

PASTORAL NOTE

# IN SEARCH OF A STORY



Brothers and Sisters, in my last pastoral note, on Ash Wednesday, I wrote of “Our Apostolic Moment,” this unique “change of eras” in which we find ourselves as Christendom ends and a new apostolic age dawns.

As I outlined there, in this new apostolic age, our Church no longer benefits from carrying out its life and mission in a Christendom culture. One which, while imperfect in its own ways, had an imaginative vision for reality that arose from and largely aligned with Christian beliefs.

Instead, we find ourselves as Christians today living in a missionary context, like that experienced by the apostles, where we find ourselves increasingly at odds with the broader society. This context invites both new challenges and opportunities for us in advancing our local Church’s mission, which is that “in Jesus Christ all might be rescued and have abundant life, for the glory of the Father.”

Given both the difficulties and opportunities of our cultural landscape, we must respond with more than tweaks to our tactics. To build the kingdom of God in a time of apostolic mission presents our institutions and each of us to embark on an even greater “missionary conversion” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 30). This is not to say that everything we have been doing to date is wrong; it is simply to acknowledge that the cultural sands have shifted under our feet and that we have to respond.

If we are to boldly and compellingly preach and witness to Jesus Christ in this new apostolic time, we must move from a mode of operating that is more suited to a Christendom context to one that is apostolic.

Where must this change, this conversion, begin?

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I am writing this pastoral note to propose that the first change Christ is calling us to, as an archdiocese, is not found in what we do, but in how we see.

## In Search of a Story

What do I mean by a change in how we see?

It is an inescapable fact of human existence that we are destined to wrestle with the profound spiritual questions of life.

*Who am I? Is there a God? How should I live? What will make me happy? Where am I going?*

More than just knowing the “what” of the universe, we need to know the “why.” We want to know what it all means. At our core, we want to know the story.

Over the centuries, many philosophies, religions, and ideologies have claimed to have an inside track on that story or a unique response to those deep questions, yet each has merely represented humanity’s best guesses on possible answers, our own attempts to arrive at understanding.

What is fundamentally unique to Christianity is our claim that The Story we proclaim is not the result of human thinking alone but has been revealed to us by God.

Our earth-shattering profession is that God himself has provided answers to these questions that are rooted in our being. Revelation, found in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, gives us the answer. These present not disconnected individual lives, but a story of salvation – the Father’s love for humanity. More than a confusing collection of disparate books, if you have eyes to see, you discover in the pages of the Bible a narrative, told by God to humanity, of why he made us, what happened to interrupt his plan and how he came to win his world back.

The most startling feature of this Story is that it really happened. It is the recounting of God’s acting in history, which has first been experienced, testified to, and then proclaimed.

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Too many Catholics, however, go their entire lives without ever being clear on this narrative, without it being presented systematically and compellingly. Even lifelong Catholics receive Communion, baptize children, get married and go to Mass every Sunday without ever really coming to a deep awareness of the point of it all. They have questions that go unanswered.

*Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is everything in the world so obviously messed up? Has God done anything about it? Why does the Church exist, at all?*

If we want answers to these questions, we need to know The Story.

This is why, as your pastors and priests told you this weekend, from the Feast of Christ the King through Christmas, the entire Archdiocese of Denver is going on retreat together. The goal of this retreat is simple but profound: to learn our Story and what it means for our lives and the life of the Church.

The content of this retreat will be delivered in homilies each Sunday, systematically unpacking the story of salvation and leaning on four key terms to guide its telling – Created, Captured, Rescued, Response.<sup>1</sup>

This Story will elicit wonder at the fact that God **Created** the unfathomably huge universe simply out of love and created each of us out of delight at the possibility that you and I would exist. The crowning achievement of his creation is man and woman, created in his image and likeness and given the blessing of procreation.

It will unpack how the original blessedness we were made for was lost when humanity was **Captured**, sold into slavery to sin and death by our first parents, Adam and Eve. When “tempted by the Devil,” they “lost trust in [their] Creator.” (CCC 397). This condition of sin, into which we were sold, is more than just a separation from God; it means we are held in captivity by powers far beyond our control. We have no hope of saving ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> These terms are borrowed from Fr. John Riccardo’s presentation of the Gospel in his retreats and writing. I have been blessed to be working with Fr. John and his apostolate Acts XXIX for the last year. I recommend his book, “Rescued: The Unexpected and Extraordinary News of the Gospel” for going deeper on these concepts.

