

Sister Phyllis Schleicher

I am very pleased to be with you tonight, along with members of the Faith Formation Task Force who have served with me:

- Greg Baker, Director of Campus Ministry at Mercyhurst University
- Father Vince Cieslewicz, pastor of St. Elizabeth in Smethport and St. Joseph, Mount Jewett
- Sister Nancy Fischer, SSJ, director, Small Communities and Interim Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Erie
- Paula Levine, former director of Religious Education at St. Thomas, Corry and Holy Rosary Parish in Erie
- Deacon Frank Luciani, director of Adult Education, Small Communities and the RCIA at St. Michael in Greenville
- Joyce Tarr, coordinator of Religious Education and the RCIA at Frenchtown and Cochranon since 1981
- and Claire Waldron, former long-time Religious Education Director in Conneaut Lake and Linesville, and now a Silo'am Formation Director.

We have been working so diligently for these past two and a half years, concerned with the evangelization of all of the baptized and asking the hard question:

What do we need to do to form disciples—followers of Jesus Christ in our parishes?

As Bishop Persico said, we have done a significant amount of research.

We reviewed and discussed documents from our bishops about evangelization and catechesis. We looked at current trends in religious education, at best practices, and at statistics—both national and from our own parishes.

Let me share just a few of the statistics we studied, to give you a better understanding of why we need to reconsider the way we approach faith formation.

First of all, when many of us think of faith formation, we think only of religious education for children. Teaching children about the content of our faith is essential, and certainly a part of the recommendations we will unveil tonight.

But it is our approach that must change.

Statistics will help us to understand that what we're doing now is no longer effective, no longer bearing fruit. This is not a new message. We've heard some of these before:

- ✓ Only 30 % of Americans who were raised Catholic still practice their faith, attending Mass at least once a month.
- ✓ Another 40% self-identify as Catholic, but seldom or never attend Mass.
- ✓ Baptisms in our diocese, an indication of a family's intention to raise their child in the faith, have decreased much more quickly than the birthrate.
- ✓ Consider that in 2001-02, we had 2569 baptisms in our diocese. Fourteen years later, that number has fallen to 1220. That's a 52 % drop.
- ✓ Confirmations are following the same trend, dropping from 1491 in 2011 to 849 in 2016. This is a loss of 43 percent, *in just five years*.
Across the country, one-third of Catholic youth are not being confirmed.

You will hear that one of the main messages of the task force is that we need to move beyond catechizing only our children and into a broader effort of faith formation for all ages—faith formation, an evolving and more inclusive concept than the current notion of religious education.

Let me give you one other statistic.

In 2013, 4,000 fewer students were enrolled in pre-school through grade 8 religious education programs in our diocese than in 2003. We lost 30 percent of students in 10 years. Again, that percentage far exceeds the decline in birthrate.

So, without getting into too many numbers, you can begin to understand that our current approach is not working. But it's important to say that we are part of a trend that is happening across the nation. This is not just here in the Diocese of Erie.

All of us know dedicated, spiritual, faith-filled women and men who have stepped forward to teach in religious education. Many without training or certification.

This is another area the Faith Formation Task Force studied. *The National Directory for Catechesis* states that the key to a successful religious education program is a trained leader. More than two-thirds of parish religious education leaders in the Diocese of Erie have little or insufficient training in religious education. In fact, in 2015-16, of the 898 generous catechists teaching in religious education programs, only 200 are certified.

Certification does take time and money, and we know that it's difficult enough for volunteer catechists to prepare for and teach classes. But the task force came to understand that having professionals who at least coordinate parish programs is increasingly important and a priority.

In the past, this was less of a concern. The fact is, we no longer have the same, built-in support for passing on the faith. The Catholic faith permeated the lives of most Catholics: at home, in the neighborhood, at school, in the parish and through the extended family. The last 50 years have seen the most accelerated social changes in human history. A spiritually poor and spiritually hungry culture pervades our society and poses very real challenges to faith formation today.

The fact that we don't live within the context of extended families is another factor. When Grandma doesn't live in the same town, it's easier not to show up at Mass on Sunday.

Without all this support from family, passing on the faith has increasingly fallen on the shoulders of religious educators and youth ministers. In some ways, we have counted on conventional religious education programs to the point that we have been blinded to the more profound deficits in our church life.

The faith formation system we have inherited, which developed in response to a different set of cultural and societal circumstances, must be reexamined.

We, the Faith Formation Task Force, knew that coming up with a program was not going to address this complex situation.

Our ultimate goal is a significant one. Using the bishops' document, *Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, the pastoral plan for adult faith formation, we know we must "create a culture that invites people into relationship with Christ and with others."

This cannot be accomplished only through religious education of children. We have succeeded, to a degree, in sacramentalizing these children. But in order to truly

catechize them—to form them into disciples who know and love Jesus Christ—our focus also must be on the adults who are raising them.

In her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell says that most adult Catholics are not even aware that a personal, deeper relationship with God is possible. They have not made a conscious choice for Christ. That is why you will hear a recommendation that we focus our initial energies on the spiritual renewal and evangelization of adults.

One of the greatest gifts we can give the young church is to let them witness and experience, through words, actions, and commitments, how the adult church is newly catching fire in its love for Jesus Christ. Welcoming, engaged, evangelized, open-minded, committed adult parishioners are a necessary prerequisite to building connections with young adults.

We all know that parents are the primary influence in forming their children's faith. Yet many are not comfortable, or particularly confident in this role. We are calling for an emphasis on spiritual renewal for adult life in the parish. We want to assist parents with resources, support, mentoring and programming that will help them in this vital role. We believe that stronger involvement with families and parents will naturally lead to a strengthening of the faith formation of children.

I want to acknowledge that some of the information I've offered this evening may feel discouraging. But the mood of the task force is optimistic. We are undaunted! I want to offer words of encouragement. The first words come from Pope Francis...

"Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey...then we should appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of the goodness and beauty which shines forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel."

The recommendations we bring to you this evening are challenging. But I am filled with hope for the future, and my desire is that you will enter into the effort with great confidence—For desire speaks of longing and a movement toward the future. Desire is an aspect of hope... our work will bear fruit!

In his letter to the Hebrews, St. Paul writes: "...faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

As Bishop Persico intimated, what we are proposing is not a brand-new set of pastoral ideas, but rather, a renewed focus and emphasis. We must move from an approach that presumes that teaching our children the content of faith is sufficient.

No, this is not enough...

Lifelong faith formation, whereby each and every one of us encounters Jesus Christ through deepening spiritual engagement throughout our lives...this must be our primary concern and emphasis. Faith formation is indeed a life-long process for all of us, that ends only when we draw our last earthly breath.

Finally, a word of hope and encouragement from Thomas Merton, monk, visionary and spiritual guide:

Merton writes: "You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."