



My Dearest Brothers and Sisters of the Diocese of Cleveland,

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! I am writing you today my first pastoral letter, and I thank you for taking the time to read it. It has been over four years since I was appointed by Pope Francis to be the Bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland, and the time is right for me to share with you where I think the Holy Spirit is calling us as a diocese, a local Church. The goal of this letter is to provide you with a resource for reflection, that you might be drawn more deeply into prayer and a more intimate relationship with Jesus. This letter is composed of four sections, and they build on each other, like St. Paul's letters. The first three sections remind us of who we are and whose we are, and the final section articulates specific strategies to boldly follow the call of the Holy Spirit as sons and daughters of the Father.

I invite every Catholic in the Diocese of Cleveland to read this pastoral letter in its entirety, as I have written it with each of you in mind. Since we are now in the Mission Year of the Eucharistic Revival, I strongly recommend that you read this letter in silence, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, perhaps at your home parish, or your school chapel, or your nursing home chapel, if you are able. If you are reading this online, consider printing it out so that you have a hard copy to mark up and are not distracted by your screen. Make notes and underline your copy of the letter; consider reading it more than just once. Then, meet with some other Catholics who have read this letter and discuss it in a small group. What comforted you? What challenged you? What excited you? What questions do you still have?

Over the next year I would like this letter to be at the forefront of conversations around the diocese. It is my hope that every parish council, finance council, priest support group, religious community, grade school, high school, youth and young adult group, all our Catholic Charities organizations, and every ministry that meets on diocesan property will become familiar with this letter so that we might recommit ourselves to a daily entry into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ so that the Church of Cleveland may truly flourish. I encourage you to approach this recommitment with an openness to change of heart, drawing yourself ever closer to the heart of Jesus, which is love itself. As Pope Francis wrote in his recent encyclical, "It is not enough to know the Gospel or to carry out mechanically its demands. We need the help of God's love. Let us turn, then, to the heart of Christ, that core of his being, which is a blazing furnace of divine and human love and the most sublime fulfillment to which humanity can aspire. There, in that heart, we truly come at last to know ourselves and we learn how to love" (DN, 30).



In these difficult times, we turn our eyes once again to Jesus. He came to befriend us, to save us from our loneliness, our sense of meaninglessness, our anxiety, our depression, our pain, our worry, our isolation, and our sin. Jesus came to save us from ourselves. He came to assure us that we are not alone, and that God is not dead, and that there is an answer to the insatiable longing in each of our hearts for perfect love, perfect understanding, perfect friendship, and perfect acceptance.

I remember my first year in college. I was a biology major, living away from home for the first time. I felt lonely, depressed, anxious, and uncertain of my future. It was not an easy time for me. Then someone gave me a copy of the Gospels, and for the first time, I read them in my need. Jesus spoke to my heart. He was no longer a distant figure in some faraway land. He was real. He was alive. He was with me. He was for me. That experience has made all the difference in my life. And it also was the beginning of a change of direction for me. I began to be more involved in my faith. I came to understand that I must love the Church as he loved the Church. And I made the intentional decision to follow him, to serve his Church, and to let go of my plans (to die to self) in order to do his will in my life. It was a life-changing decision for me. In fact, it was a resurrection experience for me, and it was life-giving. This is what I pray for all of you. Jesus came not so that we might cope; Jesus came so that we might flourish. Jesus said, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).

Jesus is a gift sent to us from his Father: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16). Jesus came to us to show us how to trust the Father, how to abandon ourselves to his holy and good and perfect will, and to convince us that the Father will never abandon us, even and especially in our darkest hours. And he didn't just tell us. He showed us, with his life: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn. 15:13). Jesus is good and Jesus is God. He can be trusted. His love has never failed, and it will never fail. He is trustworthy and dependable. He does no harm. In fact, he heals us. And he makes all things new (Rev. 21:5).

