

OUR PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE



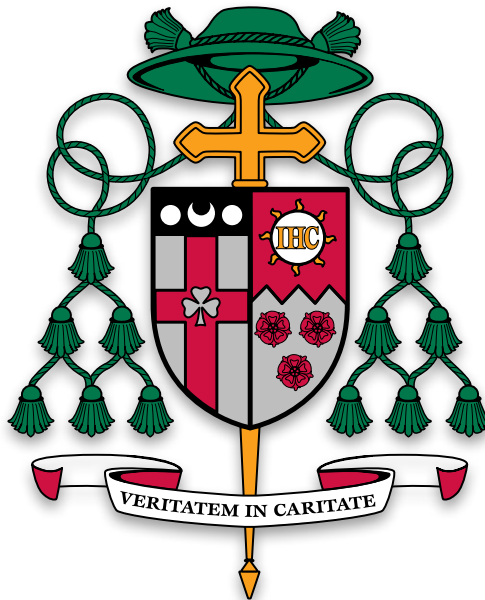
A Pastoral Letter for the Diocesan Marian Year

Most Reverend Kevin C. Rhoades, Bishop of Harrisburg



*Bishop Kevin C.
Rhoades by the
cathedra at
Saint Patrick
Cathedral
in Harrisburg.*

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Cover photo: A star trail over the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Conewago at the new moon near the summer solstice, June 22, 2009. The basilica is the oldest church in the nation built entirely of stone and is the first church in America to be dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Pope John XXIII raised the church to the rank of minor basilica July 11, 1962.

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DEAR BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST,

Greetings in the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ! As we are soon to begin a Diocesan Marian Year, I wish to share with you some reflections for your prayerful meditation during this special year of grace. Interspersed with these reflections are some prayers and images that will hopefully assist you as you ponder the message I share with you.

Several months ago, when announcing the Diocesan Marian Year and its schedule, I communicated the reason or purpose for such a year: very simply, *to lead us ever closer to Jesus through deeper devotion to Mary*. I called attention to the mystery of Mary who, under the title of her Assumption, is the secondary patroness of the Diocese of Harrisburg. Reflecting on the mystery of Mary's Assumption leads us to better understand the plan of divine providence for humanity. We see that because Mary is with God, she is very close to each one of us, hears our prayers, and shows us the path to heaven. We are a pilgrim people, journeying towards God, where Christ and, after Him, Mary, have preceded us. We learn from her to find our joy in Christ our Savior.

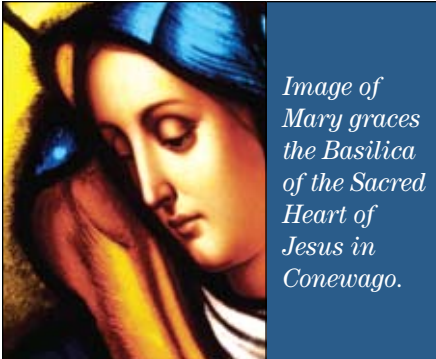


Several thousand people participate in the diocesan Eucharistic Procession in Adams County in October 2005.

I. A PILGRIM PEOPLE – THE PILGRIM CHURCH

Many of you are familiar with the famous Marian prayer, the *Hail Holy Queen (Salve Regina)*. We recite this medieval anthem to Our Lady at the end of every rosary. It is sung in Latin chant by our priests on various occasions. It is commonly the last prayer of the day for priests and all those who say Night Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours.

Let us reflect on this prayer which has been prayed by millions of Catholics for 900 years.



*Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,
our life, our sweetness, and our hope.
To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve.
To thee do we send up our sighs,
mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.
Turn then, most gracious advocate,
thine eyes of mercy toward us,
and after this our exile, show unto us
the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.*

In many ways, this prayer's words may seem strange to our contemporaries in the world today. It speaks of the world as a *valley of tears*. Some will frown on this description, considering it too pessimistic. Yet how many of the earth's inhabitants are indeed *mourning and weeping*, worn down by life's troubles, oppressed by suffering and persecution, poverty and disease, addictions and fears! How many suffer loneliness, grief, anxiety, and depression! They have no trouble recognizing themselves as *mourning and weeping in this valley of tears*. All of us, at one time or another in our life, for brief or long periods, find ourselves experiencing life in this world as truly a *valley of tears*. So we turn to Mary, *our life, our sweetness, and our hope* to console us for she is our *mother of mercy* who shows us the merciful love of her Son Jesus.

The *Salve Regina* speaks of our life on earth as an *exile*. Some have forgotten this truth. Some decades ago, such language was sharply criticized, especially under the influence of the Marxist critique of Christianity as a religion which preached *escape or flight from the world* ("*fuga mundi*"). In response to this critique, there was a reaction among some Christians who insisted that we must leave behind such descriptions of life in this world as an exile and focus more on bettering this world. There was much less talk about the afterlife and the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. There was certainly less talk about purgatory, the final purification of those destined for heaven. This is not to say that people no longer believed in heaven. In fact, many just came to presume that they would get there. The particular and final judgments became largely ignored. Hell and purgatory were forgotten or denied, and heaven was taken for granted. The virtue of hope became replaced by the sin of presumption.

But what about the Marxist critique? Does the consideration of our life on this earth as an exile really lead to the neglect of our duties to others on earth or to the neglect of the earth itself? Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the current Archbishop of Vienna, gives a convincing answer:

This look of longing toward the heavenly homeland is not an escape from our earthly responsibilities. On the contrary, hope for heaven, for full communion with Christ 'and all the angels and saints', is the very motor, the driving force, of Christian engagement in this world. Christian hope for the coming of God's Kingdom asks for both things from God: that his Kingdom may come in glory... and that his Kingdom may begin already here on earth (Loving the Church, p. 179).

The obvious corollary to the truth that our life on earth is an exile is that our true and lasting home is heaven. Sacred Scripture gives abundant testimony to this truth. It is foreshadowed in the Old Testament where the people of God journeyed in the Exodus to the Promised Land. Later in their history, they were uprooted from their homeland and transported to exile in Babylon. How many of the psalms recount the people's longing to escape their exile in a foreign land and return to Jerusalem, their true home! For the Church, the new people of God, our longing is for the new Jerusalem, our heavenly homeland.

It is important to see our life on earth as a pilgrimage to heaven, to take seriously the teaching of Jesus that we are in the world but are not to be of the world.

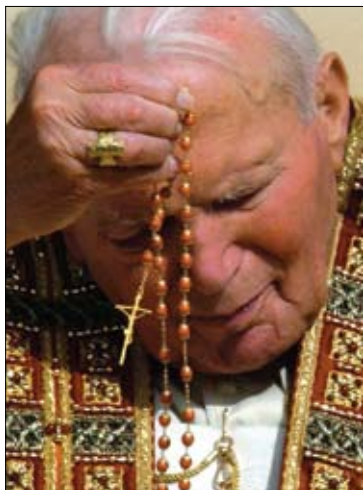
It is important to see our life on earth as a pilgrimage to heaven, to take seriously the teaching of Jesus that we are *in the world* but are not to be *of the world*. In speaking to the disciples of His imminent departure from this world, Jesus assured them that He was going to prepare a place for them in His Father's house (cf. *John* 14:2-3). These words are also addressed to us who believe in Him. They are words that give us hope and consolation, particularly when we ourselves might face serious illness, old age, or approaching death or when we experience the death of a loved one who has followed Christ.

