



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

## LIVING IN THE WORD OF GOD

### PASTORAL INITIATIVES IN SUPPORT OF THE ARCHBISHOP'S PASTORAL LETTER

#### *Introduction*

For a number of years now the Archdiocese of Edmonton has striven to heed the call of our Popes to engage in the new evangelization. Taking our cue from the teaching of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, we held our five-year reflection upon the beauty of our faith in the series *Nothing More Beautiful*. From the outset of that endeavour we said that our goal must be to determine how we can share this beautiful faith with others. Some direction in that regard was given in my pastoral letter of 2011, in which I outlined our Archdiocesan pastoral priorities: evangelization, faith formation, and building a vocations culture. Now we bring these forward and continue our discernment in the light of the teaching and direction given to the Church by Pope Francis.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Francis has stressed repeatedly the need for us to understand and accept that we are, in virtue of our baptism, missionary disciples of Jesus Christ, endowed with many gifts and talents for the service of the Gospel. In continuity with his predecessors Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis insists that central to becoming and remaining authentic missionary disciples is personal encounter with Jesus Christ. From this encounter arises what he calls pastoral conversion, to which, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he has summoned the entire Church. By "pastoral conversion," the Pope intends the transformation of individual hearts and ecclesial structures so that they become more deeply missionary, oriented towards bringing to others, especially to any persons who live on the peripheries of society, the hope-filled message of the Gospel.

The importance of this mission cannot be overstated in our day. Our culture is one in which the loving plan of God for humanity is increasingly eclipsed in favour of the exaltation of the autonomous self. This is causing untold damage to our social fabric and the individual lives of our fellow citizens. In this light we see clearly why Pope Francis is calling us to go forth into our world as disciples of the Lord with the Gospel message of truth, mercy and love.

The aim of the pastoral letter is to encourage the people of the Archdiocese to embrace willingly and joyfully the full meaning of their identity as baptized members of the Church and thus to grow in holiness. The letter centers upon the teaching of the Lord himself that the disciple is one who hears and practices his teaching, who, in other words, lives in the Word of God.

### **PROCLAIMING THE WORD OF GOD**

The pastoral letter encourages the faithful to make prayerful and attentive listening to the Word of God the centre of their lives. Suggestions are offered as to how this might unfold in their individual lives, with family members and among fellow believers.

To support our people in this effort, Archdiocesan and parochial leadership must consider carefully how we can proclaim the Word ever more effectively so that it be heard and, by God's grace, give rise to the act of faith. St. Paul underscores this responsibility clearly when he asks: "how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (*Romans* 10:14) This proclamation of the Word of God is a call and responsibility entrusted to each of us. We must evangelize! This first of our Archdiocesan priorities - evangelization - springs from the encounter with the Lord and is forever the very reason for the Church's existence.

The importance of this in our day cannot be overstated. The only sure foundation of our lives is Jesus Christ. He alone brings to light the meaning of our existence and makes known its definitive direction. Sadly, however, world events manifest a turning away from God and thus from hope. They demonstrate that too many people are building their lives on foundations other than the person and message of Jesus Christ, which is to say they are constructing the edifice of their existence upon nothing more than shifting sand (cf. *Matthew* 7:24-27). Therefore, Jesus must be made known to others, proclaimed with the joy that springs from knowing, contemplating and loving him.

I ask that we be particularly attentive to two essential means of proclamation as we help our people hear God's holy Word.

### **THE HOMILY**

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis devotes a great deal of attention to the liturgical homily (cf. EG, 135-159). His teaching is both beautiful and challenging. Inspired by the great mystery that God chooses to speak to his people through his ordained ministers, the Holy Father directs all Bishops, priests and deacons to approach this task with the utmost seriousness and dedication.

I encourage the ordained clergy of this Archdiocese to return often to what the Pope has to say in this regard.

I know from my own experience that our priests and deacons, do, indeed, recognize the serious responsibility to preach arising from sacred ordination. We have had occasion to speak of this together at a number of our regular assemblies, and the discussions have helped me to appreciate with deep gratitude the time and effort that many of our priests and deacons are dedicating to the preparation of the homily. Likewise, I am aware that our people are very appreciative when they hear a homily that moves their hearts and leads them to the hope that Christ gives. It is a particular joy for me, as Archbishop, to have people take me aside simply to tell me what a good preacher they have in their priest or deacon.

