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Sharing the Gift

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Greetings in the Lord! As I celebrate my fourth anniversary as your bishop, I wish to express in this Pastoral Letter my deepest hope for the Church (that is, the People of God – **us**). The longer I serve as a priest and bishop, the truth of this statement becomes more evident: The Church exists to evangelize! Put simply, if we believe that Jesus Christ suffered and died for us and rose again to set us free from sin and death, we are compelled to share that Good News with everyone around us.

We are living in challenging times, to be sure. Our world, our families and even our beloved Church, is experiencing a great deal of division, acrimony and confusion. It seems as though we are condemned to exist in a world where everyone either agrees with us (and thus are on our side) or disagrees with us (and thus are to be shunned – or, worse: treated as ‘enemies’). However, there is a way out: embracing and sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who said, “Seek first the kingdom of God ...” (Mt 6:33) A focus on sharing the Good News not only helps us to address the many challenges we face, it is something very positive and hopeful.

Is there anything more hopeful and joyful than knowing that in Christ Jesus we are loved, redeemed, and are given the promise of eternal life? If we truly believe that, we can say with St. Paul: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom 8:31)

Sisters and brothers, why are we downcast today? Why does there exist so much anger and outrage within ourselves and in the world today? I believe that we have forgotten the truth of the Gospel: God the Father sent his Son into the world to save us from our sins, and God also gave us the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us. Thus, we are invited to share in God’s divine life *even now*. Since that is so, what could possibly afflict us? Jesus says to us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled ... Have faith in me.” (Jn 14:1)

One of my (new) favorite passages from the Bible comes from the Book of Zechariah. The prophet lived and ministered in times of struggle and confusion, not unlike our own day and age. Yet he was absolutely convinced of God’s ultimate plan to bring salvation to all of creation. One of his prophesies ends with great hope in the coming of the Messiah, and the response of God’s beloved people: “In those days, ten people from nations of every language will take hold, yes, will take hold of the cloak of every [Jew] and say, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zech 8:23)

May we live our faith well, confident in the glory that is ours in Jesus Christ, so that people around us may say the same thing: “Tell me about God, for I am sure that he is with you!” This is our task and our challenge. If we believe in the Good News, we must share it with everyone we encounter.

I hope in this Letter to instruct, exhort, and then join you in living as a missionary disciple of our Lord. I humbly ask everyone in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee to read it and pray with it. My prayer is that all of us – as families, as parishes and as individuals – will put this teaching into practice and heed Jesus’ call: “Go and make disciples of all nations ...” (Mt. 28:19)

I. INTRODUCTION

“The Church exists to evangelize.”¹ Addressing the signs of the times and the urgent needs of the day, Pope St. Paul VI taught us to reclaim our heritage and the Great Commission of Jesus Christ: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Mt 28:19-20) This is not something that we do in our spare time or something that is “extra” to our Catholic faith or even optional; it is the heart of everything we do. Now more than ever, our God calls us to be disciples of his Son, and apostles who bring the Good News to the world.

It is clear that today we are bogged down by so many important issues and concerns. There is a great deal of anger, division, anxiety and hopelessness in our world. In times like these, we are tempted to retreat and “circle the wagons.” Some would have us focus only internally, guarding and defending our Catholic faith against the forces of the world. Others want to use the faith solely to resolve key issues like abortion, same-sex marriage, capital punishment, immigration and so many others.

Before and above anything else, however, our Catholic faith unites us with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and thus leads us to the Father and the kingdom of heaven. We remember Jesus’ words in the Gospel: “I have come so that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) We have received this incredible gift, and all God asks of us is that we extend it to others.

II. BIBLICAL BASIS FOR EVANGELIZATION

From the first moment of creation, God has been calling humanity to communion with him. Indeed, the first book of the Bible teaches us that we were created in the image and likeness of God, “called to fellowship” (1 Cor 1:9) with God. Our first parents enjoyed communion and fellowship with God, until they turned away from him. “By the envy of the devil, [sin and] death entered the world ...” (Wisdom 2:24) Fellowship was broken – not by God but by humanity, but God never gives up. God’s plan, which is perfect and infinite, presses on through all time.

