

A Flourishing Apostolic Church

A Pastoral Letter from Bishop Edward C. Malesic



The Bishop's Crosier, or shepherd's staff.
Photo credit DM Productions



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).

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Part I: The Paschal Mystery

The Paschal Mystery – the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus – is at the very heart of our Catholic faith. Like the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery is not a problem to be solved; the Paschal Mystery solves us. Our entrance into Jesus' Paschal Mystery fills our lives with grace, depth, direction, meaning, satisfaction, and, ultimately, salvation. Our personal and communal participation in the suffering, death, and Resurrection of Jesus allows the Church to flourish, both as individual members and as a diocese.

As Jesus was preparing to enter into his Paschal Mystery, he told his disciples, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn. 12:24). Our Lord was speaking of himself, but he was also speaking to us about ourselves. He was telling us that there will be no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday, and no Good Friday without an Easter Sunday.

We Catholic Christians first enter into the Paschal Mystery by following Jesus down into the deep, sanctifying waters of Baptism. There, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we die to our old selves and then rise anew as beloved sons and daughters of the Father, joining the family of God, which we call the Church. This baptismal dive into the Paschal Mystery sets the pattern for our lives. The more we die to self, the more we live for Christ, and the more we find the abundant life we all seek. Catholic Christian living is not about a one-time conversion, but about a lifetime of conversions, of authentic growth in friendship with God. The daily rhythm of our dying-to-self and rising up to Christ prepares us for the ultimate moment when we will each have to face the reality of our own death, with the hope of our own resurrection from the dead to find our ultimate fulfillment as God's beloved children.

Dying to self is difficult. It means letting go. It means surrendering. And it often involves deep and painful suffering. Dying, letting go, surrendering, and enduring painful suffering faithfully do not come easy to us as human beings. In our fallen nature, we often cling to our own desires, our own dreams, our own plans, even if God has other and better and more fulfilling desires, dreams, and plans for us that we may not yet see. To trust that God is good and that he is not in competition with our freedom, joy, and happiness is often difficult, and at times may even seem impossible. Many of us may know that 'God is good' and that 'God is for us' and that 'God loves us' in our heads, but how many of us do not experience God's love in our hearts? How many of us today long for real experiential knowledge of God's love? Sometimes we feel abandoned by God. How many of us, especially during times of suffering and agony, think that God has left the room? All too often we conclude that we must fend for ourselves, because we think that if we don't take care of ourselves, no one else will take care of us, and no one else will make us happy.



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

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community of love. He made us with a natural desire to be close to him. We are made and wired for God, we are made for perfect communion with him, and we are made for perfect friendship with him (Gen. 1:27). What was lost in the fall of Adam and Eve, we have been seeking to find once again: perfect communion with God and each other. Jesus came to extend God's hand in friendship to us.

An increasing number of people today, if they believe in God at all, do not think of God as a friend. Many people perceive God as irrelevant, or as cold and distant, and perhaps as a larger projection of their own father or some disappointing authority figure in their life who may have been absent, abusive, unresponsive, or simply inadequate. We human beings often conclude from our own heartbreak experiences in this fallen world that we must fend for ourselves and heal ourselves, thinking that God lacks the will or the ability to help us, save us, or truly befriend us. Of course, these are lies, but they are easy to believe, especially if our experiences of love have been hurtful.

Jesus tells us, "I have called you friends" (Jn. 15:14). The reason Jesus was willing to endure the Cross of Calvary was that he desired to be in complete communion with us. He desired deep friendship with us, and he was willing to die to make it so. True love and true friendship are known by their willingness to make sacrifices for the other, to put the other first, and to will the good of the other. A true friend is someone who has seen you at your very worst and loves you anyway. A true friend is one who is even willing to die so that you may live. And that's the kind of friend we have in Jesus. The love of Jesus is lavish, beyond our imagination. Jesus' love is transformative.