Preaching is a challenging task. It demands, first of all, that the preacher be a person of the Word, that is to say, one who allows his life to be fully permeated and transformed by the truth revealed in Christ. The one who is to deliver a homily must understand well the meaning of the biblical text, not only in itself but also in relation to Sacred Scripture and Tradition. This requires prayer, study and effort.

In addition, as Pope Francis is careful to emphasize, "Christian preaching ... finds in the heart of people and their culture a source of living water, which helps the preacher to know what must be said and how to say it." (*EG*, 139) The one charged with preaching the Word of God must understand well what is happening in the lives of his people so that he can offer the light and hope that only God's Word can bring. In addition, the culture in which we live is rapidly changing and increasingly complex, marked by a variety of behavioural trends and currents of thought that can leave us bewildered and looking for clear meaning and solid direction. The homily needs to address the cultural and societal context with a prophetic interpretation of reality based upon divine revelation.

To assist our priests and deacons in this complex task, I have asked our own Newman Theological College to establish an annual Homiletic Institute. Situated as part of the Benedict XVI Institute for the New Evangelization, this will be offered in order to help priests and deacons in the fulfillment of this sacred duty. There are already many biblical commentaries and homily resources available to the preacher. What is lacking is an opportunity for homilists to assemble on a regular basis to study and understand well the developments in culture and society that impact our people. These must be interpreted accurately in the light of the Gospel (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4).

## **THE ARCHDIOCESAN OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS**

Among the most important of the Church's structures are those which serve the ministry of communications. In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, communications supports the Church's mission of evangelization by informing, inspiring, and telling the story of Catholic life right here — the story of how faith in Jesus Christ is proclaimed and lived in the lives of ordinary Catholics and in the ministries of the Church.

In the current media environment, the way stories are told and the way people consume news are all changing rapidly. In order that Christ be proclaimed, the Church must be fully conversant with this evolving environment and effectively present in the midst of it. It is important that we find new and more effective means to engage our people, wherever they may be on their faith journey and wherever they may look for their news of the day.

After careful consideration and prayer, I have directed that the Communications Office be reorganized with a new vision, a new mandate, and a new structure. The Western Catholic Reporter as we have known it published its last issue on September 26, 2016. Its print and digital presence is transitioning to a daily news portal, which will be the hub for quality content shared across several platforms, including websites, social media, the e-newsletter, and print products.

## **PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT**

Effective proclamation of the Word of God requires that we also accompany our people in ways that truly help them hear the Word and put it into practice. The initiatives outlined below pertain to the corresponding sections of the pastoral letter.

### **ACCOMPANYING THE HEARER OF GOD'S WORD**

#### *Daily Attentiveness to the Word of God*

The pastoral letter indicates a resource communicated daily by the Archdiocese to assist people in their reflection upon God's Word. This will be done very simply, given the complexity of daily living. Each day, one line of Scripture will be sent out on our various communication platforms (text messages, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) as food for personal reflection throughout the day. I ask that everyone involved in pastoral leadership in our Archdiocese participate in this initiative and encourage the participation of others.

*The Word of God in the Home*

The pastoral letter is issued at a time when the Church, at the initiative of the Holy Father, is highlighting the importance and beauty of marriage and the family. Recently two successive Synods of Bishops were held in Rome on this topic, followed by the publication of the Pope's own Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. Together these events underscore the great esteem in which the family is held by the Church.

We know that family life is under a variety of pressures today. For example, the redefinition in law of marriage has given rise to ideas of family at odds with the message of Sacred Scripture. Social networking is fostering modes of human relating that are not real but virtual, even in the family. When the preference of our culture for self-assertion over self-gift enters the home, it weakens relationships and can lead to separation or divorce. Further pressures are experienced by families struggling with impoverishment and unemployment, or by students grappling with unbearable amounts of student debt. A challenge impacting many of our homes today is the struggle with time. Great stress affects family members who have to hold down multiple jobs in order to make ends meet while simultaneously helping their children meet the demands placed on them by both school and sport. At the same time, messages other than the teachings of Jesus Christ are being heard and appropriated. Therefore, we must help families center their listening and doing upon the Word of God. It is of critical importance that the homes of today appreciate that "the word of God is not a series of abstract ideas but rather a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 22). It is to be the guiding principle of their lives (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 51).