Saint Paul often reminded the communities he founded to recognize their pilgrim status on earth and to hope for heaven. It is clear that Saint Paul considered the goal of his life to be with Christ in heaven. He told the early Christians: *Our home is in heaven (Philippians 3:20)*. And he wrote about his own desire to live forever with Christ in heaven: *My desire is to depart and to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23)*. Saint Paul yearned to be in heaven with Christ, yet he did not shirk his earthly mission. This yearning for heaven did not diminish his apostolic zeal in this life. Instead, it increased it! His desire to be with Christ forever was the driving force that animated his incredible missionary work and urged him always to do more for Christ and His Gospel. It is this desire that can motivate us to fulfill our earthly responsibilities, to live life to the full, to obey God's commandments, to do good works, to be faithful to our vocation, and to serve the Lord with dedication and love.

Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians: *If... you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God (Colossians 3:1)*. When we follow this counsel, we are not less committed to building a better world. Quite the contrary! When we seek the things that are above, we grow in virtue. As the Second Vatican Council taught: *In their pilgrimage to the heavenly city Christians are to seek and relish the things that are above: this involves not a lesser, but a greater commitment to working with all people to build a world that is more human (Gaudium et spes 57)*.

While on earth, we should also consider the Church our home. The Church is not merely an earthly reality. It is also a spiritual community, *endowed with heavenly riches (cf. Lumen Gentium 8)*. As we, individual Christians, are on pilgrimage, so is the whole community. The Church is a pilgrim Church. Quoting Saint Augustine, the Second Vatican Council stated: *The Church, 'like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God,' announcing the cross and death of the Lord until he comes (Lumen Gentium 8)*.

When we consider our membership in the Church, it is good to recall the words of Saint Paul to the Ephesians, words that help us to understand our identity: *So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22)*.

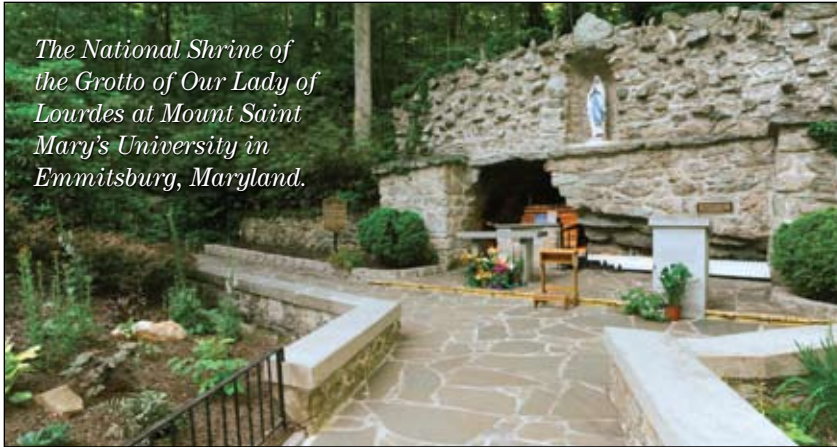


CNS/CATHOLIC PRESS PHOTO

Pope John Paul II prays the rosary at the Sanctuary of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Holy Rosary in the center of Pompeii, Italy, in October 2003.

Fifteen years ago, in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Pope John Paul II wrote: *The whole of the Christian life is like a great 'pilgrimage to the house of the Father', whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the 'prodigal son' (cf. Luke 15:11-32), we discover anew each day. This pilgrimage takes place in the heart of each person, extends to the believing community and then reaches to the whole of humanity (Tertio millennio adveniente 49)*. Before he died, Pope John Paul was profoundly aware that his earthly pilgrimage was coming to an end. On the last day of his life (April 2, 2005), the vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday, he was heard to say: *Let me go to the house of the Father*. He lived his life on earth as a pilgrimage to the house of the Father, to heaven. Pope John Paul served the Church until the very end. He taught all of us how to live and how to die: in the light of faith and with hope in Christ. He also taught us to walk this journey with Mary always at our side as *our life, our sweetness, and our hope*.

We will begin and end our Diocesan Marian Year celebration with pilgrimages. On October 24th, 2009, we will travel on pilgrimage to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. There, at the preeminent Marian shrine of the United States, we will open our Marian year. On October 2nd, 2010, we will travel on pilgrimage to the National Shrine of the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes at Mount Saint Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. There, at the oldest Lourdes shrine in our country, we will close our Marian year. These pilgrimages are to remind us that our Christian life is a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to our Father's house, with Mary as our companion on the way.



It is the final goal of our life's pilgrimage that gives meaning and value to our earthly life. It is what inspires us to work for good and to persevere in living out our baptismal promises every day. That goal is our Father's house, heaven. *Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of*

the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness: communion of life and love with the Most Holy Trinity, with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] 1024).

We live and act in this world with our eyes fixed on heaven, on being with Christ forever in His Kingdom. In this life, we are to bear witness to His life, death, and resurrection. This is the greatest contribution we can ever make to our society and our world, being a leaven for the growth of God's Kingdom on earth. We do so by lives of faith, hope, and charity. We seek to overcome evil with good. We strive to practice the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. We do not flee from the world or our earthly responsibilities. Instead, we seek to transform the world with the power of love, God's love, the love that brings reconciliation and true peace. We cannot do this by our own power. We act with the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. It is the grace of God that enables and empowers us to serve the building of His Kingdom on earth.

It is primarily from the Holy Eucharist that we receive the strength and energy we need to live our Christian vocation in the world. It is the Eucharistic sacrifice that educates us in self-giving love. The Holy Eucharist is the food for our earthly journey and the pledge of our future glory. Let us never separate ourselves from Christ who is present for us in an amazing way in this Holy Sacrament!

We are reminded of the goal of our earthly pilgrimage every time we meditate on the mystery of Mary's Assumption. Pope Benedict XVI has said that Mary helps us *not to forget that here on earth we are only passing through*. She teaches us *to prepare ourselves to encounter Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of the Father* (Angelus, August 12, 2007). She is already with her divine Son, having been assumed body and soul into heaven when the course of her earthly life was finished. She has preceded us as the first creature to be fully glorified in heaven, an anticipation of the fullness of joy promised to her Son's disciples through the resurrection of the body.

Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Mother of the Redeemer*, wrote about Mary's presence in the pilgrim Church from its very beginning on the day of Pentecost. She was present at the very dawn of the Church, united in mind and heart with the disciples at prayer in the upper room, awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. *She was present among them as an exceptional witness to the mystery of Christ (Redemptoris mater 27).*

The Blessed Virgin Mary, assumed body and soul into heaven, is a sign of true hope and comfort for us on our pilgrim journey to heaven. She lovingly accompanies us on our pilgrimage to our true home in heaven.

Through the ages, she is with the Church and with each of us, her spiritual children, on our pilgrimage through life. She is with us in prayer, as she was with the apostles and disciples in the upper room. She is with us in our daily activities. She is with us as our mother and our model. She accompanies us throughout our lives with her maternal love. The loving Mother of the Redeemer is also the loving Mother of the redeemed, the Mother of the Church. Jesus says to us as He said to Saint John from the cross: *Behold your mother*.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has spoken often of Mary's nearness to us. *After being taken up into Heaven, Mary did not distance herself from us but continues to be even closer to us and her light shines on our lives and on the history of all humanity. Attracted by the heavenly brightness of the Mother of the Redeemer, let us turn with trust to the One who looks upon us and protects us from on high. We all need her help and comfort to face the trials and challenges of daily life; we need to feel that she is our mother and sister in the concrete situations of our lives. And so that we too may one day be able to share in her same destiny, let us imitate her now in her meek following of Christ and her generous service to the brethren. This is the only way to have a foretaste, already on our earthly pilgrimage, of the joy and peace which those who reach the immortal destination of Paradise live to the full* (Angelus, August 15, 2007).

