

# *Partakers of the Divine Nature*

A pastoral letter on  
spiritual formation



Most Reverend Robert J. Carlson • Archbishop of St. Louis



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**MOST REVEREND ROBERT J. CARLSON**  
ARCHBISHOP OF ST. LOUIS

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MOST REVEREND ROBERT J. CARLSON  
ARCHBISHOP OF ST. LOUIS

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We have spent the past year observing the Year of Faith, a celebration promulgated by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI for renewing our zeal for evangelization. In my 2012 pastoral letter on evangelization, “Go and Announce the Gospel of the Lord,” I challenged each of you to be strong witnesses of our faith and to joyously proclaim the Good News of the Gospel.

As Catholic Christians, we continue to face challenges in our commission. But these challenges can present great opportunities — just as they have for disciples before us — when we are solidly formed in our faith. Continued formation fuels vibrancy, and this pastoral letter is a guide for your spiritual growth.

Our formation is a critical component of our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Through prayer, understanding, generosity and evangelization, we walk with Jesus and invite others on our journey. In exchange, Jesus offers us an opportunity to journey closer to His Father, our Father.

This journey of formation is never-ending, and it begins where we are. A lifetime of learning — true discipleship — will enrich our lives and enable us to enrich others' lives as well. I invite you to read this pastoral letter and use the reflections in each section to consider where you are in your formation and where you need to go.

As your shepherd, I am eager to walk with you on your path to holiness.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert J. Carlson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "R" and "C".

Most Reverend Robert J. Carlson  
Archbishop of St. Louis



# Partakers of the Divine Nature

A pastoral letter on spiritual formation

In my previous pastoral letter on evangelization (“Go and Announce the Gospel of the Lord,” 2012) I stressed the innate connection between the universal call to holiness and the call to evangelization. In this letter I wish to delve deeper into the meaning of the universal call to holiness. My belief in this area echoes that of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta:

“The fruit of Silence is prayer. The fruit of Prayer is faith. The fruit of Faith is love. The fruit of Love is service. The fruit of Service is peace.”

Everything we wish to achieve in the Church depends first and foremost upon the depth of our response to His call to holiness.

## A VISION OF HOLINESS

What is holiness? At its root, holiness means to be “set apart.” Of course, we might ask: “Set apart from what?” “Set apart for what?” But I suggest that, for a follower of Jesus Christ, we should be asking “set apart into what?” Simply put, it is our sharing in the divine life of the Trinity. It is, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI often said, being taken into Jesus’ own filial relation with the Father. Such is the crowning glory of the Holy Spirit: to make of us “Christians” — “anointed ones” — resplendent with the same glory the Son shares with the Father.<sup>1</sup> To become, as St. Peter put it, “partakers of the divine nature.”<sup>2</sup>

1 cf Jn. 17:5 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 795

2 2 Pt. 1:4



This vision of holiness lies at the heart of Scripture. The theophanies — the appearances of God in the Hebrew Scriptures — bear witness to the profound intimacy that God desires to have with His holy people. They show that He desires to be with us, and that He desires to be known by us. The Burning Bush in Exodus 3:2 — interpreted by the Fathers of the Church as a prefigurement of the Blessed Virgin Mary “The Lord is with you”<sup>3</sup> — is an image of every believer “consumed” with the love of God.

Similarly the prophet Elijah was “most zealous” for the things of the



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Lord,<sup>4</sup> and was assumed into eternal life without tasting death.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely what Jesus envisions for us when He says, “If anyone believes in me ... (and) keeps my word he will never taste death ... but already has passed from death to life.”<sup>6</sup> And when he prays, “that all may be one ‘as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; I pray that they may be (one) in us, that the world may believe that you sent Me.”<sup>7</sup>

The Fathers of the Church term this participation in the life of the Trinity “deification” or “divinization.” We are to partake of the divine nature, they

3 Lk. 1:28

4 1 Kg. 19:10

5 2 Kg. 2:10-11

6 Jn. 8:52; 11:26; 5:24

7 Jn. 17:21

insisted, to the same extent — though in an inverse manner — as Jesus partakes of our human nature. What an incredible thought!