Part II: Friendship with God

What we think of God and how we think of God matter. Our Catholic faith teaches us not simply that God loves, but that God is love. Love always requires more than one person; there is the lover, and there is the beloved, and then there is the love between the lover and the beloved. God reveals himself as a communion of love, as a communion of persons, as a communion of friendship, and as the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. In the Trinity we find the Father who loves the Son, and the Son who loves the Father, and the Holy Spirit as the love proceeding from a



Sometimes we forget that the same Jesus who healed, performed miracles, and offered his grace and friendship in the Gospels is still doing all these things today in his Church, even and especially right here in the Diocese of Cleveland. We need to ask ourselves: Am I hungry for something better in life? Do I long for God more than life itself? Am I thirsty for what Jesus can give to me? Have I been drinking from wells that do not satisfy the deepest desires of my heart? Am I suffering from blindness to God? Can I see the Lord at work in my life? Am I suffering from deafness to God's call? Can I hear Jesus' voice when I pray? Am I suffering from paralysis, unable to move forward with God? Do my body and soul need some healing? Am I spiritually dead? Do I need to be brought back to life? Am I a sinner in need of forgiveness? Do I trust that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world? Do I believe that Jesus, risen from the dead, is with me right now? These are important questions, and we must be able to answer them honestly.

Perhaps the most important question we all need to answer is this: What kind of friendship do I have with God? Meaning, do I know God the Father? If so, what does it mean to be his beloved son or beloved daughter? Do I know Jesus the Son, and do I allow him to know and walk with me? Do I speak with the Holy Spirit often, and do I listen when he speaks to me in the recesses of my heart? Chances are that most of us reading this letter desire to deepen our friendship with God, with each person of the Holy Trinity, and with each other. But so often as Catholics, and especially as Americans from a hard-working diocese like Cleveland, we tend to want to focus more on "getting things done" than with "being with the Lord" (Lk. 10:38-42). For many of us involved in parish life, implementing a program, publishing a policy, or promulgating a pastoral plan seems like a better use of our time and energy than deepening our friendship with God. Outside of parish life, the secular workday, school schedules, and the challenges of raising a family can be all-encompassing, leaving us feeling pressed for time. Yet the Psalmist reminds us, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:11). This pastoral letter will certainly present some practical guidelines and directives in later sections, but as your bishop I am convinced that none of those things will matter or be effective if we are not serious about deepening our friendship with God. I invite you, if it is not already part of your daily routine, to make time for God – at least fifteen minutes of prayer a day. Consider putting down your phone (unless you are praying with an app) and rest in the Lord. Read some Scripture. Give thanks for the blessings you have received. Review your day with him. Share your dreams and your joys. Share your fears, sorrows, and worries. Then listen for his response, which will usually be heard in the silence of your heart as Jesus speaks to you.

I am convinced that there is no moving forward for us as a diocese unless we first move forward in our friendship with the Triune God, who will then allow us to enter into deeper friendship



percentages for our younger generations of Catholics. The number of sacramental marriages and children being brought for baptism by their parents is also in steep decline. Because of these disturbing trends, every faithful Catholic must take seriously his or her call as missionary disciple. Jesus' command to go and make disciples demands a renewed urgency. Yet, many will still feel inadequate and not know where to begin. Allow me to suggest four areas of concentration: A daily prayer life; commitment to the sacramental life of the Church; communal encounters with God; and knowing and telling one's own story.

i: Daily Prayer Life

I have already mentioned above that I encourage every Catholic in the diocese of Cleveland to spend at least fifteen minutes in prayer each day. It may not sound like much, but carving out fifteen minutes during which one puts aside everything else and dedicates that time to one's relationship with God can be life changing. Again, if we compare our relationship with God to our other relationships, we know that we make time for the people whom we love most, and the people who love us most make time for us. The same is true in our relationship with God. The Father, Son, and Spirit are always ready to talk with us, and that is best done in silence, away from screens, noise, and other distractions. Not all of us can make our way to a Blessed Sacrament chapel, but perhaps there is a space in our home, on our porch, or in our yard that we can dedicate for our daily prayer. Seek a place to sit, quiet yourself, and learn to just 'be' in the presence of the living God. There are many ways to pray, and you can each figure out what form of prayer works best for your given state in life, but for the sake of your spiritual health and the spiritual health of our diocese, take at least fifteen minutes to be alone with God. Let him love you. Love him in return. "Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him" (CCC, 2560). For it is only in coming to know the Lord daily and deepening our friendship with him that we'll be able to take his love out to the world, ultimately sharing it with others as missionary disciples.

