



Call to Holiness

Pastoral Letter from Bishop Jaime Soto

In the fifth chapter of the gospel according to Matthew, the Lord Jesus saw a great crowd gathering around him. He went up a mountain with his disciples and taught them, “You are the salt of the earth ... You are the light of the World.” (MT. 5:13-16) These beautiful metaphors were both inspirational and instructive about Christian living. They offer us a window into the universal call to holiness. To be holy is to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”.

The scene from Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount helps us understand the holiness of Jesus. With many works of mercy, Jesus assembled the disciples around him and then he taught them. Holiness is only found through Christ. His mercy gathers us together. His gospel message unites us. We only find holiness in communion with the Lord Jesus and his mystical body, the Church. Only in union with Christ can we be as the Lord has called us to be: “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”.

As the Church and the World struggle to emerge from the dismal cloud of the COVID-19 pandemic, Christ awakens us to our baptismal dignity. We are to be the salt of the earth and light of the world, reflecting the holiness of Christ.

After months of fears and doubts about gathering together, pastor and faithful are worried about the future of our parish communities. Who will return? When will they return? How will we sustain our worship, teaching, and charity? Let us begin a revival of parish life by welcoming Christ into the journey of our lives. He can take this journey clouded by calamities and lead us on the road to holiness. With Jesus as our Good Shepherd and companion we will fulfill his summons to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. True holiness makes us disciples of Jesus and missionaries of his gospel.

In this time of uncertainty, the Lord Jesus is eager for us to welcome him on our journey as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus. (LK. 24:28-29) As for those two disciples, the disposition of hospitality opens us to

the amazing mercy to be found in Christ and the unexpected graces discovered when welcoming others on the pilgrimage of faith.

The early church emphasized hospitality as an essential dimension of holiness. St. Paul, relating the early controversy about the inclusion of the gentiles as part of Christian community, reminded the Galatians of the clear instructions he had received from Simon Peter and the apostles in Jerusalem, “We were to be mindful of the poor, which is the very thing I was eager to do.” (GAL. 2:10) In the Letter to the Hebrews, the author exhorted the community to practice hospitality, “Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels.” (HEB. 13:2)

Holiness by its very nature is hospitable. Jesus invited others to holiness in a personal way. To the disciples of John, “Come and see.” (JN. 1:35-39) To Andrew and Simon along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, “Come, follow me.” (MK. 1:16-18) “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened,” (MT. 11:28) was his invitation to all whose hearts were afflicted. The holiness of Christ attracted the first disciples. The holiness of the Lord Jesus drew the sick and the hungry to seek healing and nourishment. When we unite ourselves more closely to Christ, his spirit then makes us his messengers, his missionaries with the light of his divine mercy in our hearts. It is not a matter of wondering when will others return but when will we eagerly seek to bring them to Christ?

The hospitable holiness of Christ also makes us the living sacrament of his presence in the world. Sacraments always reflect the holiness of Jesus. They transmit his holiness to those who celebrate the Sacraments. Through the Sacraments, Jesus hospitably leads us into the holy mystery of his divine life with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We are transformed by the sacraments of Christ into the Lord’s sacramental presence in society. In this sense, to be holy is to be Christ’s sacrament in the world, to be a sign and an instrument of Christ for others, to be the salt that revives the saddened soul and the light that awakens a weary world.

This has a special meaning for us in the Diocese of Sacramento. The Most Blessed Sacrament – Santísimo Sacramento – is the rich legacy of our mission in Northern California. For this reason, in my pastoral statement from 2012, I proposed “The Church in Sacramento will be a hopeful and effective Sacrament of Christ in Northern California.” As the hopeful and effective Sacrament of Christ we will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world in Northern California.

This pastoral mission is best fulfilled when we unite ourselves more closely to the holiness of the Lord Jesus, when we join ourselves to the one holy and acceptable sacrifice of Christ offered on the cross. The blood of Christ outpoured transforms us into a holy nation, a royal priesthood consecrated to the glory of God and the sanctification of the world. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

A holy, sacramental hospitality imitates the priestly sacrifice of Jesus. As Christ obediently accepted the cross, we welcome in holy obedience the Father’s will for us. In many ways we have witnessed this during the long suffering of the pandemic. The unpredictable, unforeseeable nature of the virus has upset the patterns of our lives. Clergy and faithful have learned to welcome the tender hands of the divine potter molding our hearts, enabling us to be more compassionate for the many afflicted, bringing forth new ways to gather in faith, reviving old rhythms of prayer, and providing wellsprings of persevering grace.

A holy, sacramental hospitality also offers oneself for others as Christ offered himself for us. Only by probing the depths of Christ’s loving sacrifice on the cross will we do as he has done. After washing the feet of his

disciples, in a prelude to the purifying suffering of the cross, Jesus told his disciples, “As I have done for you, you should also do.” (JN. 13:15)

With the Lord Jesus, we are open to the Father’s will and offer ourselves to others. These two sacramental dimensions of hospitality bring us into a greater harmony with the one holy sacrifice of Christ. Hospitality becomes more than a gracious gesture; it becomes an opportunity to grow in holiness of Christ and communicate his holiness to others. This is the salt and light to which the Lord Jesus summons us from the Sermon on the Mount.