I am often reminded of this “admirable exchange” when, during the offertory, the priest prays while pouring a drop of water into the chalice with wine — “Through the mystery of this water and wine may we share in the divinity of Christ who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.”

## **TRADITION**

**H**oliness is present in the tradition of the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church attests to this vision of deification in several places. Quoting St. Athanasius, it reminds us that “the Son of God became man so that we might become God.” Quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, it insists, “The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in His divinity, assumed our nature, so that He, made man, might make men gods.”<sup>8</sup>

“This is the highest, all-embracing benefit that Christ has bestowed upon us. This is the revelation of the mystery; this is the emptying out of the divine nature, the union of God and man, and the deification of the manhood that was assumed.”

### **St. Andrew of Crete, Office of Readings, Sept. 8th (Birth of Mary)**

“For when God was born to be man the purpose was not that the Godhead should be lost, but that, the Godhead remaining, man should be born to God.”

### **Hilary of Poitiers, De Trin. 10.7**

“For since He bestowed on us His own image and His own Spirit and we did not keep them safe, He took Himself a share in our poor and weak nature, in order that He might cleanse us and make us incorruptible, and establish us once more as partakers of His divinity.”

### **St. John Damascus, De Fid. Orth. 4.13**

8 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 460; cf. 398, 1988



I believe both our healing and growth as a Church depends on our being more fully assumed into the life of the Trinity.

Can we imagine a Love whose sole purpose in creating us is to make us receptors of His Divine Mercy? Can we imagine a God whose love is greater than our desire to be loved? Can we imagine a Lord whose thirst to imbue us with His living water exceeds our thirst for holiness? St. Faustina certainly believed in it. Jesus told her, “The flames of mercy are burning Me. I desire to pour them upon human souls. Oh, what pain they cause Me when they do not want to accept them.”<sup>9</sup> The question we must ask ourselves is: Do we wish also to be taken into the fire of the Trinity’s merciful love?

“If only you recognized God’s gift and who it is that is asking you for a drink.”<sup>10</sup>

“The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: There, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is He who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts; His asking arises from the depths of God’s desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God’s thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for Him.”<sup>11</sup>

## OUR CURRENT SITUATION

Vibrant Christians are made, not born. They are formed, not produced. Spiritual formation is a life-long process. The journey to intimacy with the Lord begins with our Christian initiation but does not end there. We are summoned and equipped at every moment by the Holy Spirit to receive more deeply the Trinitarian life imparted to us in our baptism, confirmation and first Holy Communion. It is not enough, even, to receive the Eucharist regularly in order to attain the depths of holiness God desires for us. Intentional discipleship involves much more than simply

9 *Diary*, 1074

10 Jn. 4:10

11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2560



**Intentional discipleship involves much more than simply keeping the commandments and sacramentally doing our duty by God and the Church.**

keeping the commandments and sacramentally doing our duty by God and the Church. Simply going through the motions in our Catholic faith is not “being transformed from glory to glory into His very image” that the Spirit makes possible.<sup>12</sup> God wishes to make us “partakers of the divine nature.” This, indeed, is our call and purpose!

In my last pastoral letter, I laid out some of the obstacles that have anesthetized the desire for God in the lives of many of the faithful. These include post-Vatican II confusion, secularization, and poor personal choices driven by our culture of death. Did you know that only about seven percent of parishioners in any given parish can be considered “dynamic Catholics,” defined as those who pray regularly, study their faith and give generously of their time, talent and treasure? Did you know that only about seven

12 2 Cor. 3:18



percent of registered parishioners contribute 80 percent of the volunteer hours in a parish, as well as 80 percent of financial contributions? Imagine what our parishes, what our nation, what our world would look like if we doubled this percentage. What would happen if we tripled it? The Catholic Church already feeds more people, houses more people, clothes more people, cares for more sick people, visits more prisoners and educates more students than any other organization on the planet. And this with a mere seven percent of our faithful! Is it too much to suggest that our Church is a virtual sleeping giant, just waiting to wake up? By opening ourselves to the graces of the Holy Spirit that make for deification — through deep and lasting spiritual formation — I believe we could change the world.<sup>13</sup>

## **SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

What would it take to increase the number of dynamic Catholics in our Church? What would it take to expand and deepen the impulse among our people to give generously of their time, talent and treasure, and to naturally and spontaneously share their faith with others? What would it take to move our Catholic vision of life and love out of the margins and into the marketplace? I believe it will take a far-reaching spiritual formation process, one that provides



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13 The data and sentiments expressed here echo those of Matthew Kelly, *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic* (Hebron, KY, Beacon Publishing/Dynamic Catholic Institute, 2012).