ii: Commitment to the Sacramental Life

Our initial descent into Jesus' Paschal Mystery happens at Baptism. That's when our sin is washed away and we are filled with sanctifying grace, the life of God himself. In baptism, we are made members of the family of God, which we call the Church. In baptism, we become adopted children of God, heirs to God's kingdom as the beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. We are called to share the Good News of Jesus with others and are strengthened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit to accomplish this task in the Sacrament of Confirmation. It is important for us



iii: Communal Encounters with God: Faith Sharing, Small Groups, and Retreat Experiences

People look for community in the Church, and rightly so. We are social by nature. Being made in God's image, we are made to be a community of persons, just as God is. The Church helps us share God's love with each other, just as a family shares love. The Church, at her best, is a community of disciples who build each other up in faith, never tearing down our brothers and sisters. St. Paul tells us to edify each other, and he says, "All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. [And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ" (Eph. 4:31–32). Jesus wants his peace to reign in our hearts so that we can find closer unity with him and with each other.

In our diocese, the people who are most involved in the life of the Church, the life of the diocese, and the life of their parish are often people who are also part of a small group within the parish where they are regularly seen, known, and loved. We all need a small circle of friends with whom we can share our faith, in order to grow in our faith. This sort of thing should be happening within families, which are the original and most natural of small groups. Families are called "the Church at home." Make sure Jesus is at the center of your family life.

Small faith-related groups allow us to recognize what is universally true about our Catholic faith in our particular situations. They allow us to share our faith with others in more personal, often more meaningful ways. They allow us to share our stories with each other.

Smaller groups provide the opportunity for us to receive and give support out of Christian friendship. They are where the Holy Spirit goes to work in given communities of faith, where people know each other more personally, at parishes, high schools, colleges, nursing homes, prisons, seminaries, and convents. I am encouraging each Catholic in the Diocese of Cleveland to become part of some small faith-sharing group, whether it is formal or informal, a bible study, a book club, over a cup of coffee, at dinner, or in a breakfast club. Meet with each other to discuss the truths of our Catholic faith, the beauty of our belief in God, and the strength we have when we know we have become God's beloved sons and daughters. Share what the Holy Spirit is doing in each of your lives. Don't hide God's action in your life from others. Share it!

I am asking pastors and parish leaders to see that such small group opportunities are available, but even more, I also ask parishioners themselves to take the initiative to create such small groups. This might be as simple as asking some of your Catholic neighbors to come over for a get-together. Maybe, at that time, share why you are a believer and what it means to you to follow Jesus. Ask your guests to share what their faith means to them. Even if this suggestion may



must give our lives to him. This is how we are being made to be saints.

At the preparation of the gifts during the Mass, the priest or deacon who is preparing the chalice pours a little bit of water into the wine, saying, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity." Jesus has come to share himself with us, and in the process, he has lifted us up to share in God's life.

Jesus wants to share in our lives. He wants to be completely united with us and our experiences, all of them, the good ones and the bad ones – he wants to share in our humanity. Jesus desires for us to share our lives completely with him. He wants us to trust him with our pains, hurts, heartaches, and sins, as he is the Divine Healer and there isn't anything that he can't handle. He desires to show us that he understands pain and suffering, that HE came to suffer with and for us, to show us that we are not alone, and that our suffering can be redemptive because the cross ultimately leads to the Resurrection. He came to show us how to die to ourselves, so that we can have new life in him. He doesn't want his Paschal Mystery to be some ancient story that has no bearing on our lives; we want his Paschal Mystery to be the interpretive key to our lives.

