. Both ways of thinking are simply not true.

I want to say emphatically and joyfully that Jesus is the Incarnation of Divine Mercy. By dying on the Cross in an act of pure, sacrificial love, He conquered both sin and death. In the Sacrament of Confession, it is Jesus Himself who wipes away our sins when we confess them with sincere and contrite hearts and make a firm resolve to change our ways. Through the absolution of the priest, we receive the grace of new life.

When we think about the struggle with personal sin, perhaps no one comes to mind more readily than **St. Augustine of Hippo** (354–430). Through the experience of repeated repentance and conversion, St. Augustine learned to abandon his worldly pursuits and overcome his moral failings to experience a profound spiritual transformation.



As the story of St. Augustine illustrates, our path of discipleship begins with a simple but humbling admission: I am a sinner. And while we are sinners, let us strive to be saints. Only then will we begin to taste the fullness of being made into true disciples of Jesus. When we desire that for ourselves, we will naturally want it for others too.

If it has been a while since you have experienced the abundant mercy of God by confessing your sins in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, I invite you to pray for the courage and grace to return and seek it out.

Communion

After conversion and confession, *communion* continues the transformative process of disciple-making. By “communion,” I mean nothing less than the Eucharist, Jesus’ gift of Himself—Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity—to the life of the Church. In a very tangible way, the Church in the United States has reawakened to the significance of Holy Communion, thanks in part to the three-year Eucharistic Revival which culminated more than a year ago, when 60,000 Catholics, including many from our own diocese, gathered in Indianapolis for the Tenth National Eucharistic Congress.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, making disciples through personal transformation. Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist because this is His way of wanting to be in communion with you. We remember these words from the Gospel of John: **“Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me”** (John 6:54). To put it another way, “You are what you eat!” Therefore, the Eucharist is the food by which Jesus becomes alive in us. Transformed by Christ’s true Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, we receive the grace and power to go on mission as His disciple-makers.

The Eucharistic Revival coincided with the canonization process of a new saint, **Carlo Acutis**, born in 1991, who has become a role model of Eucharistic discipleship in this post-Christendom age. As a teenager, because of his love for the Eucharist, Carlo went to Mass daily and regularly invited his relatives to join him. Carlo also built and promoted a website on Eucharistic miracles as a tool for evangelization.

As St. Carlo understood, the Eucharist is the spiritual food that sustains us and the Sacrament by which Jesus empowers us to help Him build up His Body, the Church. Let us never be shy about witnessing to our faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Once truly nourished by the Eucharist, we come together in community, living out our individual vocations united in this single calling: making disciples for the salvation of souls. We do this in communion with our families, parishes, religious communities, schools, organizations, and all Catholic institutions.

If you already cherish the Eucharist, let your love for it shine brightly. Share it, adore it, and receive it with a joyful heart. If the Eucharist has not yet become a central part of your spiritual journey, I strongly invite you to make it a priority. Ask the Lord to kindle within you a deeper longing for His true Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, and experience the transformative grace it brings into your life.

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Commission

We return again to the mountainside at the moment when the Risen Jesus commissions His apostles to go and make disciples. Nourished by the transformative power of Jesus in the Eucharist, they would not be sent on their journey alone. They would be bringing Jesus with them, the Incarnate Word, now alive in them, His Body, given **“for the life of the world”** (John 6:51).

Every Eucharistic celebration concludes with a sending. In fact, the word *Mass* derives its meaning from the Latin word *missa*, meaning “dismissal.” The liturgy does not simply come to an end. Those assembled are sent forth to bring the fruits of the Eucharist to the world: *“Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life!”* This sending at the end of Mass is, for each of us, our personal participation in the disciple-making mission of the Church.

As we go forth, we are called to put our faith into action each day through our good works, our commitment to service, our moral integrity, and our dedication to justice and peace in the world. Yet none of this is possible without first knowing and loving Christ and being nourished by Him. It is from this deep, personal relationship with Jesus that all our efforts flow, helping others to come to know and love Him as well.

Our Patron, **St. Francis Xavier** lived out his mission by travelling the world to share the Gospel and baptize converts in India, Japan, China, and Goa. He learned to adopt the dress and customs of the local cultures in order to be welcomed into their communities to share the Gospel.