Offered in the pastoral letter are three suggestions for placing the Word of God at the centre of home life. These three simple methods can help families open their lives to the Word of God. Through a careful listening to this Word, they encounter the Lord and hear within the depths of their hearts his call to holiness and service. When the family centres its life on hearing and doing the Word of God, the call of the Lord to missionary discipleship is heard, trusted, and loved. Thus does the family offer its indispensable contribution to the formation of a vocations culture, one of the three principal priorities of the Archdiocese.

Furthermore, in order that the Archdiocese may accompany and assist our families, the Office of Life and Family is tasked with bringing people together for encounters aimed at listening afresh to the reality of family life in our day. On the basis of current family experience, and in the light of the direction offered by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia*, our plan for pastoral accompaniment of marriage and family life will be renewed and implemented.

*Listening to the Word of God with Fellow Disciples*

Opportunities for fellow disciples to gather and reflect deeply upon the Word of God should be available in parishes and/or deaneries throughout the Archdiocese. Indeed, many of our parishes have already been doing this for some time now, such as through programmes of weekly Bible study. Possibilities are best discerned on the local level. Accordingly, I ask that the pastors of the Archdiocese ponder and discuss the following questions with their pastoral teams and parish pastoral councils, as well as among themselves at the deanery level. How do we help one another prepare to receive the proclaimed Word at Sunday mass? How can we support one another to carry that Word forward into the week? Are there ways we can help our parishioners generally, and our liturgical ministers in particular, to read prayerfully in the days prior to mass the readings they will hear proclaimed? Are the readings, in fact, proclaimed well or simply read? Who chooses readers? What is their formation? Is there a programme of Bible study in the parish? If so, are efforts made to link with the readings of the preceding or upcoming Sunday or both? What is the place of *lectio divina* in the life of the Archdiocese and of our parishioners? Might we engage them with this through social media? How might parishioners benefit from biblical formation opportunities offered by the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, lay ecclesial movements, or associations such as the Catholic Women's League and Knights of Columbus?

**ACCOMPANYING THE DOER OF GOD'S WORD**

The pastoral letter structures the "doing" of God's Word around the three theological pillars that shape our life in Christ: *leitourgia* (worship); *martyria* (witness); and *diakonia* (service).

*Worship*

The encounter in Christ with God's merciful love gives birth in the heart to the earnest desire to worship God in praise and thanksgiving (cf. *Psalms* 100). In the Church this worship of God reaches its highest expression in the liturgy, from which we receive the grace necessary for our Christian life of virtue and good works, and toward which all of our activity is ultimately directed (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10) This is supremely true of the Church's greatest act of worship, the sacrament of the Eucharist (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 11; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1324). As we well know, in the celebration of mass, Jesus Christ, our High Priest, renders himself truly present in his act of worship of his and our heavenly Father. When we receive in Holy Communion his true Body and Blood, we are united with him in this act of worship, and receive from him the Bread of Life with its promise of eternal life (cf. *John* 6: 48-51).

From our awareness of the gifts given in this wondrous mystery arises a deep sadness that few Catholics are participating in Sunday mass. It is true that great numbers are frequenting our churches, and for this we give thanks to Almighty God! At the same time, these numbers represent but a small percentage of all Catholics in the Archdiocese. In his Sunday Angelus address of June 26, 2011, Pope Benedict XVI recalled for us this saying of some of the Church's early martyrs: "*Sine Dominico non possumus*" – without the '*Dominicum*,' that is, the Sunday Eucharist, we cannot live."

In my pastoral letter of 2011, in which I outlined our Archdiocesan priorities, I indicated that the welcoming of Catholics home to the Church and to the regular celebration of Sunday mass must be among the chief concerns of our parishes. In re-iterating that point here, I ask that our priests discern together with their parishioners how this might be most effectively done in their respective regions. As we do this together, I ask that we bear in mind a beautiful image of the Christian community recently proposed by Pope Francis. In the document by which he opened the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis said, "In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, in a word, wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy." (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 12) Therefore, as we discern our methods of outreach we must also strive to make of our parishes such "oases." How do we welcome: our broken families; our brothers and sisters who have suffered through divorce, and who may now be civilly remarried without a declaration of nullity; our youth, especially those who feel lost and without hope; any who feel hurt or abandoned by the Church; those who are grieving the death of loved ones; any who find life overly burdensome; persons coming to the parish for the very first time and uncertain of the welcome they will receive; people held captive by addictions; and so on. The Church, Pope Francis tells us in another striking image, is like a field hospital in the midst of a battle field, called to heal the many wounds of God's people. May any who are suffering and broken find in our parishes healing through the medicine of mercy that comes to us in the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist and that is shared by the love we extend to one another.