“baby steps” for the beginners among us and one that offers the already dynamic Catholic opportunities for continuous growth in the spiritual life. It would involve creating a culture of discipleship that includes multiple, overlapping and progressively deepening opportunities for people to personally encounter Jesus and share Him with others.

More important than any given program for creating a culture of discipleship is our commitment to undertake a spiritual formation process with discipline and determination. We have a plethora of wonderful spiritual programs in the archdiocese. But are our parishes really “cultures of deification?” If, as Blessed John Paul II told us, “Our Christian communities must become genuine schools of prayer” where we abide with Christ until the heart truly “falls in love,”<sup>14</sup> they must also become centers of continuous, quality spiritual formation. We must create a culture of spiritual formation that increases our percentage of dynamic Catholics and facilitates the deeper holiness of the seven percent already living their faith deeply.

To enter this mystery of holiness, our ways of thinking about the spiritual life must change. We must learn how to encounter the Person of Jesus as a living subject, not merely as an interesting object — talking and listening to Him at every moment. We must move beyond the model of simply imitating Christ and learn how to be incorporated into Him. Our view of our relationship with God must become both more personal and more nuptial. The intimate, one-flesh union of man and woman in Christian marriage is just a sign of the communion God desires to have with us. We are meant to live “in Christ,” as St. Paul so often puts it: persons experiencing themselves in spousal intimacy with the One who has created us for Himself. We are meant to know God, not simply know about Him.



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## Reflections

Reflect on the experience of **God** in your life:

**Moments of joy, delight and faith...**

**Moments of crisis...**

**Moments of loneliness, aloneness, and separation...**

**Have you noticed a change in your approach to God or God's approach to you?**

**What elements are part of your faith life — spiritual reading, spiritual direction, adoration, Bible study, grace before meals, daily prayer, the rosary, sacrament of penance?**

**If there is one thing in your life that you could add or take away, and it would increase your ability to receive God's love or seek Him, what would it be?**

## PRAYER

What are the essential elements of a serious spiritual formation process? The first is undoubtedly prayer. More specifically, we must learn how to pray at an ever-more deepening level. To pray contemplatively we must first learn to pray consistently. We do this by building a solid routine of prayer. There is no substitute for a daily commitment to prayer. Prayer routines, of course, differ and change. The shape and form of our practice of prayer will fluctuate as the years go by. But, with commitment and proper formation, our life in God through prayer will exhibit an ever-increasing depth and breadth. It will eventually develop into a true, contemplative, personal encounter with the Lord. Growth in contemplative prayer is foundational for renewal in the Church.

Prayer is  
first and  
foremost  
a heartfelt  
conversation  
with God.



Silence, Scripture and discernment go together in our life of contemplative prayer. We must listen to the Word of God in our lives and learn to discern the sound of His call. Such sensitivity to God's voice requires not only a commitment to daily prayer times but also a focused simplicity. If prayer is, as Ruth Burrows has said, simply "allowing Jesus to love us,"<sup>15</sup> this happens best by regularly placing ourselves in a quiet space, allowing

15 A key theme throughout her book, *The Essence of Prayer* (Mahaway, N.J., Hidden Spring/Paulist Press, 2006).

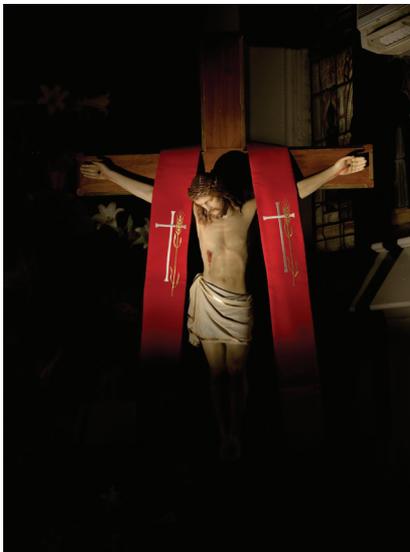


ourselves to be touched by His Spirit. This is a discipline not easily or readily acquired.