An essential component of a flourishing Church is that her members can tell the story of the Paschal Mystery through their own lives, like I did earlier in this letter when I related my experiences as a first-year biology major in college. My story is just one among the great many lives Jesus has changed. We all have a story to tell of how we were lost and then found by God, how we asked and received from God, how we were beaten down by our sins and then lifted up by the Lord's forgiveness. I met a young person in one of our elementary schools, a sixth-grader. He told me that he wasn't Catholic when he started school, but something happened to him during one of the school Masses. He came to know that Jesus was present in the Eucharist. He was drawn to receive him. He was hungry for Jesus. He told his mom that he longed for Jesus in the Eucharist. He knew that something special and powerful was happening at Mass and he wanted to be a part of it. When he told his mother about his desire, she was moved by his story, and she decided to come into full communion with the Catholic Church along with her son at the following Easter Vigil. What a story! I am asking all of us to tell our story of faith, how we came to know Jesus who has lifted us up time and time again.

Shifting from this a bit, let's think of the Stations of the Cross. There are fourteen of them, and they depict the suffering that Jesus endured on Good Friday. Now think of your own life. When have you felt abandoned and condemned? When have you fallen? Who comforted you and wiped your face? When did you feel like you were being crucified? Who has helped you carry your cross? If you can answer these questions, then you can start to tell your story, because you realize that Jesus was living his Paschal Mystery in you through all these events in your life. The mystery of your life is illuminated by the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. But the Paschal Mystery doesn't end



God's Word and share the Good News of our salvation in Christ with others, becoming evangelizers. And, finally, they put their faith into action by serving the materially and spiritually poor as Jesus commanded, especially thinking of Matthew 25, where Jesus said, "When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me."

Worship. Evangelization. Service. These three are at the heart of parish ministry, the primary reasons why a parish exists. Although parish life in the Diocese of Cleveland looks different than it did five years ago, before the pandemic, not to mention fifty years ago, these three components remain. Similarly, the makeup of cities, suburbs, and rural communities across our eight-county diocese has changed. Some areas are experiencing a civic resurgence and pockets of growth, while others have aged markedly. Many of our city parishes have shrunk in numbers, while some of our former country parishes are now booming in areas that are quickly becoming the new suburbs. Not only do we have fewer priests staffing our parishes these days and many priests pastoring more than one parish, we also have fewer Catholics in our diocese. Fewer Catholics come to Mass on a regular basis. Regardless of these changes, the parish remains central to the mission of our Church, which is taking the Gospel to every corner of the world, or at least to every corner of our diocese, in an apostolic manner. The love of Jesus compels us to make an outward response. We must be laser-focused on being the best we can be as God's Church in the parishes that have become our communities of faith. This means that we must constantly renew our commitment to our parishes being centers of worship, evangelization, and service.

Activating and promoting more effective worship, evangelization, and service was my goal when I began the restructuring of our diocese into deaneries. I hope this will be helpful in fostering other important aspects of parish life. For years, our parishes have been grouped into thirteen districts across the diocese, with the expectation of shared collaboration among the parishes in each district. I decided to take a closer look at that structure and infuse it with new energy and clearer direction. The districts will now be referred to as deaneries. Each of the twelve deaneries will be led by a dean, a priest of that area, who will act as my representative. In his deanery, he will be responsible for proactively caring for the health of our priests, regularly visiting parishes and seeing to their good governance and vitality. Additionally, he is responsible for forming and supporting a deanery committee, led by a lay, religious, or diaconal deanery chair that will shape pastoral plans for the deanery. The deanery committee is the way in which I hope to gather input and ideas, not only from clergy, but from lay leaders of our parishes. These pastoral plans I am asking the deanery committee to develop will have measurable goals that strengthen the collective work of the deanery's parishes in bringing people closer to the Lord, especially through authentic worship, active evangelization, and acts of charity or Christian service. All this work will be supported by diocesan staff in my office solely dedicated to working for the deans and helping



a time once a month where confessors would come to a given church to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Such a gathering could be preceded or followed by a fraternal priestly gathering.

