



DIOCESE of TYLER

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Dear Flock of Northeast Texas,

As the Roman Catholic bishop of the Diocese of Tyler, and shepherd of God's flock in this part of the world, I want to address every man, woman and child who resides in the thirty-three counties that make up the Diocese of Tyler. Although I have a clear understanding that approximately 1.5 million of you are not Roman Catholic Christians, I know many of you are Christians of other traditions and communities. The message I have for you, the community of God's people rooted in faith, specifically in the Judeo-Christian Tradition, is one of great importance and based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Peter, in the fifth chapter of his letter to the early Christian churches, spoke directly to the leaders with these words: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:1-4).

I offer the following ten points, not in a domineering fashion, but with much love and concern for the flock who God has entrusted to my care. If you agree with the following points, I encourage you to implore others to embrace these truths. If you should disagree, I pray that we can continue a respectful conversation in search of truth.

1. One Nation Under God

Embrace the expression "one nation under God" found in the Pledge of Allegiance to our country's flag. We are *truly* "one nation under God". I speak directly to mothers and fathers, civic and religious leaders and all who find themselves responsible for guiding others through life and making important decisions for our society. Do *all* that you do in a manner which demonstrates the fact that you are, indeed, "under God". As a pastor, I believe that neglecting to live our lives "under God" is at the root of the ills that we are experiencing in our society. I implore you to recommit personally and communally to living out your daily lives as children of God.

2. Jesus Christ, God's Divine Son, our Risen Savior

I turn to the second person of the Divine Trinity, Jesus Christ, God's Divine Son. As a pastor of the Roman Catholic Church, I believe that John 3:16 expresses God the Father's plan for all humanity. Adopt the authentic message of Jesus Christ and repent of your sins as you seek to follow Him as your Lord and Savior. Although not all of you share this belief in Jesus of Nazareth as fully God and fully man, those of you who *do* are obligated to live in His Light and call others

3. Sanctity of Life

I believe that every human being is formed in the image and likeness of God. (See, Genesis 1:27) Because of this, human life is sacred from the moment of conception to natural death. The span of days of every man and woman is to be lived out as a journey to know God more deeply and, after natural death, to ultimately spend eternity with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I urge all of the flock in Northeast Texas to accept and hold on tightly to this truth; that every human life is a sacred gift of God and to tirelessly work against all of the modern day attempts to undermine the sanctity of life and the fundamental right to life. Abortion is a scourge on our land and on our world. The respect for human life, from conception to natural death, is the foundation of a truly moral society. Protecting our youngest neighbors in the first home of the whole human race, their mother's womb, is the foundation of a true Culture of Life. Sadly, there will be little success in addressing the other threats to the Sanctity of Life unless and until everyone clings to the cornerstone that is Jesus Christ and genuinely respects the sanctity of the life of every person, born and unborn. Scripture teaches that you have an obligation to give a love of preference to the poor (See, Matthew 25:31-46), but you should all remember the words of Mother Teresa. Children in the womb are the "poorest of the poor." They have no voice to speak for them, except ours. I especially urge elected officials, particularly those within the flock of the Diocese of Tyler, to continue with your efforts to eliminate abortion as well as all other threats to human life.

4. God Made us Male and Female

"God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). You are living in a time when you must vigorously proclaim this basic truth. It is biologically true. It is confirmed in the Natural Law and taught in Sacred Scripture. It is as basic as the belief that you are created in God's image and likeness and, as such, you live as human persons created in His image and likeness as male or female. This reality of your existence is undermined and threatened in numerous ways in modern society, in this nation and throughout the world, each time the great gift of your difference and complementarity, as male and female, is denied. This difference is not a matter of equality of worth, rather, it is a gift which we offer to one another. I pray that the flock of Northeast Texas becomes a beacon of light and courageously proclaims that, as a people of God, we must follow His plan and resist any attempt to re-define humanity as something other than what it is; either, male or female.

