

St. Philip Institute: A New Way to Form First-Century Christians for the 21st Century

Bishop Joseph Strickland founded the St. Philip Institute as the heart of his mission to radically transform the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, into a teaching diocese that would bring people into an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.



Deanna Johnston, director for family life, at the St. Philip Institute looks on as Bishop Joseph Strickland holds her baby. (photo: Courtesy of the St. Philip Institute)

TYLER, Texas — How does a bishop bring “the joy of the Gospel” to the angst of the age? Bishop Joseph Strickland pondered and prayed over this question for five years as bishop and realized it was time to do something completely new for the Diocese of Tyler.

“We have to have the most intimate personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is possible to attain,” he told the Register.

The bishop thought of the Catholic friends he had growing up — most of whom lost the faith — who had no one to bring them into an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. They had needed someone like St. Philip the Evangelist in Acts, who shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the Ethiopian eunuch who told Philip he could not understand the Scriptures “unless someone explains it to me.”

In 2017, Bishop Strickland rolled out his “Constitution on Teaching” to transform his diocese into a teaching diocese with a comprehensive vision for bringing Catholics into a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. The beating heart of this renewed mission to create more “first-century Christians in the 21st century” would be the St. Philip Institute.

“We must seek new and creative ways to teach and share the wonder of our Catholic faith,” the bishop wrote. “Not only the Church, but all humanity, depends on it.”

Bishop Strickland told the Register that the diocese had a lot of hardworking people, but he realized that old approaches that served a different time no longer worked. He pointed out in the constitution the 77% of Catholics missing at Sunday Mass, or the 30 million Americans that no longer identify at all as Catholic, were not statistics but “our parents, siblings, spouses, children and friends.”

He founded the St. Philip Institute so the diocese could set a unified standard for giving the very best of Catholic teaching contained in the Catechism of the Catholic Church to every household.

They would employ qualified, professional teachers and use the best of modern media to be flexible and creative in drawing as many people as possible to the message of Jesus Christ, whether it was person-to-person or via virtual conferences.

The institute is autonomous, but it operates under the governance of the bishop and is managed by an executive director.

The institute's approach is to evangelize so an entire household engages in the practice of the faith. The institute aims to engage the whole family in a flexible way — not one-size fits all — according to their needs and the season of life they're in. The bishop pointed out that secular organizations do this for less worthy goals, and the Church can do no less for the Gospel.

Fundamentally, the bishop envisioned the institute would be “unafraid to change and improve in service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

“We will teach in our 21st-century world with the fervor of first-century Christians.”

Bold, Evangelical Risks

Deanna Johnston, director for family life, told the Register that Bishop Strickland's teaching constitution moved her to pull up stakes, go to Tyler, and join the St. Philip Institute. Her department at the institute has devised a “Three to Get Married” engaged retreat and is working on a curriculum so they can better educate and support couples in natural family planning methods.

They are also working closely with “Witness to Love” marriage ministry in their catechumenate approach to marriage formation for the engaged and newly married, as well as another initiative to invite every civilly married Catholic in the diocese to receive the sacrament of matrimony by 2025.

Mary Rose Verret, co-founder of “Witness to Love,” told the Register that she has been inspired by the St. Philip Institute's willingness to take “bold evangelical risks” for spreading the Gospel and renewal.

“They were just above the curve in finding creative ways to reach people where they're at,” Verret said.

The St. Philip Institute is planted in the Tyler Diocese's chancery building, a symbol of how Bishop Strickland envisions the administrative apparatus of the diocese as oriented toward supporting its teaching mission.

Stacy Trasancos, St. Philip Institute's executive director, showed the Register the institute's facilities on a Zoom tour, which include a production studio for their high-quality video and podcast programs, as well as an artist's studio.

“We’re also driving conversations,” Trasancos told the Register, pointing to recent podcasts on the need for ethical COVID-19 vaccines that aren’t derived from fetal tissue and on the need to address racism and racial justice in America. The goal is to put these issues before Catholics squarely within the context of the Catholic faith.

Trasancos explained the diocese’s territory is large — four to five hours of driving time from one end to the other — so the St. Philip Institute maximizes its use of digital communication tools. They are building a network of master catechists in each deanery who train people providing parish-level catechesis. They are teaching in both English and Spanish, including how to pray in both languages, so the faith does not get lost in transmission.

Father Justin Braun, who is the “Season of Discipleship” director, told the Register that the St. Philip Institute stresses “building dynamic relationships with people” in how the faith is passed down, so catechists have to know the families they’re serving.

They’re training catechists to know the diocese’s families. Father Braun explained the difference can be seen in how they minister to families with special needs and how those families realize the Church is not simply listening but actively helping them “in concrete ways.”

But Father Braun said that while the Church has raised up devout Catholic families, such as the one he grew up in, he said Catholic families today have really not been formed to live out the “evangelizing and missionary task” the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 2205) charges them with.

“We need to recover that,” he said.

Johnston said the St. Philip Institute has both a strong collaborative culture, but also one that proposes this approach to the pastors. Incoming parish priests also know the standards coming in.

Overall, Bishop Strickland believes that the diocese is in a much better place with the St. Philip Institute. He’s already seeing dividends in the approach, but they are just at the beginning. The diocese is mission territory: Just 10% of the diocesan territory is Catholic. They have to renew the faithful and empower them to invite others to know Jesus, he said.

“My objective is to bring Gospel joy to the angst of this age, and there’s a lot of angst today,” he said.

“We’re always working to build a relationship around the Person of Jesus Christ,” Bishop Strickland said, adding that the St. Philip Institute is there to help, so each Catholic can “know Jesus, as a Person, friend and Lord.”

Peter Jesserer Smith is a Register staff writer.

MORE INFORMATION

Visit [here](#) to learn more about the St. Philip Institute.

Keywords: st.philip institute peter jesserer smith diocese of tyler bishop joseph strickland

Peter Jesserer Smith Peter Jesserer Smith is a staff reporter for the National Catholic Register. He covered Pope Francis's historic visit to the United States in 2015, and to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 2014. He has reported on the Syrian and Iraqi refugee crisis, including from Jordan and Lebanon on an Egan Fellowship from Catholic Relief Services. Before coming on board the Register in 2013, he was a freelance writer, reporting for Catholic media outlets as the Register and Our Sunday Visitor. He is a graduate of the National Journalism Center and earned a B.A. in Philosophy at Christendom College, where he co-founded the student newspaper, The Rambler, and served as its editor. He comes originally from the Finger Lakes region of New York State.

Copyright © 2022 EWTN News, Inc. All rights reserved. EIN 27-4581132

Reproduction of material from this website without written permission, or unlicensed commercial use or monetization of National Catholic Register RSS feeds is strictly prohibited.