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Artistic depiction of the Assumption from Prince of Peace— Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church in Steelton.

*Almighty everlasting God,
who assumed the Immaculate Virgin Mary,
the Mother of your Son, body and soul into the
glory of heaven, grant, we pray,
that, always intent on the things that are above,
we may be worthy to share in her glory.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the
Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.
(Collect of Mass on the Solemnity of the Assumption)*

II. A PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH

As baptized Christians, our life is a pilgrimage of faith. This journey of faith began at our baptism, when we received the gift of sanctifying grace, enabling us to believe in God (cf. CCC 1266). *Baptism is the sacrament of faith, the sacramental entry into the life of faith*, a faith that needs to grow and mature throughout our lives (cf. CCC 1236, 1253-1255). *Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by Him* (CCC 153). It is only possible by grace, but also requires our free cooperation. Without faith, we would know nothing of heaven and not even desire it.

Indeed, faith is the virtue that gives meaning and purpose to our life's journey and helps us *taste in advance the light of the beatific vision, the goal of our journey here below* (CCC 163). As Saint Paul wrote, *we walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5:7) while on earth.

Since faith is a gift of God, it is only by God's grace that we can believe. It thus has a supernatural character. God inwardly draws us to Himself and enables us to base our life on His divine word. At the same time, we are free to accept or reject the gift of faith. Faith involves our human freedom, itself a gift from our loving Creator. We receive the interior invitation of grace to embrace God's word, His revelation. A true act of faith involves both our intellect and our will. Faith means we accept God's teaching and assent to that teaching with our intellect. It also means we accept God Himself and dedicate ourselves to Him in love and obedience. Faith is both an assent of the intellect and a consent of the will.

One of the wonderful contributions of the Catholic Church has been its intellectual tradition. We recognize the value and importance of human reason, the pursuit of knowledge, and the harmony between reason and faith. We believe that both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God. Saint Thomas Aquinas, who recognized this harmony between faith and reason, had a great passion for truth. With great insight, he expounded on the reasonableness of our faith and used reason to explore the mysteries of faith. Pope John Paul II wrote an entire encyclical on

faith and reason. He began with these words: *Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves* (introductory paragraph of *Fides et ratio*).



Statue of Christ from Saint Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg.

Our Christian faith is ultimately about faith in a Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the definitive revelation of God. It is what theologians call *Christocentric*, centered on the mystery of Christ, the Word made flesh. The person of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of our faith. It is Jesus who reveals the Father to us, who sends us the Holy Spirit, and who offers us the gift of salvation. It is in Him that God has saved us. We can only be saved by sharing in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical, *God Is Love (Deus caritas est)*, that the heart of the Christian faith is expressed in these words from the First Letter of Saint John: *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him* (1 John 4:16). In this same verse, Saint John writes: *we have come to believe in God's love*. According to the Holy Father, it is in these words that we arrive at the fundamental decision of our life. The Pope thus explains that *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*. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should... have eternal life"* (3:16). This is truly the core of our faith!

The person of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of our faith. It is Jesus who reveals the Father to us, who sends us the Holy Spirit, and who offers us the gift of salvation.

We who are followers of Christ are on a pilgrimage of faith. We look beyond this world and even beyond death, living (as the liturgy reminds us) *in joyful hope of the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ*. We live in time, yet we are on pilgrimage towards eternity. We are on our way to meet the Risen Christ. Our faith is necessarily linked to hope, just as it is necessarily linked to charity.

The choice of faith, a truly living faith, in its two dimensions (assent of the intellect and consent of the will) seems to be more challenging today. Why is this? Why do fewer people truly practice their faith? Why do so many who have received the gift of faith no longer give it priority in their lives? There have been numerous surveys and polls with a variety of responses and results.

Undoubtedly, we are living in a culture and a society in which faith, and particularly the Catholic faith, is increasingly criticized or marginalized. Often some in the secular media seem to delight in harsh, unfair and excessive criticism of the Church and her teachings. We live in an increasingly secularized society whose values are often antithetical to those of the Gospel. I believe that today we need the Holy Spirit's gift of courage to live our Catholic faith fully and authentically. Sadly, too many Christians are being formed, perhaps unwittingly, more by popular media and our secularized culture than by the truths of the Gospel handed on to us from the apostles. We need to hear anew the counsel of Saint Paul to the Romans: *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).*

In his address to the U.S. bishops last year in Washington, D.C., Pope Benedict said the following to us: *While it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior. Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death? Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.* I believe the Holy Father truly understands the challenges we face here in our country.

The Holy Father went on to say: *For an affluent society, a further obstacle to an encounter with the living God lies in the subtle influence of materialism, which can all too easily focus the attention on the hundredfold, which God promises now in this time, at the expense of the eternal life which he promises in the age to come (cf. Mark 10:30). People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. They need to recognize that implanted within them is a deep thirst for God... It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain,... our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance (cf. John 10:10).*

The situation we face in our culture today calls us not to abandon it but to transform it. The evangelization of culture is an essential part of the mission of the Church. But such evangelization must begin with ourselves and with our

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communities of faith. This includes a renewed commitment to the important mission of catechesis in our diocese. It is essential that we have strong and effective catechetical programs for adults, young people, and children in all our parishes, schools, campus ministries, and other communities throughout our diocese. Good catechesis is essential to bring about more mature faith, deeper knowledge and love of the Lord Jesus and His Church, and a commitment to follow Christ and His teachings in everyday life. Catechesis, of course, should begin in the home. I recommend that every Catholic home in our diocese have a copy of the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults*, along with, of course, the Holy Bible. Reading the Sacred Scriptures and studying the *Catechism* are important ways to grow in knowledge of the faith. How often Catholics are asked by other Christians or by persons of other faiths questions about our Catholic faith and teachings! And how often many Catholics are unsure how to answer! We need to ensure an excellent education in the faith for all our people. Traveling around the diocese and visiting so many of our parishes and schools, I am edified by the commitment and generosity of our priests, deacons, sisters, and countless laity in the ministry of catechesis. Let us all renew our efforts to pass on the precious gift of our faith in a convincing way, especially to our young people.

Every parish should be an evangelizing community, one that reaches out to our non-practicing Catholic brothers and sisters and to the unchurched. A parish that is satisfied just to maintain the *status quo* and does not reach out with evangelizing fervor to the fallen-away and unchurched is not being faithful to its mission. I invite our pastors and parish pastoral councils to spend some time during this Marian year to evaluate its evangelizing mission and to seek ways to become an ever more dynamic evangelizing community. Every parish (either by itself or together with a neighboring parish) should have an R.C.I.A. process, one that is solid in its teaching and dynamic in its experience. We have been blessed in recent years with an average of more than 500 new adults being initiated into the Catholic Church in our diocese each year at the Easter Vigil. If every parish had a strong evangelizing mission and R.C.I.A. process, that number would increase even more. A true sign of the Church's vitality is her ability to spread the faith. In our diocese, Catholics make up about 13% of the total population. Though we are growing in numbers of Catholics, we are static in this percentage.



Students at Saint Joseph School in York respond to their teacher during religion class.

May we all be committed to the holy mission of evangelization! We will be committed to this mission if we truly share the conviction of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict, who said during his inauguration homily: *There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know him and to speak to others of our friendship with him.* That's what evangelization is all about!