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth ... to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you ... All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.” (Gen 12:1-3) Why did God call Abraham? To establish a people for his own possession and to extend this communion with all the world. The “chosen people” would be both an example and the means of salvation for the world. This was fulfilled at Mount Sinai when God said to Moses, “Now, if you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples, though all the earth is mine.” (Ex 19:5)

Later, God raised up David, a shepherd-king, to rule in God’s name. From David’s lineage, God would ultimately bring about a Savior: one who would ‘rule forever’ and bring ‘glad tidings’ (i.e., the Gospel, the Good News of salvation) to all of creation.

Jesus is THE perfect fulfillment of that prophecy. Thus he announced in the synagogue at Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor ...” Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God? It is the “place” where God dwells, a “place” of communion with God.

In the Incarnation, Jesus Christ brought the kingdom of God to earth. “Proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” (Mt 10:7) In word and deed, our Lord inaugurated the kingdom and taught us to long for its perfection in heaven. “... your kingdom come, ... on earth as in heaven.” (Mt 6:10)

Before he was taken up into heaven, Jesus made it clear that the task of his disciples was to extend his reign (i.e., the kingdom of God) on earth, through his body, the Church, until he should come again: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

III. EARLY CHURCH

In Jesus, the new and perfect Abraham, the promise to multiply God’s people “like the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore” (Gn 22:17) is fulfilled and continues in a definitive, mysterious way in the Church.

“Church” is the people of God, united with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, who are sent to love one another and to proclaim to the world that the kingdom of God has come. The Church, which is Christ’s body on earth, is the place where Christ’s ministry continues – in worship, in service and in evangelization.

The Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the letters of Paul and the other Apostles teach the truth about why God created us and how God redeemed us in his Son. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the early Christians preached fearlessly the Good News, setting up local churches everywhere so that they, in turn, could preach and evangelize to more and more people.

Because of their obedience to Jesus Christ and his Gospel, many Christians were persecuted, imprisoned and put to death. To be a Christian in the early Church was extremely risky. Many saints lost their lives – only to gain it back in Jesus Christ. The blood of the martyrs gave rise to tremendous growth. Even though it was a time fraught with danger, it was an exciting and joyful time. Many people were eager to hear the Gospel. It was new and transformative. It spoke to their heart and convicted them to change their lives completely. The earliest Christians were anxious to evangelize and to bring the faith to as many people as they possibly could. Assuredly there was a sense of urgency with everything that they did.

IV. ORIGINS OF CHRISTENDOM

Over the course of the fourth century, Christianity went from being a persecuted, marginal religion, to a religion favored by emperors and the elite and the wealthy. Over time, Christianity was not only accepted; it became one of the world’s largest religions. As new lands were developed and countries were conquered, Christianity spread wider and wider. “Christendom” (an unofficial term) came about.

What is Christendom? In essence, Christendom constitutes a society that is guided by Christian ideals, beliefs, morals, etc. “When the Christian narrative of the human drama and its

corresponding moral order have become prominent in a given society and have come to provide, at least largely, that society's ruling vision, what emerges can be called a 'Christendom culture.'"² For many centuries (in the West, at least), Christianity was accepted as the norm. The Church was protected, respected, and given a great deal of prominence in society. Despite setbacks, scandals, and even a great schism between the East and the West in 1054, followers of Christ were still able to carry out the mission given to them by their founder.

There are periods in history when evangelistic fervor was greater than others. Wars and crusades were waged to defend the faith and to convert non-believers. The physical structure of the Catholic Church, that is, the hierarchy, became more prominent and defined. In places like what is now our diocese, the State encouraged and funded efforts to bring the Gospel to people in far-off lands. For example, the king of Spain commissioned Tristan de Luna y Arrellano to colonize (and evangelize) Florida in 1559. The Franciscan missionaries who traveled with him celebrated the first Mass in what is now the United States that same year.