I would like each deanery to consider opportunities for Eucharistic Adoration. As with daily Mass schedules, offering accessible times to pray before our Lord in the Eucharist will foster a deepening experience of the Paschal Mystery. If one parish is known for celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours regularly, highlight that parish to everyone in that deanery and encourage others to visit and pray there. Collaboration within the deanery enables shared resources and eases the burden on limited pastoral staff.

Evangelize

Pope Francis reminds us, "In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers" (EG, 28). We must never forget that the parish is the center for evangelization in a given community. It is that place where missionary disciples are formed and then sent. Pope Francis challenges us, "To make this missionary impulse even more focused, generous and fruitful, I encourage each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification, and reform" (EG, 30).

Evangelizers first hear God's Word for themselves. They encounter the living Christ. Ours is not just a decision to follow a set of doctrines, although that is important. What motivates us is that we have met the living Christ. We have come to know his love for us. We have fallen in love with him. This is what compels us to tell others to come and see him in whom we have faith. Remember Andrew? He told his brother Simon Peter, "We have found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41). He took his brother to see Jesus. Like Andrew, we must announce the one we have found, Jesus, and invite others to come and see for themselves. Remember the woman at the well? Jesus was waiting for her there. He spoke to her with compassion. She went from the encounter with Jesus at the well to invite her townsfolk, "Come see a man who told me everything I have done" (Jn. 4:29). Many in the town became believers because of the woman's testimony. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, saying, "But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? How can they hear without someone to preach?" (Rom. 10:14). We are baptized priest, prophet, and king. I commission everyone at Mass to be prophetic, to be evangelizers, when I say at the end of the Mass, "Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord." That is meant for you. You are to go and tell the Good News for all to hear. This is what it means to be missionary disciples.

The Church is missionary by her very nature. She seeks the salvation of souls by proclaiming Jesus as the Savior. We bring this message to our students in Catholic schools and to all ages in faith formation and catechetical formation programs, which serve as the foundation



Serve

There is no doubt that Jesus spent much of his time with the poor. He was born in poverty. He lived in poverty. In Matthew 25, he said that he was present in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the imprisoned, and the sick. He commended those who took care of others in their need, saying to those who do so, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt. 25:34). For the sake of our salvation, it is imperative that we serve others out of love. Jesus told us that he came to serve, not to be served, and after washing the feet of his disciples, told them to do the same, saying, "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn. 13:34). The early Church was known to be a church for the poor, gathering alms for those who were in need, not just those from their own number, but for people who did not yet believe in Jesus, too. To take care of the poor - both the materially and spiritually poor - is also a means to evangelize the world. As a familiar song puts it, "they'll know we are Christians by our love." When St. Lawrence, a deacon and treasurer of the Church in ancient Rome, was asked by the magistrate to turn over the treasures of the Church, St. Lawrence returned with the poor, disabled, widowed, orphaned, sick, and elderly. For him, as for us, these are the people to whom Jesus is the closest. If we want to meet Jesus, we will not only meet him in the Blessed Sacrament and our Sacred Scriptures, but in the poor. This is why our service to those in need is so central to the mission of the Church.

Our entry into a new phase of diocesan life through the twelve deaneries coincides with the "mission year" of our Eucharistic Revival. We are being called to go out, and what better way to go out with love to others? There are parishes in each of our deaneries known for outstanding outreach and service. Identify these parishes, their given ministries, and encourage parishioners to participate in acts of charitable outreach and service.

I would like each and every Catholic in the Diocese of Cleveland to be able to identify his or her mission of service in the world. At the end of Mass, we often hear, "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." This sending must not remain vague or abstract. Each of you must identify a concrete mission, a place where you have been commissioned by the Lord to take his love through service to those in need. For some of you, your mission of charity may be rearing your own children. Others will find their mission in defending the unborn and helping their mothers in difficult situations. For some your mission may be visiting prisoners, perhaps helping those who suffer mental health issues, or those who suffer addiction or loneliness. For some it may be working against the evil of racism, and for others it may be praying for those who have no one to pray for them. Others will want to be involved in the ministry of social justice, looking at ways to reform social systems to bring about the justice that leads to peace. There are



those wounds, bringing those who minister into closer encounter with Jesus. This will transform everything we do.