A Fifth Foundation That Holds the Rest: Prayer

Prayer is the central and vital piece that deserves special attention because it runs through all the others and holds them together. Put simply, prayer is talking to and listening to God. Prayer is our relationship with God Himself. It is the raising of one's mind and heart to God. (CCC 2559)

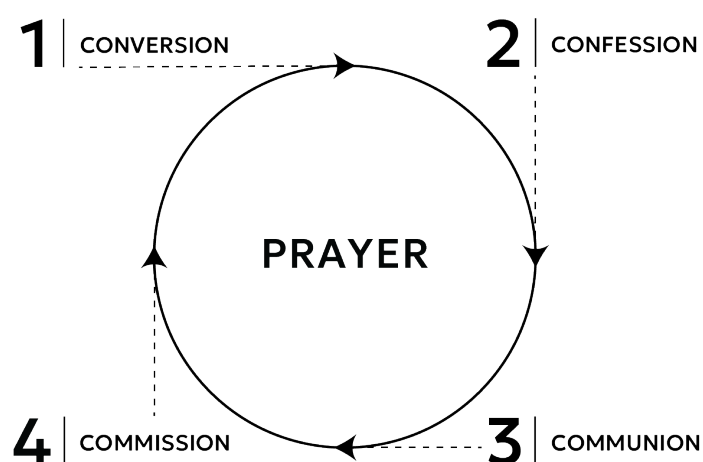
St. Thérèse of Lisieux described it beautifully:

"For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." (CCC 2558)

St. Thérèse's words remind us that deep down, every human heart longs for something greater. The Catechism tells us that humanity "is in search of God" and that this search is really our response to God, who calls us first. Jesus made this clear when He told His disciples, **"It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you..."** (John 15:16).

In prayer, we come to know God more deeply as we try to listen to Him, for listening allows the Lord to speak to us and also lead our prayer. We also come to know ourselves in His eyes. Prayer is how God reveals His heart to us and reveals our true selves to us. This is why prayer is not just another task for disciples. It is the heartbeat of our whole journey to live in union with Jesus today and always.

The diagram below shows the central place of prayer in the life of a disciple. Prayer connects and nourishes each step—conversion, confession, communion, and commission—helping us grow closer to Christ every day.



This is true because:

- We will always need *conversion* since we so often choose our own way instead of God's.
- We will always need *confession* until the day we see Jesus face to face.
- We will always need the gift of *communion* because we are always being transformed into His likeness.
- And Jesus will always *commission* us to make new disciples, as long as there are souls to be reached.

Prayer feeds all of this. It keeps us rooted in Christ so that we can be changed, forgiven, strengthened, and sent. Also, it invites others to do the same. In other words, our relationship with Jesus in prayer shows us where we are on the journey of discipleship. Saint Paul said, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17), because we always need to stay open to the One who changes us and, through us, can change the world.

If your children and young people do not see you pray, they may think you do not pray at all. I encourage you to *make* prayer a part of your daily life. Show the next generation that you set aside time to pray, and teach them, step by step, how to pray, too!

There are countless reasons to pray, and our Church provides us with an unlimited variety of ways we can pray. This includes prayers of blessing and adoration, and prayers of petition, intercession, and thanksgiving.

Preaching and Living the Gospel

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis reminded us of our mission to share the Good News:

“Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey His call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel.”

Those “peripheries” are not far away—they are right around us: people who have never heard about Jesus, those who were baptized but drifted away, and even faithful churchgoers who still need to open their hearts to the fullness of His love and mercy. Sometimes the periphery is inside our own families.

Since the start of his pontificate, Pope Leo XIV has called the Church to remember those who have yet to hear the Gospel, especially in places where it is not easy to speak the truth in love. He reminds us:

“... it is not easy to preach the Gospel and bear witness to its truth, where believers are mocked, opposed, despised or at best tolerated and pitied. Yet, precisely for this reason, they are the places where our missionary outreach is desperately needed. A lack of faith is often tragically accompanied by the loss of meaning in life, the neglect of mercy, appalling violations of human dignity, the crisis of the family and so many other wounds that afflict our society.”

Here in the Diocese of Joliet, we are called to shine the light of the Gospel for all to see. This is our mission and purpose, our daily task, and the source of our deepest joy. May we go out with courage and hope, preaching not just with words, but with words, actions, and lives transformed by Jesus Christ.



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Conclusion – Let Us Make Disciples for Jesus

Thank you for spending this time with me reflecting on the bold and beautiful mission that Jesus has entrusted to each one of us: to make disciples.

Throughout this letter, we have explored what it means to be a disciple and how, by God’s grace, we become disciple-makers. I have invited you to embrace a vision of Catechesis, Evangelization, and Faith into Action, and to truly make that vision a reality by following a clear roadmap with the four steps of conversion, confession, communion, and commission, all grounded in a life of prayer with your desire to live in union with Jesus.

We have also acknowledged the changing landscape around us. The culture is shifting rapidly. Our challenges are real. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). God remains our rock, our refuge, and our reason for hope.

Now, the time has come for us to make disciples. Yet we cannot make disciples unless we first become true disciples.

Therefore, together, let us open our hearts and our lives:

- To **make** time for prayer.
- To **make** space for God's abundant mercy and grace.
- To **make** our worldview reflect the truth of the Gospel.
- To **make** it to Mass every Sunday, even on vacation or in the summer.
- To **make** room for building and belonging to a parish community.
- To **make** the love of Christ visible in our everyday actions.
- To **make** Jesus and the Eucharist the center of our spiritual lives.
- To **make** the salvation of souls the reason behind all we do.