Many have used the Daily Examen of St. Ignatius of Loyola as a template for beginning a simple and focused prayer routine. In this model, we begin with a personal dialogue with our Spouse (God), intentionally becoming aware of and thanking Him for the blessings of our day. We revisit the times when we were not all we desired to be for Him and others. Identifying significant moments from our day, both positive and negative, we then explore with God what He may be communicating to us through such moments. Asking Him to forgive us for any conflict with His will for us helps us advance in His peace. Speaking with Him freely about where He is inviting us to go in our lives will allow us to begin to experience the interior freedom He desires us to have

or possess. We can also commend to God's mercy any persons we want to pray for, asking Him to bless and guide them, and to draw them into the same intimate communion with Himself as we desire. We can finish our prayer time by praying the Our Father, Hail Mary or another suitable prayer.

This Ignatian model is only an example. No schema for prayer should obscure the fact that prayer is first and foremost a heartfelt conversation with God. Whether we begin with one minute a day or a daily holy hour,



**The guidelines for understanding and studying our faith in depth are similar to those for developing a life of prayer: Begin where one is, establish a solid routine and remain faithful to it in practice.**

our goals are the same: to encounter the living Lord and to acquire an intimate relationship with Him. Prayerlessness is one of the curses of the modern age. In addition to the liturgical prayer of the Church, the development of our personal, private prayer is an important step we can take for the renewal of the Church.

## **Reflections**

### **After Prayer:**

**Do you give God time and space on a daily basis?**

**Can you be quiet during your prayer time and allow God to speak to you in the silence?**

**What seems to be the pattern of time/space for moments — periods of prayer in your life?**

**Where?**

**When?**

**Frequency?**

**If there is one thing in your life that you could add or take away, and it would enhance the time and space you give to God in prayer, what would it be?**



## UNDERSTANDING

In one of his final public statements before his retirement, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said: “The principles (of Vatican II were) intelligibility ... and also active participation. Unfortunately, these principles have also been misunderstood ... Only ongoing formation of hearts and minds can truly create intelligibility and participation that is something more than external activity, but rather the entry of the person ... into communion of the Church and thus into communion with Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

Second in importance to contemplative prayer, then, is the studying and understanding of our faith with ever-greater depth and appreciation. Never has there been a time in the Church when more information about the faith is matched with greater ignorance of it. This must change if we are to be fully *Alive in Christ!*

**We need quality,  
continuous spiritual  
formation in the life of  
the Spirit.**



Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke often about a “crisis of truth” in the world. “The dictatorship of relativism,” as he termed it, is eating away the very fabric of our civilization. Selfishness and pride have replaced reason as the basis of action in the world at large. “Tolerance,” as an important quality of respectful dialogue, has subtly and with dire consequences usurped Truth as the substance of dialogue. The result is that such intrin-

16 Audience with the Clergy of Rome, Feb. 14, 2013

sic evils as abortion and euthanasia are “tolerated,” even championed, as relative goods, made so by personal preference. In a culture where license has replaced freedom, and relativism reality, anything goes yet everything falls apart.

The antidote to this attitude, both inside and outside the Church, is a deeper appreciation of the teachings of our faith. Catholics and non-Catholics alike are questioning faith as never before. Few Catholics are actually capable of answering them adequately, however. Yet, those who inquire of us deserve satisfying answers to their questions, since, as St. Peter says, “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.”<sup>17</sup>

The days are gone when “because the Church teaches” is an adequate response to someone who wants to know why we believe what we believe. Gone, too, are the days when most Catholic grade school students could come home from school with a question about their faith and receive a ready and convincing answer from their parents. To be sure, Catholicism cannot be reduced to what it teaches; spiritual understanding and living always exceed good catechesis. Yet, part of what makes the Catholic faith unique — even attractive in this age of relativism — is that it offers clear and convincing answers to life’s most difficult questions. A vague, post-modern “spirituality” is for seekers. Dynamic Catholicism is for finders.<sup>18</sup> Finding the truth is a real possibility in the Catholic Church.

