Implementing the Teaching of Vatican II  
On the Universal Call to Holiness

The universal call to holiness emerges in chapter 2 of The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church at Vatican II. There, the faithful are declared to be “the people of God” (#9). No longer merely “subjects” of the Church, now this people is the Church itself. The vocation of each Christian, it follows, is to grow into intimacy with Christ, and therefore, into ever-greater holiness.

Chapter 5 of this Constitution is entitled “The Universal Call to Holiness.” In this chapter every person in the church is called to holiness. Such holiness has less to do with perfection and more to do with a lifelong process of seeking God through the person of Jesus Christ in and through the church. This call to holiness is one of the great themes running through the Council.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church

From the Constitution on the Church

“The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life, which he both initiates and brings to perfection, to each and every one of his disciples no matter what their condition of life” (#40).

“It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to…holiness” (#40).

“The forms and tasks of life are many, but there is one holiness” (#41).

Implementing the Council in our day and age

Love is the pathway to holiness (#42). Holiness leads us ever more deeply into the Paschal Mystery. We learn to die to ourselves in love, and so to also experience the joy of living in Christ (#42).
Principles

1. We cannot assume that everyone who is baptized has experienced an encounter with Christ.
2. The encounter with Christ is also and almost always an encounter with the Church, meaning the church which is the People of God.
3. The encounter leads to a turning of the heart, a movement of the Spirit within us, leading us to intimacy with Christ and love for the Church.
4. The “moment” of this turning is known to us as that point in our lives when we die to ourselves and share our faith with others. The pathway to the heart of the Lord is seldom traveled alone.
5. Most of the time, this “moment” occurs in the context of faith sharing, a sacrament, or another time when we are in touch with our faith in the context of the wider community.
6. This “moment” is repeated often throughout life. Each week at Eucharist we have a chance for this. In the Sacrament of Penance, in times of breaking open the word, reflecting on the mysteries of faith, being on retreat or in spiritual direction, talking over coffee with a friend, sharing a meal with our family, and so forth.
7. What sets this “moment” apart from others is our intention to donate ourselves to each other in love. Even if we do not realize fully that Christ is acting in our lives then, nonetheless, the Spirit is moving us. Looking back, we can see that the forgiveness we were able to muster, or the generosity we had, or the heart opening to the poor, or any other of a myriad of “holy urges” – all are the result of grace acting in our lives. We died to ourselves in love – and love resulted!

How can the parish make this happen?

Parishes can provide opportunities that give rise to the possibility of such conversion of the heart. We should not assume that everyone who comes to us for Mass, faith formation, assistance, or pastoral care has had this experience.

How Do We Get Started?

Create a Pastoral Plan
The first step for most parishes is to plan for this ministry. Very few parishes have any planned way to provide such opportunities for conversion at the moment. Use Dreams and Visions: Pastoral Planning for Lifelong Faith Formation as your guide for this.

From the General Directory for Catechesis:

“Conversion is first. It is the full and sincere adherence to the person of Christ and the decision to walk in his footsteps. Faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the making of oneself a disciple and it demands a permanent commitment to think, judge, and live like him.”

-The GDC #53
The most common moments of life are laced with the power and presence of God, if we can help people recognize that. Not all conversion happens at the parish church.

Every aspect of parish life
Helping people experience conversion happens throughout the parish, and in every dimension of parish life. From the welcome people receive as they arrive for Mass, to the tone of the homily, to the way people whom we seldom see darkening our doorway are treated. In such moments, the parish has an opportunity to help people grow in holiness and love for the Church.

If we are loving in those moments, people will open their hearts. If we are cold, silent, judgmental, or indifferent, people will feed their hunger for God in another place or another way.

The challenge is ours!

THE CATECHUMENATE IS THE MODEL FOR ALL FAITH FORMATION. STEP #1 IS CONVERSION.

Breaking Open the Word

Sunday Liturgy of the Word
The Scripture Readings at Sunday Mass are the beginning point. Most people hear them but forget them within minutes. But many parishes invite their members to spend the entire week after hearing the Word, “breaking it open” and sharing faith around that.

This is an ancient practice of the Church, used now widely in the RCIA (catechumenate) process. We recommend using it throughout the parish.

For a complete plan including the handouts needed for this, get the free resource, How to Lead Faith Sharing from the website. We also post there a free “Question of the Week” drawn from the Sunday readings.

The Witness of Others

The Pastor
One pastor makes it a point to share his own faith every chance he gets. Without in any way suggesting that everyone should have the same faith experience he does, he simply begins with a brief witness, letting everyone see into his heart. At parish meetings, liturgies, or other moments, he shares his faith.

Why is this important?
At one recent meeting of the summer festival committee, they begin with “breaking open the word” as described above. During the sharing time, when the floor was open, the pastor simply said, “I believe in Christ, and this reading helped me see a little of my unbelief, times when I feel I have to do it all alone. This is a point where I need more conversion.”

That simple statement catechized and formed the faith of everyone who was present. He taught others how to witness and share faith well.
Parish Retreats: An Initiative for Faith

Even though this is new work, it will light a fire in the parish that will last for years to come.

Leaders First
By asking the leaders to be the first to deepen their faith, this parish saw a general increase in awareness of the need to grow faith. Other members of the parish soon asked to be included in the retreats. Participation at Mass improved. Collections went up dramatically. Leaders began to see their role in the parish as a true calling. For the pastor and staff, the vibrant parish of which they had dreamed was becoming a reality before their very eyes.

As the faith of the parish leaders increased, so did the faith of their extended family members.

When you light this fire, it heats the entire parish community! Do not be afraid of this work. God is in it.

Living Christ Retreat
In one parish, a group was formed to lead the initiative for parish-based retreats using The Living Christ retreat. Every leader and public minister of the parish was asked to attend one retreat each year. By forming the core leaders of the parish, everyone in the parish saw faith increase.

The Living Christ retreat mentioned here is available at the web site. It is reproducible, so the cost to the parish is very small, but the fire you light in the hearts of your people is huge.

For Young Parents in Your Parish...

Questions you can ask
As a parish, what is our plan for helping young parents grow in their personal and shared holiness?

If there is no plan at the present time, who will write one? (Use Dreams and Visions, mentioned above, as your guide.)

For those who present a child for infant baptism, or the baptism of a young child, how do we help that young couple or single parent to prepare their own hearts with the holiness which they will then pass on to their child? (You may want to use I Claim You for Christ for this purpose. It is a retreat-like baptism preparation process which you can find on the web site.)

After baptism, how do we help young couples or single parents grow in their own faith and pass it on to their child? We know that such holiness comes from parental example, not from parish programming. (You may wish to use Entrusted to Your Care for this purpose. It is a series of resources to help you be in touch with this group in the parish during the key years of a young child’s life.)

Once the child reaches the point of First Communion and Confession, how do we coach the parents to form their own child? We know that only the formation provided by the parent lasts for the entire lifetime of the child. (You may wish to use Growing Up Catholic for this purpose. You can find it via the web site.)