5. Lifelong Marriage Between One Man and One Woman Who Are Open to Children

Men and women created in the image and likeness of God, are called to "Be fruitful and multiply..." (Gen. 1:28). This is accomplished through the natural and supernatural gift of a lifelong marriage between one man and one woman who are open to having children. Children are conceived through the marital embrace and are meant to be raised in the beauty of the family and the hearth of the home. I call on all members of this flock to resist the attempts to re-define marriage. They are contrary to the Natural Moral Law and the teaching of Sacred Scripture. They are contrary to the Deposit of Faith which has guided the Church through the ages. In addition to the sanctity of life, marriage, as revealed by God, is another key cornerstone of human society.

6. Family is the Prototype of Civilization

Family is the first church, first school, first economy, first hospital, first government and the first mediating institution of society. According to God's plan, every family, guided by what God has revealed to us in the bible and seeking to live God's commandments, is a basic building block of our society. The breakdown of the family is one of the most devastating aspects of the disintegration of society that you are witnessing, and you must support and encourage families to live according to God's divine plan. Certainly, individual families are never perfect, but you must reject any attempts to redefine family according to novel, new human ideas rather than following the truth that God has revealed to you.

7. The Constitution of the USA is Our Civic Guide

I urge the flock of Northeast Texas to embrace the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, and the Bill of Rights as the basic documents which guide our lives as citizens. The "self-evident truths" and "inalienable rights" that you enjoy in this nation and here in Northeast Texas cannot be taken for granted. They come from God and not civil government. You must recognize that they inform the heritage of this nation which flows from these noble and inspired founding documents. You must vigorously resist any attempts to undermine these guiding truths. It is important to remember that, when the American Founders insisted that these rights which God gave us are inalienable, they were standing on the shoulders of the giants of Western civilization who recognized the Natural Law.

8. Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell

I ask the flock of the Diocese of Tyler to consider, what Catholic theology calls, the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. These are universal elements of our human journey. Many do not believe in judgment, heaven, or hell. But because death is inevitable for every human being, you must return to the truth which God has revealed to you. I urge all of you to frequently ponder these four last things and to consider how the choices you make today will impact the end of your lives on earth. The Church's teaching regarding heaven and hell clearly states that you all have a choice in your eternal destiny. You will either spend eternity with God or totally absent from God. You must repent of your sins, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for forgiveness, embrace reparation as you can and seek to live more virtuously by cooperating with God's grace. The final judgement, which Jesus Christ speaks of in Sacred Scripture, is a specific moment, but you are choosing your final path with every daily decision you make.

9. God's Will is Our Eternal Salvation

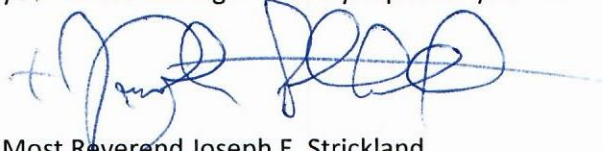
I encourage all the flock under my charge as Bishop of Tyler to embrace the truth that your loving God longs to welcome you into eternal life with Him. He has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to show you the way. I believe that Jesus established the Church in order to give you a path to eternal salvation and, it is the obligation of all of you who believe, to do all you can to share this Good News, this Gospel, with every person. As the Lord Jesus Christ says, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). He has come so that your Joy may be full. I pray that all of you can believe in God's loving plan for every human being and to do your best to accept it and share it with everyone you encounter.

10. Note to Catholics

My final point is specific to the Roman Catholics of the Diocese of Tyler, my family, for whom I am personally responsible. I urge you to trust in God, His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and to seek to know Him more deeply in your daily journey. Repent of your sins and seek Gospel virtues. Study

scripture in order to have a better understanding of the Word of God, and through study of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, deepen your knowledge of the Deposit of Faith which is the heritage of the Church. Receive the sacraments often, especially the Eucharist, with joy and reverence for it is Jesus who comes to you through His sacraments.

My prayer for each and every person in the thirty-three counties of the Diocese of Tyler, is that these ten points help you to navigate the challenging world in which you live, with joy in your hearts, clarity in your minds and vigor in every aspect of your lives.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Joseph E. Strickland', with a cross symbol to the left.

Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland
Bishop of Tyler