### *Witness*

The joy of the Gospel cannot be contained. Once we come to know Jesus Christ - his love, mercy and forgiveness - and the purpose of God to save the world in him, we cannot keep this experience of life, light and truth to ourselves. From the beginning of the Church, Christians have gone forth, urged on by the love of Christ (cf. *2 Corinthians* 5:14), to be witnesses before the world to the saving purpose of God, to be, that is to say, convinced and joyful heralds of this good news to others.

From my discussions in recent months with any number of people of the Archdiocese, it is clear that many Catholics are awakening anew to the urgency of this task. Events in both Canadian society and around the world underscore the need to embrace anew our call to evangelize.

We carry within us a message of hope, rooted in Christ, and must seek effective ways to announce it to our contemporaries.

Our faithful people receive encouragement in the pastoral letter to give individual witness to Christ and the joy of his Gospel by word and example. The responsibility that is ours as leaders in the Church is to foster among believers a witness that is communal.

The joyful proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ demands a serious commitment to live in unity and manifest it to the world. Sacred Scripture testifies to the plan of God to reconcile all of humanity to himself in Christ (*Ephesians* 1:1-11). Therefore, followers of Jesus Christ must give witness to this saving will of God by unity among themselves. Indeed, Jesus himself prayed fervently to his heavenly Father that all his followers be one, and clearly linked that unity with the credibility and effectiveness of the Church's announcement of the Gospel: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (*John* 17:20-21) To the degree that we are separated from one another our proclamation of the Gospel is weakened.

#### 1. Unity in the Catholic Family

As we live in the Word of God, we pray that the appeal issued by St. Paul to the Church finds a ready reception in our hearts: "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (*Ephesians*. 4: 1-6) This cry of the Apostle demonstrates that, from the beginning of the Church, Christians have had to struggle against division. Since Christ offered his very life that we may be one in him, Christian division is a grave matter. Indeed, it is a sin against charity. It can arise in our homes, corrupt parish life and weaken the mission of our Catholic institutions. Our call is to discipleship of the Lord Jesus Christ. To be "worthy of that calling", we are impelled by the Word of God to be on guard against division and to work strenuously through repentance and reconciliation to overcome it. Only in this way will our witness before the world be credible.

#### 2. Ecumenical Relations and Collaboration

Likewise must we work for unity with other Christians. In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, we have been witnesses recently to the joy and hope engendered in the community when Christians speak and act as one. Common efforts to bring an end to homelessness have been very effective

in transforming peoples' lives and making visible the very heart of the Gospel of our Lord. At the same time, we also see, with great sadness, many Christian denominations drawing away from one another on such fundamental issues as the sanctity of human life and the nature of marriage. Such division can only impel us to renewed efforts to restore unity if we are truly a people who seek both to hear and do the Word of God, and who embrace the call to evangelize. On this point, Pope Francis is insistent: "Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, ... the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. ... The immense numbers of people who have not received the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot leave us indifferent. Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ [is] ... an indispensable path to evangelization." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 246)

A detailed pastoral plan for ecumenical dialogue and collaboration has been developed by our Archdiocesan Office for Ecumenical Relations. Its implementation throughout the Archdiocese will serve, I pray, to enhance and strengthen the united witness of Christians to the truth, beauty and hope of the Gospel of our Lord.

### *Service*

As we open our hearts to the Word of God, and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us how we may more faithfully put it into practice, we encounter these challenging questions, posed by St. Paul: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (*1Corinthians* 4:7) All is God's gift. Everything good that we have and are comes from God. Sacred Scripture also makes known the purpose for which God bestows gifts on his children: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." (*1Peter* 4:10) By our generous sharing of the gifts, talents and resources with which we are blessed we participate in the mission of the Church and reach out in loving service to others.

Here we encounter the concept of stewardship. We are stewards, not owners, of the gifts we have received from God. The steward is one who recognizes dependence upon God and who, in gratitude for gifts received, offers them humbly and generously to God by placing them at the service of others.