Who of us doesn't appreciate the listening ear of a good friend? Who of us doesn't desire to be seen, known, and loved as we are, "warts and all," as they say? Who of us doesn't desire a friendship that never fails, that never ends, that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7)? Who of us doesn't simply enjoy being in the presence of one who loves us? And isn't it wonderful to know and love someone so well that, at times, just being together is enough and no words need to be spoken? My friends, this is the kind of friendship that God offers to us and desires to share with us in Jesus.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is constantly befriending humanity, showing that he did not come to condemn us, but to save us. He meets people who are hungry, and he gives them food (Mt.14:13–21). He meets people who are thirsty and gives them something to drink (Jn. 4:7–42). He meets people in their blindness and allows them to see (Jn. 9:1–7). He meets people in their deafness and allows them to hear (Mk. 7:31–37). He meets people in their paralysis and allows them to walk (Mk. 2:1–12). He meets dead people and brings them back to life (Mk. 5:21–43). He meets sinners, and he heals them with his mercy (Jn. 8:1–11).



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

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with each other as Missionary Disciples, people who have been blessed and sent out with the Good News of Jesus, the Savior. Plunging deeper into the Paschal Mystery, we recognize that authentic change of heart can be painful as we change direction from doing things our way to doing things God's way, but the Lord is with us and promises good. Lavish love does not disappoint.

Part III: Becoming Missionary Disciples

When we hear the word “missionary,” perhaps we think of a visiting priest at Mass who offers an appeal on behalf of impoverished peoples living in other countries. Here in the diocese of Cleveland, when we hear the word “missionary,” many of us may think of our own Sr. Dorothy Kazel, OSU, and Jean Donovan, martyrs who, in 1980, were brutally murdered because they took the side of the poor in El Salvador; or we think of the many priests, religious, and lay people who have faithfully served there over the years from Northeast Ohio, or those who are serving in the Archdiocese of San Salvador today. We are grateful for these missionaries, and our relationship with our Salvadoran mission has been a true gift to our diocese for decades. However, Pope Francis has reminded us that “in virtue of their baptism, all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples” (EG, 120). In other words, each baptized person is not only called to follow Jesus as a disciple, but to take Jesus into the world as a missionary. Hence, every Catholic is called to be a missionary disciple, not just those who serve in El Salvador or other foreign lands but all of us within the context of our own communities.

Although Pope Francis’ use of the term missionary disciple is new, the concept goes back to the Great Commission of Jesus, who instructed his apostles: “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). Our Holy Father writes, “Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (EG, 120).

Many Catholics are uncomfortable with being called missionary disciples or being asked to share their faith with others as evangelizers, because, for many of us, it was thought to be enough to simply go to Mass and be a good person. The clergy, religious, and professional lay leaders would take care of sharing the faith with others. The Second Vatican Council reminded us, “It is the special vocation of the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will” (LG, 31). In many ways, it is this very approach of deferring our missionary responsibility to others that has brought us where we are today, with less than twenty-five percent of Catholics attending Mass on weekends, and alarmingly lower



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

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to remember our baptism often and recall daily that God looks upon us as his beloved sons and daughters and takes great delight in us (Is. 62:4).

Unlike Baptism, which can only be celebrated once, Eucharist and Reconciliation are two sacraments that can be celebrated often. At the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Jesus comes to us under the signs of bread and wine. He is truly present there. He wants to feed us with his very life. He gives himself to us, once again, as a sacrifice of love for us. And, at the Mass, we do our best to give ourselves to him in return. In Confession, Jesus uses his priest to be an instrument of love and forgiveness. He wants you to hear with your own ears, “I absolve you from your sins.” It is for these reasons that every Catholic in the Diocese of Cleveland should be participating in Mass each Sunday and on Holy Days of obligation, as well as going to Confession at least once a year to confess serious sins. That is the minimum. But why settle for the minimum when we can do so much more? Strive for more in your spiritual life. Strive for that deep and personal relationship that Jesus wants to have with you. If you are reading this and are not yet going regularly to Sunday Mass, or if you haven’t been to Confession in a while, I encourage you, “Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near” (Is. 55:6).

Both the Eucharist and Reconciliation are sacraments of mercy. They are real places where God makes his love known to us in an authentic, tangible, and sacramental way. They are celebrations that remind us that God is good, that he loves us, that he desires to heal us and befriend us. Adding a daily Mass during the week or going to Confession more regularly can be transformative, so I invite you to consider frequenting the Sacraments of Confession and Eucharist more often than perhaps you have in the past. Again, more time with Jesus makes us more like Jesus, which means that we’ll be better able to love like him, listen like him, forgive like him, and serve like him. This is what makes us a better Church together.