During this Marian Year, one of our prayer intentions is for the return of non-practicing Catholics to the Church. Let us pray fervently for this intention, asking the Holy Spirit, the primary agent of evangelization, to guide us in our evangelizing mission. And let us ask the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Star of Evangelization, to intercede for all our brothers and sisters who have strayed from the Church, that they may come home!

I mentioned that catechesis begins in the home. Recently, I was having dinner with a family in our diocese who asked me to lead grace before dinner. I asked the family what prayer they usually prayed before meals. They told me that before saying the traditional grace before meals, they always recited *The Apostles' Creed*. What a wonderful custom! Every day, this family proclaimed the essential truths of our faith together. This was not only a great catechetical tool in ensuring that the children had *The Apostles' Creed* memorized, it was also a daily demonstration of the centrality of the faith in this family's life. It is beautiful for me to witness the commitment of so many people of our diocese to our Catholic faith.

On Holy Saturday of this year, I was in a discussion with a young adult Catholic about one of the articles of the Creed. We were talking about Christ's descent into hell, an appropriate theme for reflection on Holy Saturday. He told me he had no idea what this doctrine meant, so I invited him to read with me the section of the *Catechism* on Christ's descent into hell. At the end, we also read an ancient homily on this article of faith that is in the Liturgy of the Hours for Holy Saturday. We had an interesting discussion that ended in prayer and meditation on this holy mystery. It was great preparation for the celebration of the Easter Vigil that night! Study of the faith so often can lead to meditation and prayer. Communion with Christ in prayer, through the action of the Holy Spirit, brings us deeper knowledge, not only in the mind, but also in the heart, of the mysteries of God.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is the perfect model for us on our pilgrimage of faith. When Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, Elizabeth exclaimed: *Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord (Luke 1:45)*. Elizabeth praised Mary's faith. Of course, Elizabeth was referring to Mary's consent at the Annunciation to the Incarnation. Though Mary did not fully understand the angel's message, she nevertheless consented to become the Mother of the Incarnate Son of God. She cooperated fully in God's saving plan, and said *Yes* in a great act of obedient faith, believing that *with God nothing will be impossible (Luke 1:37)*. And thus she pronounced those unforgettable words: *Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word. (Luke 1:38)*. She entrusted herself into God's hands, with the full submission of intellect and will.



Stained-glass window at Saint Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg depicts the Annunciation.


Throughout her life, Mary walked by faith, trusting in God and adhering to His will. The Second Vatican Council taught the following: *Committing herself whole-heartedly and impeded by no sin to God's saving will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with him, serving the mystery of redemption, by the grace of Almighty God. Rightly, therefore, the Fathers (of the Church) see Mary not merely as passively engaged by God, but as freely cooperating in the work of man's salvation through faith and obedience. For, as Saint Irenaeus says, she "being obedient, became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race... the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith"* (*Lumen Gentium* 56).

Mary was indeed a woman of outstanding faith. Her firm faith in her divine Son was manifest at the wedding feast of Cana when Jesus performed His first miracle at her request. Her faith-filled cooperation in her Son's mission reached its climax when she stood beside the cross on Calvary. There she joined her *Yes* to that of her Son, uniting herself to Jesus' sacrifice. Later, after our Lord's Ascension, she waited and prayed with the apostles for the coming of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus. We can imagine that there, in the upper room, her presence and witness of faith helped prepare the minds and hearts of the disciples for Pentecost.

The Blessed Virgin Mary supports us as she accompanies us on our pilgrimage of faith. When we are tempted to doubt, she points us to the Truth.

The Blessed Virgin Mary supports us as she accompanies us on our pilgrimage of faith. When we are tempted to doubt, she points us to the Truth. There is no question that the Christian people throughout history who have had strong love and devotion for the Mother of God have kept the faith, even during times of persecution. Staying close to her helps us to persevere in faith during times of trouble and suffering. May she keep us strong and steadfast in our faith and help us to grow in our faith each day! Mary, Pillar of Faith, pray for us!

ACT OF FAITH

 *my God, I firmly believe that you are one God in three divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins and that he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches because you have revealed them who are eternal truth and wisdom, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. In this faith I intend to live and die. Amen.*

III. A PILGRIMAGE OF HOPE

Our Christian life is also a pilgrimage of hope, which is inseparable from our journey of faith. Hope can be called the inner force of faith. The sanctifying grace we received at Baptism enables us not only to believe in God, but also to hope in Him (cf. CCC 1266). The *Catechism* defines hope as *the theological virtue by which we desire and expect from God both eternal life and the grace we need to attain it* (cf. CCC glossary).

As human beings, we all aspire to happiness. In our life's journey, we can sometimes get discouraged. At times we experience sadness; we encounter suffering; we can become weighed down by problems. Some may even be tempted to despair. As followers of Christ, we live in hope and are called to be witnesses of hope to others. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: *rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer* (Romans 12:12). This is good advice for us today. Saint Paul was a great apostle of hope who himself endured many trials and sufferings, yet he was able to say: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us* (Romans 8:18).

Just as faith is Christocentric, so is the virtue of hope. Our hope is ultimately a Person: Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became a man, who died for us, and who rose from the dead. Our hope as Christians is founded upon the event of the Incarnation, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The mystery of Christ is the fulfillment of God's loving plan for humanity and the source of our salvation. In a dream, an angel revealed to Saint Joseph the mystery of the Incarnation and instructed him: *You are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21). The very name of Jesus, in its Hebrew root, means *Savior*. In the first chapter of the New Testament, we find the basis of our hope: the coming of Jesus our Savior.

As believers in Christ, we have hope. Our hope is grounded in the great love God has shown us in sending us His beloved Son as our Savior, a saving love supremely manifested in Jesus' death on the cross. There, on Mount Calvary, Christ reconciled us with God and merited salvation for us. This filled Saint Paul with incredible hope, enabling him to proclaim: *If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?* (Romans 8:31-32). The resurrection of Jesus revealed that God's love is even stronger than death. Our Lord promises His faithful followers a share in His resurrection: eternal life in His Father's house, the ultimate end of our Christian pilgrimage.

The virtue of hope enables us to face the daily challenges of life and to persevere in the midst of difficulties. The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful...* (Hebrews 10:23). Hope dispels fear, including the ultimate fear: death. We realize that our final destiny is to share in the glory of Christ. We are called to participate in His glorious life beyond our temporal existence on earth.

True Christian hope recognizes that we cannot save ourselves and, thus, we cannot live in self-sufficiency. We recognize that we are sinners in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. We need His grace if we are to be saved. Personally, I experience a surge of hope, an increase of hope, every time I go to confession and hear the words of absolution: *God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* This prayer of absolution beautifully sums up the cause of our hope. How I wish that more Catholics would recognize the treasure we have in the sacrament of Penance! Many who are lax in the reception of this sacrament are deprived not only of the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation, but of the grace of hope that results from forgiveness. Let us recall the words of Pope Benedict during his homily at the Mass in Washington, D.C. in 2008:



Pope Benedict XVI responds to the crowd during a Mass he celebrated at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C., on April 17, 2008.

To a great extent, the renewal of the Church in America and throughout the world depends on the renewal of the practice of Penance and the growth in holiness which that sacrament both inspires and accomplishes.

confessors to be creative in offering diverse times for confession, ensuring that the sacrament is readily available for our people. In order to foster greater participation in this wonderful sacrament of mercy and spiritual healing, I intend, during this Marian year, to lead Penance services and hear confessions with our priests in different regions of our diocese.