Especially in recent centuries, the Catholic Church became established throughout the world – and the sense of urgency that our ancestors had was diminishing considerably. Even so, the Church has faced many persecutions over the years, for instance, during the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, the rise of Communism, the Cristero War in Mexico, and so on.

V. THE DEATH OF CHRISTENDOM

This statement is meant to be provocative. It does not mean that Christianity is dead – that will never happen, of course. Rather, it can no longer be taken for granted that Christian values are the norm. In 1974, Archbishop Fulton Sheen declared, "[W]e are at the end of Christendom." He could see how people were turning away from God and the truth, in order to refashion God in the image and likeness of humanity. Like our first parents, we were disregarding our dignity and declaring the Church to be unnecessary – even a detriment – to our happiness.

In our day, Pope Francis has said, "Brothers and sisters, Christendom no longer exists."³ We see it even more clearly today: the Church – and her leaders – are often suspect, ridiculed and dismissed.

To be sure, many members and leaders of the Church have engaged in sin, infighting and scandalous behavior, sowing doubt about the truth of the Gospel and its transformative effect on the lives of believers. The people of God must go forward in a spirit of humility, penance and service, in order to show forth the presence of Christ in our midst.

For many people today, there are few (if any) objective truths. "Truth" for them is what matters most to them and their happiness. Any restrictions on their freedom or happiness are regarded as suspect or even as intolerance. "That may be truth for you," they say, "but not for me." We may argue and debate over where this attitude – this 'hardness of heart' – is coming from, but we cannot dismiss the fact that it is the prevailing attitude of our time.

What has worked in the past will not work in the same way today. We can no longer be content with opening our church doors and watching people come in. In fact, they are leaving faster than they are joining, and they have been for quite a while.

VI. RENEWAL

Vatican II recognized the need to return to our original charism. *Gaudium et Spes* was a path forward to engage the world around us. *Lumen Gentium* serves as a reflection on who we are as a Church, here to glorify God and announce the Good News. If you have not read these documents of the Second Vatican Council, or if it has been several years since you have done so, I exhort you to read these documents, which are still relevant today and are more accessible than ever before. “By her proclamation of the Gospel, [the Church] draws her hearers to receive and profess the faith, she prepares them for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error, and she incorporates them into Christ so that through love for him they grow to full maturity.”⁴

Pope St. John Paul II was the first to use the term “New Evangelization,” and in response to the question about what he meant by it, he said: “The commemoration of this half of the millennium of evangelization will achieve its full meaning, if as bishops, with your priests and faithful, you accept it as your commitment; a commitment, not of re-evangelization, but rather of a new evangelization; new in its ardour, methods and expression.”⁵

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, picking up the theme of evangelization, taught that our faith is not merely a program but rather an opening of the heart ... to a person: Jesus Christ.⁶ Then – and now – we have to think of new ways to evangelize and re-evangelize the world.

Even more recently, our Holy Father Francis has laid out a vision for the universal Church, building on the teachings of his predecessors: “I dream of a ‘missionary option,’ that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”⁷ Pope Francis has repeatedly urged everyone – clergy and laity alike – to leave the comfort of our homes, churches, rectories, etc., and imitate Jesus in seeking out the lost and bringing them the Good News of salvation.

Clearly, the Holy Spirit is moving us to return to our roots.

VII. WHAT DOES EVANGELIZATION LOOK LIKE TODAY?

There is a great deal of urgency here. Whereas in the early centuries after the resurrection, the people embraced the faith because it was completely new, most people today have already heard about Jesus and the Gospel. Some say that they have already tried Christianity, but now they are embracing a new faith – or, most likely, no faith at all. Thus it will be an even greater challenge to bring them back. However, the goal is not just to bring people back to church; it is to help them to find LIFE in Christ Jesus. We need not get caught up in the thinking that one needs to be eloquent or perfect before one evangelizes. No, this is something for every baptized person. We have the authority, the power and the commission to do this.