Have you ever noticed that some couples who have been married for a long time begin to look like each other? I notice it every summer at the marriage anniversary Mass at the cathedral. That a husband and wife begin to look more like each other after fifty years of marriage is a wonderful image for us to consider. In the same way, the more time we spend with Jesus, particularly in the celebration of Eucharist and Reconciliation, the more we begin to look like him, which means that when people see us, they also see Jesus. This is the point of the sacramental life: to become who and what we receive. The sacraments make us who we are because the sacraments allow us to have authentic encounters with God himself and then we are charged to “go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” to the world.



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

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seem uncomfortable to you, remember that dying to self is not often comfortable, but the results might be very life-giving. If nothing else, just to be together as fellow believers in a small and more personal group is a good thing.

It frequently happens that people experience conversion at a retreat, a conference, or at a camp. Retreats, conferences, and camps offer people everything we have mentioned so far: silence, sacraments, community, small faith-sharing groups, and distance from the outside world to encounter God. I would like to encourage many more opportunities for these kinds of experiences in the Diocese of Cleveland for all Catholics, from the daily Mass-goer to the non-active Catholic, and everyone in between. It is through these experiences that people find community and space where they can share their faith, their joys, their sorrows, their pains, and their hopes, and walk with others in the sacramental life in true Christian friendship.

Our world is more digitally connected than ever, yet the data tells us that people are also lonelier than ever, especially our young people. The remedy to this loneliness is authentic Christian friendship and community. I encourage and support creating retreat opportunities, conferences, and camps for as many people as possible. This would allow all sorts of people to encounter the deep, healing love of Jesus and the comfort of his Church, who is both Mother and Teacher.

iv: Knowing and Telling One’s Own Story

The great story of our Catholic faith is that the God who created the universe became human, was born of the Virgin, and became like us in all things but sin. He saved us from sin by dying on a cross and then rising from the dead, never to die again. It’s the Paschal Mystery, the focus of the first section of this letter. That story is the context and backdrop against which we understand the story of our lives and find meaning and redemption.

St. Athanasius said, “God became man so that man might become God.” Of course, we will never be God, in the strictest sense, but we are meant to be like God. In the eastern-rite Christian churches it’s called theosis; in the West we call it becoming a saint, or becoming holy. God became human so that we humans can become God-like, or holy, or saints who have been perfected by God. Jesus said it this way: “So be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). Jesus came as one of us to make us one with God.

That’s the point. God’s story of saving us by way of his Incarnation, suffering, death, and Resurrection is not simply something that happened in history to others. It has happened to us. Every time we gather at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, or celebrate any sacrament, pray with Scripture, take a contemplative walk, pray the rosary, or rest in contemplative prayer, we are able to allow the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ to enter into the mystery of our lives, and to allow the mystery of our lives to unite with the mystery of Jesus. He gave himself to us out of love, and we



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

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with suffering and death, it ends with the glory of life renewed and resurrected.

Have you ever noticed that the times in our lives when we grow the most, when we learn the most, and when we become more of who God made us to be are almost always preceded by some difficult time – some pain, sorrow, suffering, heartache, or loss? That's the Good Friday experience. When we stay faithful through those Good Friday experiences and trust that the Lord will raise us from the dead as he raised Jesus on Easter Sunday, we are able to experience the power of his Resurrection in our own lives. This leads us to another set of questions: When did God save me from despair? When did God show me how much he loves me? When did God light my way in the darkness? When did I know my sins were forgiven? When did I know that Jesus was speaking to my heart and really present to me? When did my dying lead me to rising?

The ability to give personal witness or testimony to God's action in our lives is critical to the health of the Church of Cleveland. Many people may not be convinced of Jesus' Paschal Mystery presented as an abstract concept, as it seems too far removed from their life experience. Jesus died and rose again; all well and good. But what does that mean for me? Well, if we follow Jesus, we will also rise again. In fact, without Jesus, we will never rise up from the grave.

We find that we do need a savior, after all!

Sharing your own spiritual experiences of God's action in your life and telling of the new life you received after intentionally committing yourself to discipleship with Jesus invites others to believe that God is real, that God is good, that God is close, and that Jesus is still very much alive and at work healing, redeeming, loving, and saving his people.