Two ascetic disciplines essential to cultivating holiness in harmony with the one offering of Christ are the practical, pastoral principles of co-responsibility and accountability.

Co-responsibility springs from our common baptism. Through baptism we all share in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Together we are a new creation in Christ. We are no longer strangers and aliens to one another, we are all members of His one body, the Church. (1 COR. 12:4-31) Christ is the head of this mystical body. Each of us is a part of Christ’s body. Each of us have been given gifts by the one Spirit. We are responsible to Christ and one another to share those gifts for the good of the Body of Christ. This is the baptismal responsibility of each disciple.

Accountability is the practice of reverence for one another, responding to Christ’s presence whenever two or three are gathered in his name. “If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy. Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it.” (1 COR. 12:26-27) Being accountable to one another, each member understands the unity of the whole Body of Christ. We will all provide an accounting of our lives at the final judgment. This accounting begins even now because as the Lord Jesus reminds us, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (MT. 25:40)

The practice of co-responsibility and accountability are not just organizational tools. They are disciplines that enable us to grow in holiness together. They are wise ascetical practices that teach us how to be more hospitable to the gifts, the wisdom, as well as the needs of one another. They are holy habits that keep salt from losing its flavor or a light from being hidden under a bushel basket.

Over the next 12 months, I invite my brother priests and the laity to join me in revitalizing our parish communities with a focus on offering greater hospitality and outreach to all our communities.

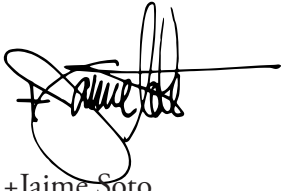
- Reinvigorate Parish Pastoral Councils that foster accountability, co-responsibility, and collaboration. To this end, I will convene a Convocation on Saturday, April 17, 2021 for all Pastoral Councils. This will be followed up in October 2021 with an additional day of dialogue and workshops.
- Pastors whose parish is without a Parish Pastoral Council are expected to inaugurate a Council by June 30, 2021.
- To promote parish revitalization, Parish Pastoral Councils will meet monthly. I will propose agenda items for consultation among the pastor and the council members. The proposed agenda items are intended to augment but not replace parish agenda items. I would ask you to choose three to four of the agenda items listed below to work on over the next six months:

- The Parish Pastoral Council is an effective tool for building parish co-responsibility and accountability.
 - Communicate the membership, the agenda, and minutes of the Parish Pastoral Council as a means of building a common mission in the parish community.
 - Review the membership and leadership of Parish Pastoral Councils to ensure they reflect the membership of the parish.
- Hospitality and Sunday Mass.
 - Sunday Mass is the source and summit of parish life. Explore the ways Sunday Mass can bring others around the table of the Lord to share in the one saving sacrifice of Christ.
 - The worship and praise of the Eucharist should bring us into communion with the Father through Jesus Christ.
- Hospitality in our Charitable works.
 - The charitable works of the Church are an extension of the Sacrament of Charity, the Eucharist.
 - We meet Christ in the people we serve.
- Hospitality in our Religious Formation.
 - Religious Formation engages the lives of families and children helping them to meet Christ and follow him.
- Hospitality for Young Families.
 - Baptism is a graced moment to engage young families and develop a welcoming relationship to bring them to Christ.
 - Parish life is a support to young parents raising their children in the Catholic Faith.
 - Offer encouragement and support for women who are the sole providers of their families.
- Hospitality for the unmarried and the engaged couples.
 - Present Christian marriage as the way to grow strong in love.
 - Teach the beauty of sexuality as an expression of love and life.
- Hospitality for the Dying and the Bereaved.
 - Death and dying is a part of living. No one should be alone in the journey to the Father's House.
- Hospitality to the sick and homebound.
 - The sick and the homebound share in the sufferings of Christ. The accompaniment of the Church makes Christ Jesus more present to them as well as to the Church community.
- Hospitality for Expectant Mothers and Fathers.
 - The gift of new life creates bonds between the parents, the unborn child, and the Church.

- Missionary outreach as hospitality.
 - Each parish is a beacon and haven of home for everyone in the parish. Each parish community is called to be a good neighbor.
- Hospitality and Vocations
 - A vocation begins with the invitation, “Come, follow me.”

These reflections hope to encourage us to foster together an authentic holiness of life in each disciple and a holy hospitality in the whole body of the Church so that together with Christ we can be His living sacrament of joy and hope in Northern California.

We are inspired by the example of holiness and hospitality found in the person of St. Joseph. His moment of salvation came when he heard the angel’s good counsel, “Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home.” (MT. 1:20) Let us rely on the powerful intercession of the holy couple, Mary and Joseph, so that holiness and hospitality may open the door for our salvation in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jaime Soto', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

+Jaime Soto
Bishop of Sacramento