



Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

At the beginning of this New Year, I am pleased to announce that plans are underway for an opportunity of pastoral and spiritual renewal for everyone in our Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.

It's called *ARISE Together in Christ*. You will be hearing about orientation sessions, leadership training and formation for *ARISE* parish teams, as well as evangelization training for parish leaders.

If you are approached by your pastor or by parish staff or leaders to participate in the *ARISE* process, I urge you to say yes to this opportunity for everyone to develop a closer relationship with Christ; to deepen your faith through prayer and small group sharing; to receive new ideas and encouragement to put faith into action in daily life; to foster spiritual renewal and bonds of Christian friendship in our families and parishes; to expand our outreach to youth and young adults.

Speaking of young people, it is no secret that I devote much time and attention to them. They tell me that they need and really want our guidance and support. They are searching for their place in the Church and in our parishes. They have a passion for discovering the truth about themselves, about our world, about our faith, and about their relationship with Christ.

In my conversations with young adults, they often ask me how they can pass on the Catholic faith to their children within their families. They too are asking for guidance and support. And in my conversations with older adults, they have expressed concern for their children and grandchildren. They wonder if their prayers are enough to sustain them in the later years of life or to keep alive the Catholic faith within their families.

ARISE Together in Christ, is a program developed by RENEW International in the Archdiocese of Newark. RENEW has more than 30 years of experience in the planning, training, and successful completion of parish-based renewal programs in over 150 dioceses in the United States and 23 other countries.

You may ask, "Why this program, and why now?" My response is inspired by the insight of Pope Francis who writes in his exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*: "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter." Isn't it true that so many of our brothers and sisters who are Catholic only join us at Easter or maybe Christmas, or do not join us at all?

And Pope Francis writes, "Sometimes we are tempted to find excuses and complain, acting as if we could only be happy if a thousand conditions were met." Our diocese is not alone in the experience of scandal, loss of confidence, and even a kind of spiritual disorientation or disconnection from God and the Church.

But, as Pope Francis writes in *The Joy of the Gospel*: "Thanks to a renewed encounter with God's love, which blossoms into friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness...and we become fully human."

In my time as Bishop, I have seen discouragement and I have seen numerous people become fully human because of a renewed encounter with God's love. That encounter did not occur through an apparition or mystical experience. It occurred most often when their eyes were open to see the face of God in someone who reached out to them with compassion; who listened to them and invited them to walk together on the road where Christ can be found.

I have seen, and heard, the good and not so good excuses, and I have heard the complaints which need to be expressed in order for truth to emerge and for love to return.

When all that occurs, something powerful happens. As Pope Francis adds in *The Joy of the Gospel*, "If we receive the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?"

ARISE Together in Christ, is an opportunity for all of us, in every parish and place in our diocese, to have a renewed encounter with God and to share God's love in sharing the friendship of Christ with each other. The result, the goal, the reward that comes from this opportunity is that we become more fully human; persons of body, mind, and soul who are all made in the image and likeness of God.

The renewed encounter with God and with each other will occur in small groups that will meet under the direction of a trained leader. There are a total of five (5) seasons in the process.

Season One is about encountering Christ today. Season Two is dedicated to the theme of ongoing conversion; of accepting Christ into my life. Season Three focuses on living our faith by following in the footsteps of Christ in charity and justice. Season Four is about our need for forgiveness and reconciliation as individuals and as a community. And Season Five explores how we become people of the Good News.

It is my desire and intention to see to it that *Arise Together in Christ* will be available in every parish. Every effort will be made to have small groups available at different times of the day (morning, afternoon, evening) so that everyone will have an opportunity to participate.

You will also hear about the ways in which *Arise Together in Christ* will make its way into schools, gatherings for teens, in religious education sessions, in prisons, and in other places and circumstances within the diocese so that everyone has an opportunity to participate together.

Please encourage and support the efforts of your pastor and parish leaders to make this pastoral and spiritual renewal opportunity available. Above all, please pray with thankful hearts and with great anticipation for the blessings that will come through this experience. Make every effort to commit yourself and encourage others to participate.

Be bold in responding to a request to host, facilitate or otherwise support one of the small groups. Maybe you can be a group leader. Maybe you can make the coffee. Maybe you can babysit someone's children or stay with their elderly family member so that they can participate. Maybe you can be the person who has one special story to share about the presence of God in your life.

ARISE Together in Christ. "Why this program, and why now?" I have offered my reasons and I am determined not to make any excuses. It's time for us to *ARISE*. We must do it *Together*. We can do it *Together*. We need one another for encouragement and support. And we need to do it *in Christ*. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life. It is the Lord Jesus who calls us to *ARISE!*

Thank you for your attention to this plan for pastoral and spiritual renewal. I am entrusting this effort with confidence to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who under the title of *Mother of the Church* is the patroness of our

Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. Ask her to pray for us as we pray to her Son our Lord Jesus Christ for the gift of renewal in our diocese, in our families, and in the heart of each and every person. Please know that I am praying for all of you.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ *Mark L. Bartchak*

Most Rev. Mark L. Bartchak
Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, you have given the world its true light, Jesus, your Son - the Son of God. You abandoned yourself completely to God's call and thus became a wellspring of the goodness which flows forth from him. Show us Jesus. Lead us to him. Teach us to know Jesus and to love him.

Help us to open the door of Christ's love by sharing our faith and living our faith with each other and with all who are searching for the way, the truth, and the hope and promise of eternal life.

As patroness of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown be with us on our journey to ARISE Together in Christ. Pray for us, Mother of the Church, Pray for us!