What is your story? What has God done in your life? How has your life changed because of your participation in the life of the Catholic Church? How have the Scriptures illuminated your story? How have the sacraments healed you and nourished you? In what way have you come to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass? Can you name a moment when you were one way and then were different in a much better way (Lk. 8:2-3)? How has being part of a Christian community of faith enriched your life? If you have never done so, I invite you to take the time to sit with these questions and prayerfully answer them. One of the dismissals at Mass is "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." In knowing your story, you will have one more way to glorify the Lord by sharing with others all that he has done for you in your one, unique, and unrepeatable life as a missionary disciple.

Part IV: The Apostolic Parish: Worship. Evangelize. Serve.

When I visit parishes and celebrate Mass with the parishioners, I often tell them that a healthy parish does three things well: The people worship God with intensity. The people hear



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

shape the deanery pastoral plans. It is my hope that this structure will facilitate the pastoral care of our priests and allow for a better and more just distribution of resources so that the sacraments will be celebrated, the Gospel will be authentically proclaimed with love, and Christian service will be extended in a manner that will allow our parishes to flourish as families of faith that are gathered around the altar table of the parish church and other places of worship.

Worship

Jesus said, summing up our duties to God, that the first and greatest commandment is this: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37). When confronted by the devil in the desert, he said, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Mt. 4:10). A healthy parish rejects false worship in order to give right worship and praise to God alone. It is a parish that prays to God from the heart, and has liturgies directed to God that inspire people to know that they are loved by God. Good worship does what the Church intends in her rituals, following the given norms of celebrating sacraments and sacramentals. Authentic worship instills a desire to live our lives for God and to fulfill the vocations to which God calls us, whether ordained or laity. It is a parish that fosters both personal and communal prayer, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the veneration of saints, various devotional practices such as the Rosary, and the contemplation of all things holy. A parish centered on good worship keeps its sacred places well-maintained and inspirational. A parish that worships God above all else is a parish that is living the first and greatest commandment.

Attentiveness to quality liturgy facilitates the full, active, and conscious participation of God’s people in worthy worship. For this reason, I would like each parish and each deanery to consider weekend and daily Mass schedules. It may be that a given parish once needed five weekend Masses, but now could have a fuller church and better liturgies with two or three weekend Masses. In a given deanery it will be important to determine the Mass times for neighboring parishes. We shouldn’t see other parishes as competitors, but as parts of the same body, the Body of Christ. This is especially true of the daily Mass schedule. It would be wonderful if parishes within deaneries worked together to ensure that there are daily Masses available early in the morning, later in the morning, midday, and evening at a variety of parishes. Accessible Mass times and celebrations with larger assemblies will attract more who desire to experience what our beautiful worship has to offer.

I would also like each parish to consider when it offers the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Thirty minutes on a Saturday afternoon is often inadequate. Perhaps each deanery could designate



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

“ **What motivates us is that we have met the living Christ.
We have come to know his love for us.** ”

for those looking to deepen their relationship with God. We announce this message to our families and our communities. We seek to hear it ourselves so that we might grow in faith. We ask for courage to proclaim Christ without fear of rejection, even though rejections certainly come. St. Paul wrote to Timothy, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:1–2). These words are not only for Timothy, but for all of us. Let’s all of us be ambassadors of Jesus Christ!

Let’s ask ourselves how we can get the message of Jesus and his Gospel out into our communities in a way that is authentic, orthodox, and inviting. How can we train ourselves and others to be missionary disciples, knowing our faith and explaining it in ways that are understandable, true, and appealing?

It is true that we live in an age saturated by screens and information, and that a majority of young people spend a great deal of time on the internet and social media. We must ask ourselves, are our parishes present online? Are we reaching out to our parishioners and potential parishioners online with the Gospel message? Do we have a social media presence that is filled with hope and joy? Are our websites attractive and easy to navigate? Can people easily find us and our Mass times? Can they easily identify what is offered for visitors and inquirers? Can they find a community to meet in person? Have we consulted our younger parishioners to ask for their help as “digital natives” in this regard? If not, it is time we begin. These are tangible ways we live out our call to be missionary disciples.

