



DIOCESE of TYLER

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

September 5, 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ:

I write to you today to discuss more fully the first basic truth that I spoke of in my first pastoral letter: “Christ established One Church—the Catholic Church—and, therefore, only the Catholic Church provides the fullness of Christ’s truth and the authentic path to His salvation for all of us.”

To begin, I must state clearly and emphatically this fundamental truth—Jesus Christ is the only path to everlasting life; no other path to salvation can be found! As Our Lord Himself tells us: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” (Jn 14:6). In order that we might participate in that promise of everlasting life, Our Lord in His great mercy established the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. As we read in the Gospel of Matthew, Christ said: “And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:18-19). The foundation and divine head of the Church is Jesus Christ; however, this passage makes it clear that Jesus is promising to establish a visible Church upon the earth with a visible head, Peter, to whom He will entrust a unique mission and a specific authority.

The Catholic Church IS the body of Christ, and He is inseparable from His body. The Church’s understanding of Christ’s words in Matthew has deepened throughout the ages, but in accordance with Sacred Tradition handed down from Christ to the Apostles (cf. 2 Thess 2:15), and then preserved and protected by the Church Fathers and saints and martyrs until today, it has always been understood and proclaimed that the Catholic Church is the single, divinely-instituted Church that Christ established for the salvation of souls. All that the Church is, as the mystical body of Christ, flows from the truth that it was, and is, divinely constituted by Christ, and her basic elements—which include the sacred Deposit of Faith—cannot be altered by men because it does not belong to men; the Church belongs to Christ!

St. Cyril of Jerusalem stated in A.D. 350: “The Church is called catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely the doctrines that ought to come to men’s knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins that are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue that is named, both in deeds and words, and in every spiritual gift.”

Christ therefore established His Church for all people, for all time, for the salvation of all. There is no salvation apart from Christ and His One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; this is an infallible teaching of the Church. However, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and His Church.” As Catholics, we are lovingly and joyfully bound to the Church and to the seven sacraments instituted by Christ. These are essential for our salvation. Some may ask, however: “What about those outside the Church? What about those who have never heard of Christ? Can they be saved?” For those who are not united to Christ through His Church and through the grace of the sacraments, we simply pray for them and entrust them to God. Although we must never be presumptuous of God’s grace, we recognize that God is sovereign, and if in His mercy He would choose to operate in ways beyond our knowledge or understanding, He has full authority to operate however He chooses because He is not bound by anything other than His own perfect nature.

We ourselves must cling tightly to the Church and the sacraments as He gave them to us, but we must also pray always for souls outside the Church, that God offers His grace to those souls in ways unknown and unseen to us. However, I want to emphasize this point—if God would choose to offer grace beyond the normal sacramental means, we recognize that this grace would always still flow to every soul from Christ and through His Church in a mystical way. Therefore, anyone receiving and accepting God’s grace would never be saved through any other path or church or religion; there is One Savior, One Redeemer, for all mankind, and He established One Church for the salvation of souls.

God desires the salvation of all, but He does not force salvation upon any of us; it requires our cooperation and free assent to His grace. He calls each one of us to participate in His plan of salvation not only for ourselves, but for the world; this is the Great Commission: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.” (Matt 28:19-20).

We live in an age of great interconnectedness where people across the globe can share and learn with each other as never before in human history. This is a great blessing in many respects as it opens the possibility of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in ways not before possible. True ecumenism, however, is an open invitation to all people to experience and embrace the fullness of Christ and the Christian life which can be found only in the Catholic Church. This path, although difficult at times, is the only sure path to true everlasting love, grace, and life with God. It is false charity to tell people that regardless of what path they are on, it is God’s Will that they stay where they are because this does not call on people to embrace the one true path instituted by God for the salvation of souls. Therefore, the Church has a sacred obligation, borne of love, to evangelize all people.