And this mission is not for a distant future. It begins today in these ways:

- We **make** disciples when we share our faith with a family member, friend, neighbor, coworker, or even a stranger.
- We **make** disciples when we invite someone to Mass and when we speak of our love for the Eucharist, for Mary, and for the saints.
- We **make** disciples when we teach our children to pray, comfort a neighbor in need, or serve without expecting anything in return.
- We **make** disciples when we forgive, just as God mercifully forgives us.
- We **make** disciples when we listen with compassion and witness to the truth with courage and humility.
- We **make** disciples when we hand on the faith by sending the next generations to our Catholic schools and religious education programs.
- We **make** disciples when we respect life from conception to a natural death.
- We **make** disciples when we work for justice, peace, and the dignity of every person.
- We **make** disciples when we care for God's creation.
- We **make** disciples when we feed the poor and accompany those who suffer and are marginalized.
- We **make** disciples when others find our joy, faith, and hope to be contagious.
- We **make** disciples by what we say, by what we do, and by how we live as sons and daughters of God.



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So, I ask again: What are we waiting for?

Jesus has already given us His Spirit, His Word, and His Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. Now He continues to entrust us with His mission, not only to follow Him but also to make followers of Him.

This is how the Church will be renewed—not by programs alone, not by treating the Church like a club, and not by clinging to the status quo, but by being on fire with love for Jesus, who is truly God and desires to be your personal Savior. The Church will be renewed by embracing His mission and committing ourselves to making disciples for the glory of God.

That is what this whole letter has been about: living out the mission of Christ through *Catechesis, Evangelization and Faith into Action*. It is an urgent invitation, not to settle for just knowing about Jesus, but to truly know Him personally, to love Him, to follow Him with courage, to serve Him and others with our whole being, and to share Him with joy.

Once we have heard Jesus call us by name, once we have encountered His love and mercy, once we have experienced His presence in the Eucharist, and once we have seen His face in serving others, we are never the same. When that happens, we will never want to keep that love to ourselves.

It is my sincere hope that the Diocese of Joliet will become the most evangelizing diocese in the country, not out of competition, but because I love Jesus. I want you to love Him too, with a love that transforms your life and draws others to Him. So be faithful. Be bold. And together, let us make disciples for Jesus... starting now!

For resources on how to live out "Make" in your daily life, and examples from the saints, visit make.diojoli.org.



Questions for Reflection

I invite you to take some time to reflect on this pastoral letter on your own, with another individual, with your family, or in small groups in your parish. These questions follow the letter's sections and can help you listen for how the Holy Spirit may be calling you to make disciples today. Please know that as you pray and read, I am praying for you too.

I. Introduction – God So Loved the World

- How have I personally experienced God's love for me?
- Has my understanding of God's love changed over the years? How?
- In what ways can I lead others to an encounter with God?

II. A Renewed Focus on a Changing Landscape

- In the current culture, how do I retain hope in Christ?
- How do I see the challenges in our culture as opportunities to share the hope of Christ with others?

III. First, Be Made

- What am I doing to deepen my own discipleship so that I have something real to share? Who could help me?
- What does "You cannot give what you do not have" mean for my life of faith?

a. Conversion

- Have I had a clear moment, or season, of true conversion?
- What is Jesus doing in my heart right now?
- How can I invite Jesus to renew my heart today?

b. Confession

- In what ways have I experienced God's mercy in my life?
- Do I turn to the Sacrament of Reconciliation regularly?
- What might keep me away from the Sacrament?

c. Communion

- Have I ever had a transformative experience with Jesus in the Eucharist?
- How central is the Eucharist in my life?
- How can I grow in love for Jesus truly present in the Blessed Sacrament?

d. Commission

- When I hear "Go and make disciples," how do I feel called to respond?
- How can I put my faith into action in my family, parish, workplace, or neighborhood? Do I feel equipped to do so?

IV. Prayer – Holding It All Together

- How does prayer shape my daily life and my relationships?
- What steps can I take to deepen my personal prayer and teach it to others?

V. Preaching and Living the Gospel

- Where are the "peripheries" in my own life—people or places that need the light of Christ?
- How can I proclaim the Gospel joyfully by my words and actions?

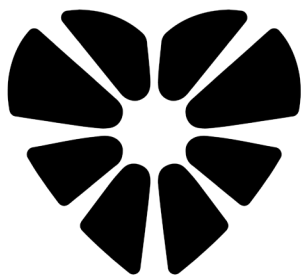
VI. Conclusion – Let Us Make Disciples for Jesus

- How is Jesus calling me to make disciples?
- How can I help my family, parish, school, and community be more alive with His mission?



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