The guidelines for understanding and studying our faith in depth are similar to those for developing a life of prayer: Begin where one is, establish a solid routine and remain faithful to it in practice. Learning from highly engaged Catholics is a great way to start. Catholics who know their faith well are usually among the seven percent and willing to share it. Learned Catholics are continuous learners. “Disciple,” after all, means “learner.” Jesus’ disciples are voracious learners. They never stop inquiring and exploring the

17 1 Pt. 3:15

18 A phrase borrowed from George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church* (New York, N.Y., Basic Books), 28.



“unsearchable riches of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> They seek to have in themselves the mind of Christ.<sup>20</sup> As with prayer, they have developed a routine that allows them always to learn more. They read, they listen to, they seek out and they attend many educational offerings related to the Catholic faith. They exhibit a hunger and thirst for truth. They show an insatiable desire to grow in their love of the Lord. They know that deepening their understanding of the “what and why” of Church teaching is essential for their life in Christ, as well as for their mission to evangelize the world.

## INDICATORS OF OUR DESIRED FUTURE

**H**ow will we know that real spiritual transformation is taking place within our archdiocese? What will be the leading indicators that we are on the path to renewal? There are two: increased generosity and evangelization. Catholics who are transfigured by the Holy Spirit are naturally generous and share the Gospel spontaneously. Both are byproducts of deep and effective spiritual formation.

## GENEROSITY

**G**enerosity is at the heart of the Christian life. Jesus is the incarnation of the Father’s generosity. Each of His miracles (e.g., Mt. 14:15-21) and his “signs”<sup>21</sup> — especially His surrender to the Father on Calvary<sup>22</sup> — bears witness to the generous, self-giving love of One whose life is the very definition of generosity. Jesus’ generosity is an expression of His gratitude to His heavenly Father. “I give you thanks, O heavenly Father ...” Jesus prays so often (e.g. Mt.11:25). We might say Jesus’ entire life is one continuous act of thanksgiving (the Eucharist). Or, put differently: He is the Eucharist before He gives us the Eucharist. Partaking of the Eucharistic Lord, we become partakers of His own divine generosity.

If we have become one with Him, that should show itself in generosity; and if we are not being generous, we have to wonder about the depth of our union with Him.

19 Eph. 3:8

20 cf. 1 Cor. 1:10, Phil. 2:5

21 cf. Jn. 2 - 12

22 (Lk. 23:46)

Generosity is at the heart of the Christian life. Jesus is the incarnation of the Father's generosity.



Dynamic Catholics are intentionally generous. They experience themselves as gifted and loved by God. It becomes second nature for them to give generously of what they have. The surest sign of a generous heart is the spontaneous joy with which a person gives. “God loves a cheerful giver.”<sup>23</sup>

Generous people exude joy. Their generosity is naturally attractive and contagious. A life of joyful generosity is perhaps the leading indicator that we are *Alive in Christ*. Generosity, however, does not have to do only with money. Praise, appreciation and encouragement are close-to-hand gifts of gratitude that cost us nothing. A smile to the lady at the checkout counter, a courteous word to the ticket taker at the theatre — these and a hundred other such simple gestures of kindness manifest to the world the generosity of Jesus Christ.

In order for this kind of generosity to become natural for us, we must undergo a spiritual transformation. I certainly treasure our Catholic tradition of social justice teaching and practice, but I believe there would be less need for specific programs for social justice if the spiritual formation and renewal I have in mind were to take hold fully in our Church.

## EVANGELIZATION

We now come to the second leading indicator of the future I envision for our Catholic Church. I have long believed that the best apologetics and the best evangelization is personal holiness, priests and

23 2 Cor. 9:7



laity together radiating the light and love of Jesus. The faith, I believe, is more often caught than taught. Yet, our faith will not be attractive and contagious for others until we continually draw near to the One who is all-holy, asking to be enveloped and transfigured by the fire of His Holy Spirit.