Evangelization, put simply, is a means to awaken in people’s hearts a love of God and an adherence to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What can we do to participate in Christ’s mission and continue his work of evangelization? I offer the following suggestions and guidelines. I am sure that you can think of more ideas as well.

Before going outward, remember: Evangelizers must first be evangelized. Learn as much as you can about our Catholic faith (by reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sacred Scriptures,

the writings of the saints, and the magisterial teachings of the Church). Ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten you and to deepen your relationship with God. Never cease to grow in the practice of the faith.

Pope Francis offers us practical advice as we strive to share our faith in the world: “You too need to see the entirety of your life as a mission. Try to do so by listening to God in prayer and recognizing the signs that he gives you. Always ask the Spirit what Jesus expects from you at every moment of your life and in every decision you must make so as to discern its place in the mission you have received. Allow the Spirit to forge in you the personal mystery that can reflect Jesus Christ in today’s world.”⁸

Celebrate the Mass and the other sacraments regularly. In the sacraments, God forms us as his people, strengthens and forgives us, and empowers us to be his witnesses in the world. Pray and ask for God’s help. Then you will take seriously the invitation given at the end of every Mass: “Go, and announce the Gospel of the Lord!” Make it your number one priority to practice the faith above all with your family. Pray the rosary together, go to Mass as a family and talk about the readings and the homily afterward, celebrate the liturgical seasons together and pray before meals and bedtime with your children.

Share the joy of the Gospel. Do not be afraid to give an account of yourself to others. Tell people what it means to you to be Catholic. (No one can argue with you over this since it is your personal experience). Start simply by establishing a friendship with someone. Walk with them and listen to them. Tell them about how you know the Lord and how much joy that gives to you.

Invite people to church or Bible study, or simply ask if you can pray with and for them. (Note: while it is good to invite someone to come to Mass, this may not be the best way to evangelize someone new. They may come to Mass, but because they are not familiar with it, they might become lost and thus turned off.) We cannot simply point out the way for others; we have to accompany them on the road as Jesus walks with us all.

Live your faith well as an example to others. Let people know that you practice your faith in your parish and in your home. When you encounter people who are negative or hostile to the Church – especially, these days, in comments and articles online – point out the benefits of believing and the good things that God is doing in his Church. Preach with your actions. Serve our neighbors in need, whether they are in prison, or are homeless, victims of natural disasters or crime, or simply without basic necessities to survive.

Be ready to articulate and defend the faith at work, in grocery stores, airports, schools and wherever people gather.

VIII. EVANGELIZING IN THE DIOCESE OF PENSACOLA-TALLAHASSEE

We are so blessed to be part of such a vibrant local church. Although we Catholics are a clear minority in NW Florida (less than five percent of the population), we are mighty! The seeds for the faith were sown by the Holy Spirit before the first missionaries came to this land. The Gospel took hold and grew through the witness and the martyrdom of the native peoples and immigrants, and it continued to grow through the perseverance of our ancestors. Missionaries, religious, and laypeople came to this land from across the oceans, bringing the message of salvation with them. Over time, the Church was organized, first as a mission within the (Arch)Dioceses of Spain,

Santiago (Cuba), New Orleans, Mobile (AL), and St. Augustine. Finally, in 1975, the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee was formed. From here, the Gospel will continue to go forth.

