

**In the Heartland
Moving Forward
Impetus to Renewal**

Two providential events in the U.S. Catholic Church, to happen soon, will have a long-lasting impact on our future as a robust ecclesial presence in our country. They intend to articulate and make provision to abide in a vibrant faith. Moreover, they seek to espouse a commitment to morals and values that best represent human integrity.

The first is the Convocation of Catholic Leaders, set to occur in Orlando, Florida, July 1-4. It is a gathering that has been in the works for some five years – gradually emerging to the point where approximately 3,500 Catholic leaders representing the vast majority of the country’s dioceses will be present. The program will consist of Eucharistic celebrations, extended, carefully prepared prayer services, motivating talks and workshops.

At this gathering, the Diocese of Des Moines will have 17 representatives coming from a variety of backgrounds. If there is a specific weighting of the diocesan group, it is to young participants. The greatest leakage currently in religious institutions is among the young and their predecessors, the “millennials.” It is a concern for our Catholic community as well. Hence, our engagement of the convocation process.

Our delegation to the convocation has met once to discuss what to expect at the gathering. We are also beginning to determine how to best bring back to the diocese the impetus of the convocation. It is our anticipation that the outcome for us will be in unison with that which resonates with the rest of the country.

Concomitant with preparations for the convocation, about 10 groups of priests, representing nearly all of those serving the diocese, came together at the cathedral residence for informal meals and discussions. As we talked about the future, a vision emerged that was highly pastoral in nature.

Our priests are concerned about the integration of faith in the hearts of all. We ask: How do we share the faith with our families in such a way that it inspires them to commit to regular participation in the Eucharist and to otherwise engage in the conversion process? A further concern is the stability of marriages especially in their first five years. Marriage is the cornerstone of our civilization. We cannot dedicate too much energy to enable these relationships to flourish.

Contemporaneously to the Convocation of Religious Leaders in Orlando is the Hispanic effort titled “Encuentro V.” It is a movement already taking place in the nine diocesan parishes which have significant Latino presence. The process is progressive in nature moving from parish, to diocesan, to regional, and then to a national level set to occur Sept. 20-23, 2018 in Grapevine, Texas.

The main goal of the Encuentro is to assess the needs of the Hispanic members of the U.S. Church. They now constitute 40 percent of American Catholics. Again, there is a commitment to strengthen this arm of the Church as it begins to mesh with its Anglo, African and Asian counterparts into a unified church that enjoys a healthy diversity

Three key components serve as foundations for what is regarded as the movement of the Spirit in our times as the convocation and encuentro unfold.

The Joy of the Gospel. In the Apostolic Exhortation of this title, Pope Francis outlines his vision for the Church. The pope states that the Church, as the Body of Christ, cannot be self-referential. It needs to go out to the peripheries bringing the healing message of Jesus to a suffering humanity.

Evangelization. This concept is sharing the redemptive story of Jesus Christ by our action and witness. It is a call to bring the light of the Gospel to situations where its merciful impact can lead to love and peace.

Missionary Disciple. This concept popularized by Pope Francis speaks to the following of Christ by which we deeply appropriate his friendship, teaching and spirit. We are his disciples. With such ingrained in our spirit, we are sent on daily mission – to witness to others – without proselytizing – in order that they too might come to see and enter into a vibrant relationship with Jesus who has the words of life.

The challenges posed by the crisis of faith, emerging in our society, can lead to seizing the opportunity to be led by the Spirit to a new season in the flourishing of the Gospel. For American Catholics, two of these opportunities are the Convocation of Catholic Leaders and Encuentro V. May we be open to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as he inspires these movements.