In this Marian year, I invite everyone, especially those who have not been to confession in a long time, to make a good examination of conscience, to be contrite of heart, and to discover anew the richness of God's mercy in the sacrament of Penance. I also invite our priests who are so dedicated in their ministry as

I wish to stress again the fundamental importance of the Church's evangelizing mission, this time in the context of hope. Evangelization includes the preaching and witness of hope in the promises of God. Saint Peter wrote: *Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence* (1 Peter 3:15). We are indeed called to give an account to others of the hope that is within us.

We have been strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation to do so and to bear witness to Christ our Hope. We should keep in mind that this hope which is in our hearts springs from the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul wrote: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope*” (Romans 15:13). We are more convincing witnesses of hope when people see within us authentic joy and peace, two of the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit.

The desire for hope is inscribed in the very nature of the human person. We know this by experience, our own and that of others. Every person has the experience of his or her finiteness, which gives rise to anxiety. Human beings long for happiness and fulfillment. The call to hope is in the very nucleus of the human spirit. As humanity and individual human beings advance and progress through life and history, there is always a thirst for something more. Even as people experience some satisfaction and a degree of happiness in their life’s pursuits, there is always something lacking in this world, something that, in truth, cannot be definitively achieved in the context of this world. Nowhere is this experienced more profoundly than in the awareness of death. Though many in the world today try to ignore death, it is ultimately inescapable. No matter what successes one has achieved in this life, one is left unsatisfied at the prospect that all may come to an end. Some try valiantly to flee this reality, the unavoidable end of one’s existence, because every human being has an irrepressible desire to live. Of course, one could adopt the philosophical view of Jean-Paul Sartre who wrote: *It is absurd that we are born and it is absurd that we die* (J.P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*). But in the deepest levels of the human spirit there is a rejection of this claim that our existence is absurd. In the human spirit, there is a desire for eternity, a hidden hope. The fundamental tendency of the human heart is not toward nothingness. The human heart is inclined towards hope. And here is how we, as believers in Christ, are called to evangelize, giving an account to others of the hope that is in us. When we proclaim the Gospel to others, we are offering them the fulfillment of their deepest aspirations, the possibility of eternal life with God.

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Despair and presumption are both sins against hope. Those who despair abandon hope in salvation. Those who commit the sin of presumption, the opposite of despair, presume God’s mercy without repentance, *expecting to obtain God’s forgiveness without conversion and (to obtain) glory without merit* (CCC 1817). This is a dangerous sin, one that easily leads to a lackadaisical approach to the Christian life. Our hope for the future, for eternal life in heaven, includes the knowledge that it is something we need to attain, *relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy*

Spirit (CCC 1817). When we live the virtue of hope, we seek to do God's will. We strive to keep His commandments and to practice the works of justice and charity. We keep in mind the words of Jesus: *Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it* (Luke 17:33). Recall also the words of Pope Benedict: *The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life* (*Spe salvi* 2).

The greatest witness to hope is the practice of the third theological virtue, love. I will treat the call to love in the next part of this letter, but it is important here to note that hope is not complete nor perfect without love. Love is an intrinsic demand of hope. We witness to hope not by attempting to flee this world, but by actively working to better the world, loving and serving our neighbor with the spirit of Christ. The gift of salvation offered to us involves the responsibility to cooperate with Jesus in the building up of his Kingdom with love.

To be effective evangelizers in our world today, we need to bear witness to the joy of life in Christ and the joy of being Catholic. Joy is a fruit of the virtue of hope. We will hardly attract others to Christ and to His Church if we lack authentic Christian joy. When joy characterizes our daily

living as individuals and as Christian communities, this has tremendous evangelizing power. Saint Paul exhorted the Philippians: *Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again: Rejoice! Everyone should see how unselfish you are* (Philippians 4:4). There is something wrong if our faith does not bring us joy. By joy, I do not mean a mere emotional sensation. True joy is much deeper. Recall the words of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, when he said that he and his co-workers were sorrowful, *though always rejoicing* (2 Corinthians 6:10). Genuine Christian hope dispels fear and anxiety and brings joy to our minds and hearts. Inner joy and peace can be lost through sin, but forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance restores our joy and peace.

When we read about the life of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, we see clearly the spirit of joy in the lives of the apostles and early Christians. In those first decades of the life of the Church, the evangelizing activity was truly remarkable. We read in Acts about the profound joy of those early Christian communities, even in the midst of fierce persecution. That joy came from the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who guides and animates the Church today. May we allow the Holy Spirit to unleash that evangelizing power and that spirit of joy in our lives and in the life of the Church today!



Diocesan youth pray the rosary during their participation in World Youth Day in Australia in July 2008.

We see the spirit of joy in the midst of adversity in the lives of the holy martyrs of the Church. It is indeed paradoxical: joy in the face of death. Theirs was a joy born of hope in Christ. They endured suffering for the sake of Christ, even with joy, because of their hope in eternal life. They believed the words of Saint Paul: *If we have died with Christ we shall also live with Him; if we hold out to the end, we shall also reign with Him (2 Timothy 2:11-12)*. They teach us even today to trust in the victory of the cross. Nothing, not even death, can defeat us!

Often in Christmas homilies, I have quoted the words of one of our more recently canonized saints, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein). This great Carmelite nun, a Jewish convert, became a martyr in solidarity with her Jewish brothers and sisters in the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the midst of the horrendous evil of the Holocaust, she persevered in Christian hope. She wrote the following words during that terrible period of unimaginable evil: *The star of Bethlehem is a star in the darkness of night even today*. That is *Christian* hope, the hope we are reminded of every Christmas!

Our hope is nourished when we participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the banquet of the Holy Eucharist. We are filled with hope when we remember Christ's promise: *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:54)*. Our Lord's Body and Blood are a pledge of eternal life. The second century bishop and martyr, Saint Ignatius of Antioch, called the Eucharist *the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live forever in Jesus Christ*. According to the *Catechism*, *there is no surer pledge or clearer sign of this great hope in the new heavens and new earth "in which righteousness dwells," than the Eucharist (CCC 1405)*.



Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades elevates the host during Mass.

The Blessed Virgin Mary is the perfect model for us on our pilgrimage of hope. At the Annunciation, when she responded to the angel's message with obedient faith, she also brought the dawn of hope and salvation to the world. At the Visitation, she proclaimed the Magnificat, a great hymn of joy and hope in God: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior*. Mary did not praise herself. She praised God and recognized the Lord as her Savior. Throughout her life, she placed her trust in the Lord.

At the end of his encyclical *On Christian Hope (Spe salvi)*, Pope Benedict XVI reflects on Mary under the traditional title of *Star of the Sea* as our *Star of Hope*. He writes: *Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They*

are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by – people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? With her “yes” she opened the door of our world to God himself; she became the living Ark of the Covenant, in whom God took flesh, became one of us, and pitched his tent among us (cf. John 1:14).

The glorious mystery of Mary’s Assumption can give us great hope. In her Assumption body and soul into heaven, we get a glimpse of our destiny, the fullness of happiness promised to her Son’s followers.