Another topic that I want to discuss because it will reportedly be a topic of discussion at the upcoming Synod on Synodality is the divinely-instituted structure of the Church as it applies to ordination of women. As Sacred Scripture tells us, Christ ordained only men as apostles. Sacred Tradition and the Ordinary Magisterium of the Church have affirmed throughout the ages that the Church has no authority whatsoever to ordain women to the priesthood. This cannot be changed because Christ instituted a male priesthood in order to image Himself as the bridegroom with the Church as His bride. As St. John Paul II

solemnly stated in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*: “I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.”

It is imperative to state, though, that Christ would never want a “lesser” role for women than He wants for men. Women have made and continue to make indispensable contributions in the history and life of the Church. From the greatest and most perfect of God’s creation in all of history, Our Blessed Mother, the Queen of Heaven and Earth; to some of the greatest saints and Doctors of the Church; to our holy and faithful women in religious orders and convents; to the countless women who have and continue to impart the faith to their families and communities; Christ instituted His Church in a way that calls for women to have “more” of a role in Him than could ever be found in the world. However, as God did not call men to be mothers, God did not call women to be fathers, and to be sacramentally ordained as a minister for Christ in His Church, Our Lord calls for men to be spiritual fathers and bridegrooms to His bride, The Church. This role can only be filled by one properly ordered to this role.

For those who would inquire about the potential for female deacons in the Catholic Church, I would offer this: Scripture tells us that from the earliest days of the Church, women served as faithful servants (Greek: *diakonos*) of the members of the Church. (cf. Rom 16:1). Historians and scholars tell us that women served in many important roles of service in the early Church, including acts of charity for the poor, caring for the sick, preparing other women for baptism, etc. However, we see in the Acts of the Apostles that there is another type of servant (*diakonos*) called specifically by the apostles and set apart from other servants in the Church; the apostles laid hands on these particular servants, and these servants then received a sacramental ordination to fulfill their unique role. Scripture tells us that the apostles said, “Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, who we appoint to this task.” (Acts 6:3). And then, “They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them.” (Acts 6:6). Although many (both men and women) have faithfully served the Church as servants/*diakonos* throughout history, the sacramental ordination to the diaconate—as one of the three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders (deacon, priest, bishop)—has always been reserved for baptized males alone. All three degrees act as instruments of Christ *in persona Christi Capitis*, (in the person of Christ as the Head), but with distinct functions for each office. Because sacramentally ordained deacons share in the apostolic ministry with priests and bishops, the Church has decreed that they must also be men, as were the apostles Jesus chose.

The Canons of the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) state in reference to women who have been granted a certain status of service: “We refer to deaconesses who have been granted this status, for they do not receive any imposition of hands, so that they are in all respects to be numbered among the laity.” (Canon No. 19).

In conclusion, I want to state that although the Church is holy because of her Founder and her divine origin, she is also made up of sinful members who are called constantly to repentance and conversion. However, there is a Church Triumphant in heaven that exists perfectly in her fullness in Christ in heaven where the heavenly marriage feast is eternally celebrated with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are eternally

worshipped and adored. The choirs of angels, the Immaculate Virgin Mary, and all the saints eternally cry “Holy, Holy, Holy” before the throne of God.

It is important that we, as the Church Militant on earth, carry this truth and hope in our hearts as we strive to align ourselves and every aspect of the Church on this earth with her heavenly reality. Because of sin, both personal and communal, the Church Militant on earth falls short of the Church Triumphant in heaven, but it is our mission to strive always for holiness and by the grace of God to persevere until the end so that we might also join with the Church Triumphant. Part of this striving on earth consists in engaging in the spiritual battle that is taking place around us daily as many attempt to chip away or destroy altogether the Deposit of Faith.

My dear sons and daughters, be assured that angels surround us in this battle, and saints—especially Our Holy and Blessed Mother—offer their heavenly assistance as we seek the eternal prize Our Lord has won for us.

Remaining your humble father and servant,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joseph E. Strickland". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and "S".

Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland
Bishop of Tyler, Texas