Stewardship is not new to the people of the Archdiocese of Edmonton. I recalled its importance in my pastoral letter of 2011, and raise it once more here. The pastoral letter places it in the context of service, and thus asks the faithful to reflect upon their Baptismal call to serve through the offering made of the God-given gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Both witness and service require proper formation. Indeed, our people will often speak today of their desire to profess and defend the faith, or to serve in a variety of ministries, yet feel ill equipped to do so. Parents especially know their responsibility to be witnesses of the faith to their children, but feel inadequate to the task because they lack formation. Some parishioners will want to serve as catechists, for example, yet hesitate due to want of training. These are among the reasons that formation in the faith is one of the principal Archdiocesan priorities established in 2011. I wish to re-affirm this here, and strongly encourage leadership to promote the faith formation opportunities available at the Archdiocesan and parish levels.

1. Nothing More Beautiful

Let us recall that this five-year series, which was held from 2008-2013 to lead us through fundamental elements of the faith, has left to the Archdiocese a legacy of more than sixty catechetical presentations and witness testimonies. All are posted in both written and video format on our Archdiocesan website, together with reflection guides. A regular review and study of this resource can be of immense benefit for growth in knowledge of the faith.

2. Every Life Matters

In the wake of the legalization in Canada of assisted suicide and euthanasia, the Archdiocese of Edmonton launched an initiative aimed at helping people understand the Church's teaching on the immorality of these acts and uphold the dignity of human life at every stage and in every circumstance. The presentations serve as an important catechetical resource in support of our mission to uphold and defend the inherent dignity of every human life. They can be accessed on our Archdiocesan website under *Every Life Matters*.

3. Benedict XVI Institute for the New Evangelization

This institute, an outreach of Newman Theological College, was established in honour of Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the end of his pontificate. It offers a number of excellent programs designed to assist people to be thoroughly formed in the faith.

Certificate in Catholic Studies

This program offers a large number of courses that give a good and thorough grounding in the basics of our faith. They are offered online at minimal cost in order to be accessible to people in the midst of their busy lives.

Vocatus

This program reaches out to business persons, who seek to integrate their Catholic faith with both their professional and family responsibilities.

Treasures of our Faith Seminar Series

Through this outreach, participants explore the key elements of our faith that have shaped our Catholic Tradition and continue to inform our daily living.

Seminars in Missionary Discipleship

This will be a new initiative.

It is critically important to keep in mind that our exercise of service relates not just to the direct support of Archdiocesan and parish ministries. In virtue of our baptismal call to be missionary disciples, each of us is sent "into the world" in order that it be transformed with the power of the Gospel of our Lord. The commandment to love our neighbour moves us to evangelize the social and political order, bearing always in mind the dignity of the human person and concern for the common good in accord with Catholic social teaching. Particular outreach must be directed to the impoverished and marginalized. Addressing the plight of the poor, the Holy Father says: "We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them." (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 198).

In order that our faithful have the necessary support for the service to which they are called, we shall establish, in association with Newman Theological College, *Seminars in Missionary Discipleship*. The aim will be to prepare and equip our people to serve in a variety of "missionary" contexts: the family; the workplace; political engagement; media and the arts; and so on. Nothing is more important than engaging our world with the life-affirming and life-transforming message of the Gospel. We have received the Word of God from those who have gone before us. Now it is our time and our turn to assume this task with conviction, confidence and joy.

4. Parish programs

Of course, our parishes have been offering faith formation opportunities to parishioners for many years I ask our priests, pastoral teams and parish pastoral councils, in dialogue with the Archdiocesan Office of Catechesis, to continue to discern faith formation opportunities to offer our parishioners.

## Conclusion

As we move forward in response to the call of our Holy Father to conversion by hearing and doing God's Word, let us not fail to look to the example of Our Blessed Mother, the Virgin Mary, and invoke her intercession. The perfect disciple, her heart was fully open to the Word of God and entirely receptive to its transformation of her life. Her response to God, born of complete and unfailing trust in the providence and wisdom of God, inspires and shapes our own: "Be it done unto me according to thy Word." (*Luke* 1:38) By the help of her maternal prayers, may her response be ours as we hear Jesus speak to us in Sacred Scripture and strive, with the aid of his grace, to put that Word into practice.

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This letter is also available online at <http://caedm.ca/letter> .