The glorious mystery of Mary’s Assumption can give us great hope. In her Assumption body and soul into heaven, we get a glimpse of our destiny, the fullness of happiness promised to her Son’s followers. Because of this we can call her *our hope*. In her glorious state, she remains very close to us and supports us with her maternal love. It gives us hope to know that she is in heaven and that she continues to serve her Son’s work of salvation. The Second Vatican Council taught that *the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come (cf. 2 Peter 3:10), a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim people of God (Lumen Gentium 68).*

When we recite the *Hail Mary* and ask for Mary’s prayers for us *now and at the hour of our death*, we are filled with hope. We know that she watches over us with love. This knowledge strengthens our hope in eternal life. We call upon her on our pilgrim journey to salvation, *counting on her motherly intercession to receive from the Lord everything necessary for growing in the divine life and for attaining eternal salvation* (Pope John Paul II, *General Audience*, November 5, 1997). Mary is truly a beacon of hope for us on our earthly pilgrimage.

ACT OF HOPE



Lord God, I hope by your grace for the pardon of all my sins and after life here to gain eternal happiness because you have promised it who are infinitely powerful, faithful, kind, and merciful. In this hope I intend to live and die. Amen.

IV. A PILGRIMAGE OF LOVE

Our Christian life is, most importantly, a pilgrimage of love. *If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing*, the Apostle Paul teaches us (1 Corinthians 13:2). Contemplating the goal of our Christian pilgrimage, heaven, Saint Paul wrote: *Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, ... So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love* (1 Corinthians 13:12-13).

Love is the greatest of the three theological virtues, since, as Saint Thomas Aquinas says, *love (charity) attains God himself*. We recall again the words of Saint John: *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him* (1 John 4:16). Pope Benedict XVI teaches that *these words ... express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny (Deus caritas est 1)*.

Indeed, *God's very being is love. By sending his only Son and the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, God has revealed his innermost secret. God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange (CCC 221). The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life (CCC 234)*. This is indeed a great mystery before which we can only stand in wonder and awe. God's essence is a mystery of infinite love. At the same time, we are involved in this divine mystery since we have been created to share in this mystery, in the Trinitarian life. This is given to us through grace, beginning with the grace of our Baptism. Indeed, our pilgrimage of faith, hope, and love began with our baptism *in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*. Our pilgrimage is directed toward the blessedness of heaven, toward perfect communion of life and love with the Most Holy Trinity, a communion that was already begun here on earth when we were baptized.

God sent us His Son because He wills that we share in the glory of His blessed life. As Saint Paul teaches: *God destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:5)*. Similarly, Saint John exclaims: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are* (1 John 3:1). Baptism has made us God's children, partakers of his divine nature. Our earthly pilgrimage involves the unfolding of the baptismal graces we have received through lives of faith, hope, and love.

Indeed, our pilgrimage of faith, hope, and love began with our baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Our pilgrimage is directed toward the blessedness of heaven, toward perfect communion of life and love with the Most Holy Trinity, a communion that was already begun here on earth when we were baptized.



Stained-glass window at Saint Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg depicts Saint Patrick illustrating the Trinity with a shamrock.

It is through the Holy Spirit that we enter into the loving communion of the Trinitarian life of God. The Holy Spirit is *the Lord and Giver of Life and of Love*. Because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are able to share in Christ's communion with the Father. Indeed, *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Romans 5:5)*.

Love is first of all God's gift to us, the greatest of all the Spirit's gifts. The love of God the Father, revealed in His Son, is infused in us by the Holy Spirit. Through love, God lets us share in his own life, in the communion of Trinitarian love.

We have been created in the image and likeness of God who is love. The Fathers of the Church saw a foreshadowing of the Trinity in God's words in the book of Genesis: *Let **us** make man in our image, after our likeness (Genesis 1:26)*. What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God? It means that intellect and freedom are properties of our human nature. It also means that we have the capacity to enter into a personal relationship with God and with others, the capacity to love. The Church teaches: *Being in the image of God, the human individual possesses the dignity of a **person**, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons. And he is called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead (CCC 357)*.

There is another important truth in the next verse of the book of Genesis: *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27)*. This is how Pope John Paul II explained this truth: *The fact that man 'created as man and woman' is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a 'unity of the two' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. This 'unity of the two', which is a sign of interpersonal communion, shows that the creation of man is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion (John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* 7)*.

What distinguishes human beings from other creatures is that we have been created in the image and likeness of God. We are endowed with a spiritual and immortal soul and the spiritual powers of intellect and will. We are endowed with freedom.

These are profound truths contained in just two verses of the book of Genesis. What distinguishes human beings from other creatures is that we have been created in the image and likeness of God. We are endowed with a spiritual and immortal soul and the spiritual powers of intellect and will. We are endowed with freedom. We are thus able to enter into relationship, communion, with God and others. By nature, we are relational and social beings. And in our sexual complementarity and reciprocity (as masculine and feminine), we are the image of Trinitarian love in the created universe. Both our origin and our destiny are in God who is Trinitarian love. Our fundamental and common vocation as human beings is, therefore, love.

At the very beginning of human history, man abused his freedom and did evil, succumbing to the temptation of the Evil One. The divine image in us became disfigured by original sin. The original harmony within the human person and the harmony of human persons with God and others was destroyed. In addition, death entered into human history. Original sin did not totally corrupt our human nature, but it wounded it. Though Baptism takes away original sin, the consequences of it remain in that our human nature has been weakened.

One of the consequences of original sin is that we are now inclined to evil (an inclination that is called *concupiscence*). As the Second Vatican Council taught: *Man is divided in himself. As a result, the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness (Gaudium et spes 13)*. Yes, our life is a battle, a spiritual battle. On our earthly pilgrimage, we continually renew our baptismal promises, which include the renunciation of Satan and sin. We recite this renewal every Easter, but we are to live these promises every day. We are aided by God's grace to overcome evil with good and to live in the light and not in darkness.

The Good News of our Christian faith is that God did not abandon us to the power of sin and death. God the Father sent His own beloved Son who assumed our human nature in order to redeem and save us. In becoming man, He elevated our human dignity; He restored in us the likeness to God that had been disfigured by original sin. Through His Son's suffering and death on the cross, God reconciled us to Himself. He restored the harmony that was lost. He destroyed sin and death. We can now proceed on our pilgrimage because the gates of heaven have been opened.

One of the most profound statements in the documents of the Second Vatican Council is the following: *It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear... Christ the Lord, Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling (Gaudium et spes 22)*. Pope John Paul II reflected on these words often. In his very first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis (The Redeemer of Man)*, thirty years ago (1979), he wrote: *Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not*

experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This... is why Christ the Redeemer 'fully reveals man to himself'. If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of the Redemption. In this dimension man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity. In the mystery of the Redemption, man becomes newly 'expressed' and, in a way, is newly created (Redemptor hominis 10).



Diocesan youth process with a cross during a Palm Sunday celebration at Saint Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg.

Because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, we are a *new creation* (1 Corinthians 5:17). We are enabled by grace to *walk in newness of life* (Romans 6:4). Our old selves, with our evil inclinations, have been *crucified with Christ* (Romans 6:6).

The virtue of love, like the virtues of faith and hope, is Christocentric. Jesus Christ is the revelation of God's love. Jesus freely embraced the Father's redeeming love. He loved us *to the end* (John 13:1). He is *the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:11). Jesus freely accepted His passion and death out of love for His Father and for us. He took our sins on Himself and offered Himself as a sacrifice for us. The redemption of man was accomplished through the cross. As a result, our dignity has been restored and our life has meaning and purpose anew.

The Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross (CCC 766). The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus (Lumen Gentium 3). The Church is, therefore,

fundamentally a communion of love. The Church is called to manifest and to actualize the mystery of God's love for humanity. The supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls since the Church's first law is the new commandment to love as Christ loved us (cf. *John 13:34*). Saint Therese of Lisieux wrote that the Church *must have a Heart, and a Heart burning with Love*. In all of our activities as members of Christ's Church, we are to be motivated by love. As Saint Paul wrote, *the love of Christ urges us on* (2 Corinthians 5:14). This love is truly the soul of everything we do. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn wrote: *Love is the innermost life of the Church, for God is love, and God is the life of the Church (Loving the Church, p. 165).*

The Holy Spirit dwells in the Church as the soul who makes the Church, the Body of Christ, more like its Head, Jesus, through the gift of love. The Spirit also dwells in the heart of every member of the Church as the *sweet guest of the soul*. It is up to us to allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of God (cf. *Romans 8:14*). This is how we can become holy, allowing ourselves to be made holy by the Holy One. It is the Holy Spirit who destroys sin in us and inwardly sanctifies us.

The universal call to holiness is one of the great teachings of the Second Vatican Council. *All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of love, and by this holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society (Lumen Gentium 40).* All of us, clergy, religious, married or single lay persons, are called to holiness. According to our state of life and its particular duties, we are called to imitate Jesus in His love, to walk in His footsteps along our pilgrimage of life, taking up the cross every day.

Married life is truly a way of holiness and a vocation to love. In marriage, man and woman become one flesh in an indissoluble, unbreakable union (cf. *Genesis 2:24* and *Matthew 19:6*). The union in one flesh is deeply personal and *leads to forming one heart and one soul (CCC 1643)*. Let us recall again *Genesis 1:27: God created man in his own image... male and female he created them.* The mutual love of man and woman in marriage is thus an image of God's love, the love of the Most Holy Trinity.

The Second Vatican Council taught: *Married couples and Christian parents should follow their own proper path (to holiness) by faithful love. They should sustain one another in grace throughout the entire length of their lives. They should imbue their offspring, lovingly welcomed as God's gift, with Christian doctrine and the evangelical virtues. In this manner, they offer all people the example of unwearying and generous love; in this way they build up the brotherhood of charity, and they stand as witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church; by such lives, they are a sign and a participation in that very love, with which Christ loved his bride and for which he delivered himself up for her (Lumen Gentium 41).*

Jesus abundantly blesses married love. He elevated it to the dignity of a sacrament. The sacrament of marriage expresses the great mystery of Christ's nuptial love for His Church (cf. *Ephesians 5:32*). Our Lord gives His grace to husbands and wives so that they can grow day by day in a covenant of love and fidelity, helping each other to attain holiness in their married life. This love, by its nature, is not meant to be turned in on itself. It is meant to be open to new life, to the procreation of children, living images of God's love and of the love of the parents. In the gift of children, marriage finds *its crowning glory (Gaudium et spes 48)*.

In our culture today, the institution of marriage and family life is in crisis. At the beginning of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II wrote the following regarding the truth about marriage: *the Church cannot yield to cultural pressures, no matter how widespread and*



Faithful witness to the sanctity of human life during the Diocesan Pro-Life Mass at Saint Philip the Apostle Church in Millersville.

even militant they may be. Instead, it is necessary to ensure that through an ever more complete Gospel formation Christian families show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God's plan and with the true good of the human person – of the spouses, and of the children who are more fragile (Novo millennio ineunte 47).

We must not yield to today's cultural pressures to re-define marriage. God, the author of marriage, has established this holy institution as a union between one man and one woman. As the Second Vatican Council has clearly taught: *The intimate partnership of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws (Gaudium et spes 48).* Therefore, society has no right to re-define marriage, a divine institution established by our Creator.

In light of today's crisis, one of the five special prayer intentions of this Marian Year is “the protection of marriage and the strengthening of family life.” Let us look to the Holy Family of Nazareth to teach us the sanctity of marriage and the value of family life. Through the prayers of Mary and her most faithful spouse, Joseph, may Jesus unite all our families in peace and love!

Single lay people are also called to holiness through the vocation to love. The Church and our world benefit greatly from the generous and loving service of single people. The Second Vatican Council taught about the example given by widows and those who never married, saying that they *can also greatly contribute to the holiness and activity of the Church (Lumen Gentium 41).* Whatever the reason for their single life, it is important that those who are single recognize their call to holiness and their important place in the Church and her mission of love. Their own gifts and charisms, like those of all the laity, help build a civilization of love in our world.

Men and women in consecrated life live the call to holiness by embracing the evangelical counsels: chastity, poverty, and obedience. Theirs is truly a vocation to love as they are consecrated totally to Christ and to His Church. They remind us of the words of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus: *In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love.*

Consecrated men and women embrace a radical way of living the Gospel on their earthly pilgrimage. We are blessed in our diocese by the witness of three communities of cloistered nuns who pray for all of us daily. We are blessed by the prayers of hundreds of retired religious sisters in our diocese. And we are blessed by the active ministry of over 300 men and women in consecrated life, serving in our parishes and schools, in Holy Spirit Hospital and other health-care facilities, and in a variety of other apostolates. Consecrated men and women, by their lives of self-giving love, remind all of us of our call to imitate Christ and His love.



*Christian Charity Sister
Romaine Niemeyer,
President and CEO of
Holy Spirit Health
System in Camp Hill*

The ordained (bishops, priests, and deacons) are called to live their ministries with holiness and to lead God's people, not only by their preaching, but also by their example of holiness.

The deacon in the Church is to be an icon, an image, of Christ the Servant. We are blessed in our diocese by the life and ministry of 42 permanent deacons as well as 23 men in their last year of formation before their ordination on May 22, 2010. That will be a day of great joy for the Church in our diocese, the first ordination of a class of permanent deacons here since 1983. The deacon's life and ministry is one of loving service as he is called to follow Jesus by an attitude of humble service that finds its expression in charity.

The bishops and priests of the Church are called to be icons, living images, of Christ, the Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom of the Church. They are called to imitate Christ the Head of the Church *who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)*. They are called to imitate Christ the Good Shepherd, *who lays down his life for the sheep (John 10:11)*. They are called to imitate Christ the Bridegroom *who loved the Church (his Bride) and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her... (Ephesians 5:25-26)*. The way to holiness for the ordained is truly the way of love, as it is for all Christians. But it is a specific path of holiness that arises from the sacrament of Holy Orders. For bishops and priests, it includes the imitation of Christ through lives of obedience, chaste celibacy, and simplicity of life. This way of holiness finds its supreme manifestation in the exercise of pastoral charity.

We are blessed in our diocese with the presence of 180 priests (144 are active and 36 are retired). Of the total, 146 are diocesan priests and 34 are religious order priests. We are also blessed by a significant increase in the number of men in formation for the priesthood. We now have 27 seminarians, over twice the number we had just four years ago. We thank the Lord for hearing our prayers for an increase of vocations to the priesthood in our diocese.

Our diocesan Marian Year partly coincides with the universal *Year of the Priest*. This is a happy coincidence. In this special *Year of the Priest* (June 19, 2009 – June 19, 2010) proclaimed by our Holy Father, I ask all the faithful of our diocese to pray in a special way for all our priests and for their sanctification, imploring the intercession of Mary, the mother of priests.



Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades imposes his hands on Jose Elias Mera-Vallejos during his ordination to the priesthood on June 6, 2009.



Diocesan priests gather at the altar at Saint Patrick Cathedral in Harrisburg during the Chrism Mass.

In this Marian year, one of our five special prayer intentions is for “an increase in vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life.” We need to continue to pray for this intention since it is still true that *the harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few*, especially as we experience the continual growth in the number of Catholics in our diocese.