Although we must spread the Gospel everywhere, we have unique opportunities to evangelize to the many groups of people here in our diocesan boundaries. First of all, since our neighbors who are not Catholic comprise 95 percent of the population, we can say along with Jesus that, “The harvest is abundant!” (Mt 9:37) A good place to begin is by inviting everyone within our 18 counties to consider joining us in full communion with the Catholic Church. In addition, many, many people come to our area for the short- or long-term through the military or for vacations or seasonal living opportunities. We are blessed to welcome tens of thousands of students into our community every year at Florida State University, University of West Florida, Florida A&M University, and many other local colleges. Campus ministry has been and will continue to be an important point of evangelization. Finally, our brothers and sisters in the many prisons and jails in Northwest Florida look to us for support, prayer and a connection to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not an exhaustive list; it is meant only to highlight the specific opportunities that we have in our diocese to spread the Good News to our neighbors.

IX. MARY AND THE SAINTS WHO WILL GUIDE AND ASSIST US

We stand on the shoulders of giants. A great cloud of witnesses preceded us and are with us today. May the saints – officially recognized, as well as our ancestors who are surely with God in heaven – intercede for us. We especially call upon the following saints in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee:

St. Michael the Archangel (Primary patron of the diocese): Defender of the faith, conqueror of the devil and protector of the faithful.

St. Thomas More (Co-Patron of the Diocese): Married layperson, lawyer. Was passionate about defending and promoting the Catholic faith, even unto martyrdom.

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (Co-patron of the diocese): First citizen of the United States to be canonized and founded many schools and academies for the promotion of the Catholic faith.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux (Patroness of missionaries): Even though she remained in the convent for most of her religious life, she had a heart for evangelization, and therefore she encouraged many through her prayer and writings.

Servant of God Antonio Cuipa and Companions, Martyrs of La Florida: Native Americans and missionaries who embraced the faith and laid down their lives for the faith – right here in what is now our diocese. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” (Tertullian, 2nd century).

Servant of God Sr. Thea Bowman (Jackson, MS): Convert to Catholicism and religious sister, dedicated to sharing the joy of the Gospel – especially with her African-American sisters and brothers. Worked for racial harmony and inspired millions to embrace the faith and live it well.

St. Andrew Dũng-Lac and the Vietnamese Martyrs: One hundred seventeen missionaries, catechists, clerics and laypeople, who died for the faith in Vietnam.

St. Joseph: Faithful (earthly) father for Jesus and spouse of Mary. In this, the Year of St. Joseph, we call upon this great saint to inspire us to carry the Gospel to all nations.

Mary, the Mother of God: After receiving the news of the incarnation from the angel Gabriel, Mary went in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth and to share the good news of salvation. She followed Jesus faithfully, shared in his suffering, rejoiced in his resurrection and received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with the Apostles. Perhaps her words at the Wedding at Cana are most appropriate for us today, “Do whatever he tells you.” (John 2:5)

PRAYER

God our Father, you sent your Son, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to seek out and save the lost. Through his cross and resurrection, you have set us free. You sent the Holy Spirit as the first gift to believers, enabling us to preach and teach. Send us out into your vineyard so that more and more of your children can know you and make you known for your glory and our salvation. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

May God bless the Church that is in Pensacola-Tallahassee, and may each one of us embrace our Catholic faith and share it joyfully with our brothers and sisters!

Your Brother in Christ,

The Most Reverend William A. Wack, CSC
Bishop of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

November 6, 2021 – 46th anniversary of the establishment of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

Endnotes:

- 1) Pope St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Dec. 8, 1975 (#14). Full quote: “The Church exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of his death and glorious resurrection.”
- 2) *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission*, University of Mary Press, 2020, p. 13
- 3) Pope Francis, speech to the Roman Curia, Dec. 21, 2019
- 4) *Lumen Gentium*, 21 Nov. 1964, no. 17
- 5) Pope St. John Paul II: Discourse to the XIX Assembly of CELAM (as quoted in Olson, p. 15).
- 6) Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Dec. 25, 2005 (1). Full text: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”
- 7) Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Nov. 24, 2013, #27
- 8) Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate*, March 19, 2018, #23

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC.

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