- Parish Staffs in a very real way, you are the face of the Church. You are the bridge builders, the first face of the Church that many see, the consolers, the triage attendants, and the "field hospital" personnel who provide the day-to-day care to those in need. Hold yourself to a higher standard. Embody a life of prayer, welcome, hospitality, patience and compassion.
- Volunteer Leaders of Ministry charged with both communicating and enacting the vision, your efforts support the mission of the Church in worship, evangelization and service. Your role is exercised mostly within the parish, but your responsibility of leadership is to encourage the front lines, to embody the dream, and to serve as a conduit between the clergy, paid staff, and broader membership of the parish. Recognize the privilege and responsibility of your calling and seek the Lord's will each day. Participate regularly in the sacramental life of the Church, in small groups, and in opportunities to share your story in compelling ways, so that you might truly glorify the Lord by your life.
- The People of God are the front-line workers for Christ in our society. Your apostolate, flowing from your baptism, is to transform those within your sphere, those you encounter on the journey of life. Your mission is fulfilled by being followers of Jesus in the world, especially serving those who don't know Christ. It's about loving those who haven't been drawn to church, who don't cross the parish threshold. Yours is a mission to live in such a way that when others encounter you, they encounter Christ. They experience your qualities of salt, light, and leaven, even without being able to articulate what draws them to you. Your mission is to bring about the will of the Father for the good of the other, in all the places and spaces you encounter them, standing ready to give an account of your joy (1 Peter 3:15). Remember, our highest purpose is the salvation of souls. Our final destiny is to be made into saints. Use the gifts God has lavished upon you in ways that build the Kingdom of God on earth in the image of what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like: a place of peace, love, and joy. Pray regularly, attend Mass, and celebrate Reconciliation. Practice seeking the Spirit, listening in the stillness, and telling your story. Parents and teachers, embrace your role in forming the next generation of faithful. Whether young or old, digital natives or technologically challenged, urban, suburban, or rural dwelling, each of you has the ability and responsibility to transform lives.



Going Forth

In my years as Bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland, I have come to know you to be faithful, prayerful, supportive, loving, and generous. I often say that I am a member of the Church, just as you are. I know my role may be different, but my basic calling is the same as yours, to follow Jesus. May we follow him together, walking in the same direction, listening to the Spirit, building each other up, keeping the faith, and looking forward to our ultimate calling: that we be saints someday forever in heaven.

Finally, I want to entrust this letter and its contents to Mary, Mother of the Church. Sometimes, when people think of "The Catholic Church" they think of a cold institution, oppressing people with rules and regulations, when in fact the Catholic Church is first Mother and Teacher, which is why we refer to her as "she." Mary is the one who trusted that the Lord was good and true and had her best interests in mind when he called her through the Angel Gabriel to be the Mother of God, the Mother of Jesus. And although at first St. Luke reports that she was "deeply troubled" (Lk. 1:129) by the news, she did give her fiat, her "yes" to God, and that faithful response made our salvation possible.

If you haven't yet made friends with Our Lady, I invite you to do so. She is gentle, understanding, and wants to have a relationship with you. She can show you how to look at your life contemplatively, without fear or anxiety: "And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart" (Lk. 2:19). She is the one who points us to her Son, saying to us, "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn. 2:5).

As we move forward as a diocese, on our pilgrim way toward heaven as missionary disciples, I ask Our Lady's intercession that we may indeed flourish as an Apostolic Church in the worship of God, in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in loving service to each other and our neighbors.

May God bless you and those you love.

+ Edward C. Malein

Your Brother in Christ,

Most Rev. Edward C. Malesic, JCL

Bishop of Cleveland

Serve the Lord with Gladness - Bishop's Motto