All of us, the Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Harrisburg, members of the universal Church, united with Pope Benedict XVI as our universal pastor, walk together on this pilgrimage of love. As bishop, my episcopal motto is *Veritatem in caritate (Truth in love)*. When appointed Bishop of Harrisburg by Pope John Paul II in 2004, I chose this motto. It comes from Saint Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where he wrote: *Let us profess the truth in love and grow to the full maturity of Christ the head. Through him the whole body grows, and with the proper functioning of the members, joined firmly together by each supporting ligament, builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:15-16)*. Christ is the Head of his Body, the Church. We receive from Him the grace to grow and to be built up in love. We are called to proclaim and witness to the truth in love. This is how we are to evangelize. When we do so, we help to build up Christ’s Body, the Church, and we contribute to building a civilization of love in our world.

There are two other special prayer intentions for our Marian Year: “the protection of human life from the moment of conception until natural death” and “a more just and peaceful world and an end to terrorism and violence.”

As a community of love, we are called to embrace all people with the love of Christ, especially the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable in our midst. In our country today, the most vulnerable are innocent unborn children. The Gospel of Jesus is the Gospel of life. Every human being has been created in the image and likeness of God and thus has an innate, inalienable, and sacred dignity. We must never tire of proclaiming and defending the right to life and opposing the horrendous crime of abortion. The mentality against life so prevalent in our society must be countered by our teaching and living the truth with charity, the truth about the sacred dignity of all human life, from conception to natural death.

As a community of love, we are called to promote peace. Peace is the fruit of justice and love. The violence of war, like the violence of abortion, destroys the dignity and life of human beings created in the image of God. True peace is not possible without forgiveness and reconciliation. Peace begins with each one of us and our families and communities. It involves our forgiving the trespasses of others as God has forgiven us. It involves obeying the commandment of Jesus: *Love your enemies (Matthew 5:44)*. This is perhaps the most difficult of all Jesus’ commandments, the most difficult part of living the call to love. But it is possible since the Spirit of God, the Spirit of love and peace, has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34), Jesus commands. Loving others as Jesus did requires our communion with Him in prayer and in the sacraments. All the sacraments of the Church flow from the self-giving love of Christ on the cross. They strengthen us with God’s grace so that we can love as Jesus loved. The Holy Eucharist, the greatest of all the sacraments, is Christ’s sacrifice of love that becomes present on the altar. At every Mass, we participate in His supreme act of love on Calvary. The Church was born of this sacrifice of love, born from the heart of the crucified Christ. The Eucharist draws us into Christ’s sacrifice and, through the Eucharist, *we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving (Deus caritas est 13)*. The Eucharist, which makes sacramentally present Christ’s gift of



Mother Teresa smiles in this 1997 file photo taken during a visit to Rome. She dedicated her life to serving the poorest of the poor.

As a community of love, we are called to embrace all people with the love of Christ, especially the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable in our midst.

His life for the world, educates us in this self-giving love and strengthens us to be witnesses of His love to all our brothers and sisters, especially the poor and needy. We saw this ideal lived in an extraordinary way in Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, whose capacity to love and serve the poorest of the poor came from her daily encounter with our Lord in the Eucharist.

Pope John Paul II wrote that *by sharing in the sacrifice of the cross, the Christian partakes of Christ's self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds (Veritatis splendor 107)*. Pope Benedict XVI wrote that *worship itself, eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented (Deus caritas est 14)*.

The Eucharist, a mystery of Christ's love, is a mystery to be lived. When Jesus feeds us with the great and amazing gift of Himself, His very Body and Blood, He gives us the strength and energy we need to love as He has loved us.

The Eucharist, a mystery of Christ's love, is a mystery to be lived. When Jesus feeds us with the great and amazing gift of Himself, His very Body and Blood, He gives us the strength and energy we need to love as He has loved us. Sunday Mass is a serious obligation that too many Catholics fail to fulfill. This is one of my saddest experiences as bishop. I hope and pray that all our people come to recognize the greatness of this gift which Jesus gave us the night before He died. The Eucharist is Christ! The Eucharist is the center of our lives as Catholics! As Catholics, we are to be men and women of the Eucharist, men and women of love!

The Blessed Virgin Mary, whom we honor during this Marian year, was called the *Woman of the Eucharist* by Pope John Paul II. She shows us how to live a Eucharistic life, a life of self-giving love. She loved Saint Joseph with the most perfect spousal love. She loved her Son Jesus with the most perfect maternal love. And she loves us, her spiritual children, with that same maternal love. She was always obedient to her Son's commandment of love and teaches us that same obedience. She is the shining model of our call to holiness through love.



Pilgrim statue of Mary's Assumption for Diocesan Marian Year.

We see Mary's love at the Visitation when she went to assist her cousin Elizabeth for three months in the final phase of her pregnancy. We see her love when she asked Jesus to help the newly married couple at Cana. We see her love when she stood at the foot of the cross, her heart broken as she witnessed her Son's suffering and death. We see her love in the upper room as she prayed with the disciples awaiting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Let us ask Mary to teach us to love as we journey through this life. Pope Benedict entrusted to her the Church's mission in the service of love in the following simple prayer:

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely
to God's call
and thus became a wellspring
of the goodness which flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him
so that we too can become capable of true love
and be fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsting world.
(Deus caritas est 42)*

Pope John Paul II always wore our Lady's scapular. Following his example, I also wear it every day. It reminds me of Mary's maternal love and protection. I recommend this sacramental to you as well. It is a simple sign that teaches us to *put on Christ* (Galatians 3:27) and to *live in his love* (cf. John 15: 9-10) with the help of Mary, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Mother of Fairest Love.

On our Christian pilgrimage, love is the most important virtue for us to cultivate. As the great Spanish mystic, Saint John of the Cross, said: *At the sunset of my life, I will be judged on love.*

ACT OF LOVE



*Lord God, I love you above all things and I love my neighbor
for your sake because you are the highest, infinite and perfect
good, worthy of all my love. In this love I intend to live and die.
Amen.*

V. CONCLUSION

Let us pray for one another during this Marian year that we may grow in faith, hope, and love along the pilgrimage of life, with Mary as our model and our intercessor. May she help us to be men and women of strong faith and messengers of the hope and love of Jesus, her Son!

I recommend to you images of the Blessed Virgin Mary in your homes as further reminders of her loving presence in our Christian pilgrimage. My favorite image of Mary is Our Lady of Guadalupe. I gaze on the tender love in her face and eyes and hear her consoling words to Saint Juan Diego: *Listen and let it penetrate your heart, my dear son: do not be troubled nor disturbed by anything; do not fear illness nor any other distressing occurrence, nor pain. Am I not here who am your mother? Are you not under my shadow and protection? Am I not your fountain of life? Are you not in the folds of my mantle, in the crossing of my arms? Is there anything else you need?* It was a special blessing for me to be ordained a bishop on December 9th, the memorial of Saint Juan Diego. Like him, we can be comforted in the knowledge that we are always *in the arms of Mary*.



Saint Juan Diego

Mary walks with us on our pilgrimage, teaching us the path of holiness along the way. She prays for us constantly. She embraces each and every one of us. Having been assumed into heaven, she reminds us of our final goal: eternal communion of life and love with the Holy Trinity, with her and all the angels and saints. This is what Christ promises His faithful followers. So we say to her:

*Pray for us, O holy Mother of God,
that we may be made worthy of the
promises of Christ.*

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Kevin C. Rhoades

Bishop of Harrisburg
September 8, 2009

FEAST OF THE NATIVITY
OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