We will do this better together than alone. I would like each deanery to consider its ministries. The parishes within the deaneries should work toward collaborating and sharing resources, thus making the most of what the Lord has provided. For example, if one or two parishes in the deanery are excellent at family programming, or youth ministry, or have services for people with special needs, consider making those parishes the hubs for those ministries. If other parishes have excellent marriage preparation, marriage enrichment, or senior ministry, or perhaps outreach to those on the periphery, then designate those parishes as the hubs for these ministries. How can we incorporate the best practices, those that we can all learn from, to proclaim Jesus to our families, communities, co-workers, and friends?

We can think of the Church, our diocese, or our parish as a band, a choir, or an orchestra; and in *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis invites us all to ‘play’ together in a missionary key. The Holy Father explains, “Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way.’ I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (EG, 33).



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

“For the sake of our salvation, it is imperative that we serve others out of love.”

countless missions and apostolates to be lived out, and I am asking each of you to prayerfully consider where the Lord is sending you on mission to serve others here in our Diocese of Cleveland.

The Parish: The Church's Field Hospital

We sometimes come to Mass worn, weary, and even broken. Our diocesan synod listening sessions reported that many are struggling and looking for relief in varying degrees. That relief is found in our worship. The proclamation of the Word and the nourishment of the Eucharist refresh and refocus us. They change our vision and perspective. We see the world as Jesus sees it, and our hearts break at the suffering around us. In this breaking, room is made for the Holy Spirit to enter into our lives and grant his many gifts so that we may wisely discern how to take the simple, daily activities of our lives and infuse them with apostolic vigor and joy. Thus nourished, we are missioned to spread the Gospel, to tell our story through Christ's story, to become who and what we receive. This is how we immerse ourselves in the Paschal Mystery and how the Paschal Mystery immerses itself into us.

Pope Francis has challenged us to see our Church as a “field hospital.” This powerful analogy invites us to consider the different roles we all play in our beloved Church and in our parishes. Having reflected on the Paschal Mystery, on Christ's lavish love for us, and on our calling as missionary disciples, I offer some specific strategies for all who read this letter:

- **Pastors** – you are charged to envision your role not only as caring for souls, but as encouraging the mission of those souls to transform the world within their individual reach: in the workplace, the gym, the grocery store, the home, their schools, in places where life happens. Celebrate sacramental ministry to the best of your ability, collaborate within your deanery, engage in the greater community, and develop structures within the parish so that, with God's grace, the laity are formed, sent out, and supported in exercising their baptismal call. Encourage the spiritual development of your flock through worthy worship, formation of small groups, and provision of accessible opportunities to celebrate the sacraments. Evangelize the evangelists with the Good News so that they can take it out to others. Encourage your parishioners to serve the Lord who is found in those most in need.
- **Deans** – work diligently with your brother priests to care for each other, to assist with oversight and care of parishes, and to support pastoral planning within the deanery in a manner that empowers the missionary work of the people. In your role, you will encounter the wounds of our Church, but there you will find the Lord. His wounds were his strength and, likewise, our wounds are our greatest asset. Speak truth among



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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.

Yours is a mission to live in such a way that when others encounter you, they encounter Christ.

All of our roles are interdependent and are broader than just creating parishes with lots of activity. In order for parishes to be the home base, sending people on mission, of course they must have the operational structure – the budgets, personnel, programs, and pastoral plans. But they must be directed toward worship, evangelization, and service to those in need. We must do this with the apostolic vigor of St. Paul, who preached Christ crucified, and invited others into the challenging, adventurous life of discipleship. Jesus' lavish love for us has transformed us; our new life in Christ should animate everything we do. Don't minimize the power of his Presence, be bold in proclaiming the Gospel, and give thanks for the saving power of his love, mercy, and the sacramental life he shares with us.

For a glossary of terms and citations, please visit dioceseofcleveland.org



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.