As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote, “One receives (the Holy Spirit) by coming within breathing range of the Son ... (Jn. 20:19-20).”<sup>24</sup>

Evangelization is the voice of the Lord speaking in and through those He has imbued with his own Spirit.<sup>25</sup> We must all aspire to be able to say with St. Paul, “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me.”<sup>26</sup> Without being possessed of the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, both our lives and words appear as “a resounding gong, a clashing cymbal.”<sup>27</sup> All of our programs taken together will not bear fruit unless they are fertilized by a deep renewal of personal faith and holiness. Only when transfigured by the Light of the risen Lord can we present to the world a face resplendent with His glory.<sup>28</sup> The New Evangelization will come about as a result of our deep, profound, and continuous encounter with the Lord in the fire of His Spirit.

In his first encyclical “*Lumen Fidei*,” Pope Francis said, “Those who have opened their hearts to God’s love, heard his voice and received his light, cannot keep this gift to themselves. Since faith is hearing and seeing, it is also handed on as word and light. Addressing the Corinthians, St. Paul used these two very images. On the one hand he says, ‘But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with Scripture — ‘I believed and so I spoke’ — we also believe, and so we speak’ (2 Cor. 4:13). The word, once accepted, becomes a response, a confession of faith, which spreads to others and invites them to believe.”<sup>29</sup>

24 *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*, p. 109.

25 Cf. Lk. 10:16

26 Gal. 2:20

27 1 Cor. 13:1

28 Cf. Ex. 34:29

29 Pope Francis, “*Lumen Fidei*,” 37

## **Reflections**

**What are some ways you have given witness to your faith to those around you, such as family, co-workers and peers?**

**What are some ways you have not given witness to your faith?**

**Are you willing to be a disciple by praying daily, reading the Scriptures and serving/witnessing to others?**

**What is one thing that you can do to give better witness to the faith in your life?**



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## CONCLUSION

The Catholic novelist Leon Bloy once wrote, “The only tragedy in life is not to become a saint.”<sup>30</sup> Becoming a saint means becoming a “partaker of the divine nature.” A saint is happy, joyous, and free. Saints are also steeped in the truth. This kind of holy, happy life is acquired through deep conversion, deep prayer, and deep study. The results of this formation are an increased generosity and a spontaneous desire to share our faith with others.

We have a wide array of wonderful programs for spiritual growth in the archdiocese. While there needs to be something for everyone, we also have to make sure that there are opportunities to grow and develop the spiritual life.

Often, however, the programs we attend and the retreats we make are like episodic downpours on a drought-stricken land. While we are most grateful for these blessed outpourings of God’s love in our lives, we also realize we need a long, slow, steady, gentle and refreshing rain of grace if our lives are to bloom in Christ.

It is not enough for us to return from a weekend retreat, for example, or to finish an inspiring catechetical program, and then be left in a spiritual lurch. Nature abhors a vacuum — and something will fill that space. We need quality, continuous spiritual formation in the life of the Spirit. Otherwise, the gains made in our episodic programs soon evaporate, even among the seven percent of dynamic Catholics.

Recently I announced the new Lay Formation Program, through the Paul VI Pontifical Institute, designed to promote and facilitate the vision I have outlined here. I hope both priests and laity will see this as a model and instrument for continuous, quality spiritual formation. But this program is only a modest beginning. Total spiritual formation is a gradual, life-long process, not an episodic program. Vibrant Christians are slowly fashioned, not instantly created. The formation of dynamic Catholics

must be continuous. This process requires commitment, discipline, and determination. It asks us, as Jesus asked of Peter, to “put out into deep water.”<sup>31</sup>

Since the conclusion of Vatican II we have been awaiting a New Springtime of Evangelization in the Church. In calling the council, Blessed John XXIII also prayed for a New Pentecost. I ask you to join with me petitioning the Lord for a fresh outpouring of His Holy Spirit to renew our commitment to being deeply formed in our faith. Made “partakers of His divine nature” through conversion, prayer, and profound understanding, I pray that He will also make us better instruments of His mission of salvation in the world.

May she whose faith and growth in the divine life of her Son never ceased — Mary, the Mother of the Lord — assist us with her prayers as we seek together a deeper sharing in the life of her Son.

31 Lk. 5:4



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## Notes





ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. LOUIS



YEAR OF FAITH 2012  
2013