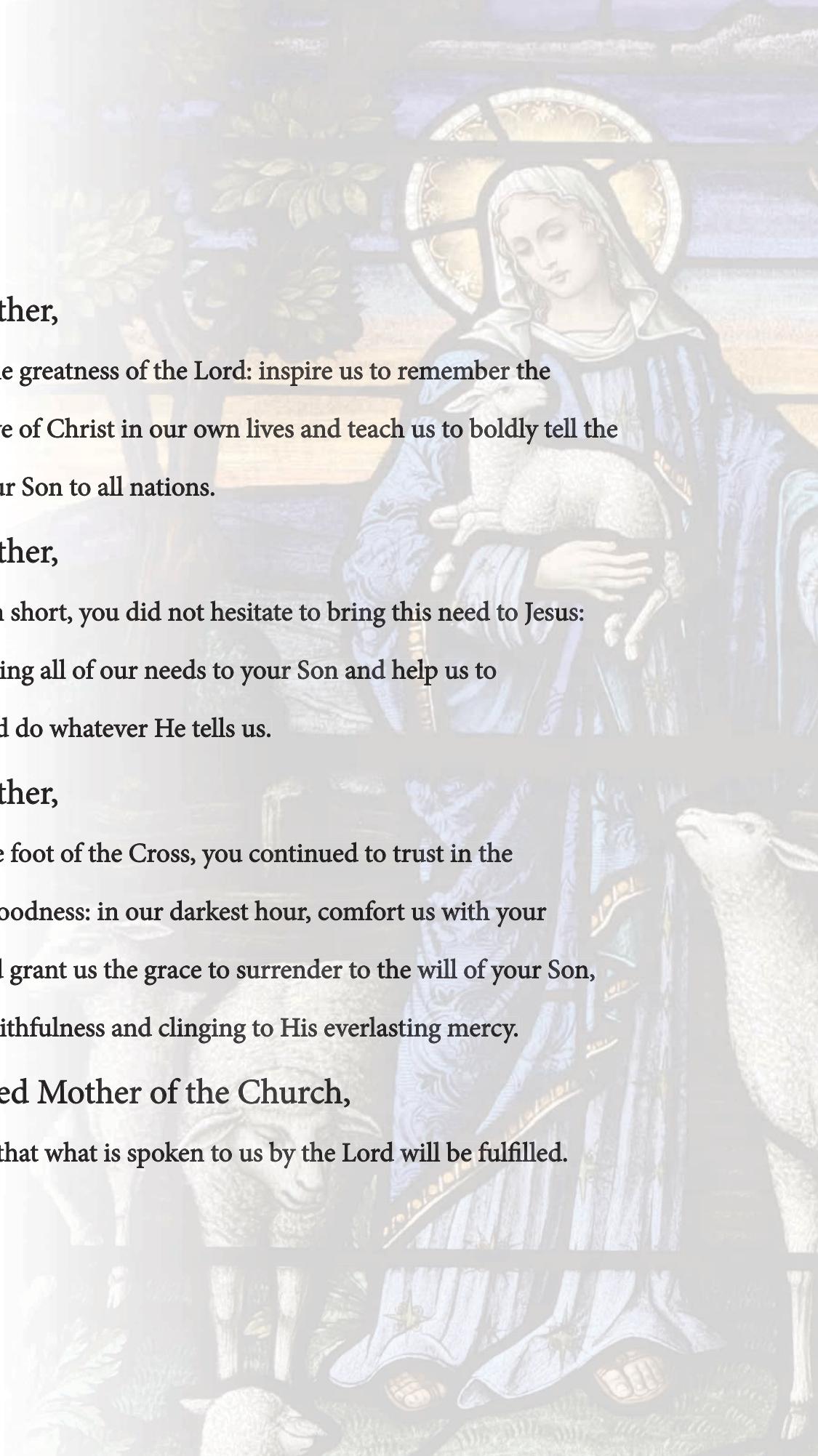
May God bless you and those you love.

Your Brother in Christ,

+Edward C. Malesic

Most Rev. Edward C. Malesic, JCL

Bishop of Cleveland



O Blessed Mother,

you proclaimed the greatness of the Lord: inspire us to remember the transformative love of Christ in our own lives and teach us to boldly tell the Good News of your Son to all nations.

O Blessed Mother,

when the wine ran short, you did not hesitate to bring this need to Jesus: we ask that you bring all of our needs to your Son and help us to hear His Word and do whatever He tells us.

O Blessed Mother,

as you stood at the foot of the Cross, you continued to trust in the Lord's abundant goodness: in our darkest hour, comfort us with your maternal love, and grant us the grace to surrender to the will of your Son, believing in His faithfulness and clinging to His everlasting mercy.

O Mary, Blessed Mother of the Church,

help us to believe that what is spoken to us by the Lord will be fulfilled.

“ Serve the Lord with Gladness
~ Bishop’s Motto ”