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But God did not leave us in captivity. The Story will continue when immediately after the Fall, in Genesis 3:15, God tells us of the woman's "offspring" who will come and crush the head of the Serpent. Jesus, himself the Son of God and our Redeemer, is sent by the Father to bring "liberty to captives" (Lk 4:18) and bring us home. He became man to **Rescue** us from sin and death and conquer all that binds us.

This Story leads us to the critical question at the heart of all of our lives: if God did all of this, how should I **Respond**? Where would your gratitude for someone who saved your life lead you? And, importantly, if others were still lost, even unaware of having been captured, would you feel compelled to be part of helping them to experience freedom?

This proclamation of what God has done in Christ, known in theological circles as the *kerygma*, is meant to do more than be an interesting re-telling of events that happened in the distant past. As this narrative is unpacked over these six weeks, my hope is that all Catholics in our pews have a chance to be "overwhelmed and brought to the decision to entrust [themselves] to Jesus Christ by faith" (CT 25) so that this story will begin to shape the way we see our lives and the entire world.

## A Biblical Worldview

Being overwhelmed and moved to conversion by this Story is the foundational, irreplaceable centerpiece of the missionary conversion the Archdiocese of Denver needs to operate in an apostolic mode and not a Christendom one. That is because the first element needed for the renewal of the Church is not strategic planning, changes to structure or doctrine. The initial battle is for our minds and hearts; it is a question of *worldview*, a question of *how we see*.

What is a "worldview?" Simply, it is the lens through which one sees all reality; our interpretive key for life. Think of eyeglasses, sunglasses, or contact lenses; each changes how we see in some way and our sight becomes mediated through that lens. The phrase "rose-colored glasses" refers to someone whose positivity colors how they view various circumstances. Similarly, 3-D glasses change the experience of viewing certain movies.

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The temptation today, for many, is to take one's worldview from an ideological camp and let that inform one's perspective of the Gospel or "what the Church should do." We derive our vision for reality from the world and the many voices which vie for our minds and hearts and only then work backward to a system of belief that corresponds to this "secular worldview."

Contrast this way of thinking with Jesus' testimony to Pontius Pilate in the Gospel from the Feast of Christ the King:

"Jesus answered, 'My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants [would] be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here.'

Pilate said to him, 'Then you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say I am a king. **For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice (emphasis added).'**'"

A common and worldly way of thinking attempts to adapt the difficult teachings of Jesus Christ the secular world finds unacceptable. We must avoid this temptation. Jesus does not gain a single disciple by his followers watering down or adapting his Gospel on his behalf, in order to make it, and therefore him, seemingly more palatable. We have only to look at his teaching on the Bread of Life in John 6 as confirmation. Jesus told his followers the Eucharist was his body and blood and he let them walk away when it wasn't something they could accept.

The Gospel we preach is not one we ourselves invented but one which was revealed by Christ. The Church does not speak on her own behalf but she speaks that which she has heard from God. We listen to what he has spoken and hand it on to others.

Brothers and sisters, ask yourselves: what is my worldview? Is it a biblical worldview, shaped first and foremost by The Story? Or is it a secular one, shaped first by an ideology, whether it be consumerism, an identity, or a political party?

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God is inviting us, in this apostolic age, to move beyond ideologies in order to “put on the mind of Christ” and **re-acquire a biblical worldview**. We need to see and interpret the events of our own lives, the events of the world, all of reality, through the lens of The Story, to let the “words and deeds” (DV 2) of Jesus Christ be the standard for our own lives and not vice versa.

As C.S. Lewis wrote, “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else.”

## Fruits of a Biblical Worldview

Over two millennia of the Church’s life, the saints have found in the “narrow way” (Mt 7:14) that Jesus offers a “new horizon and decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est* 1) for their life and a joy they never thought possible. Their perseverance to “run the race” (1 Cor 9:24) began with seeing the world through the lens of The Story.

The same is possible for us today. The hope we need to navigate and even thrive in our faith amid the trying cultural moment in which we live begins with our worldview and how it shapes our minds and hearts.

What happens to our lives when we **re-acquire a biblical worldview**?

We come to consider the span of our lives as a brief but essential moment in a grand epic narrative, unfolding from long before we were born and continuing long after we go into eternity. We accept that no life is an accident; you and I have been chosen, intentionally, to play a definite part in this epic adventure.

We see clearly who God is: that he is Lord, and he is for us, so we can trust him. We recognize that everything he has done to rescue us means that we matter, he love us more than we could have ever imagined. We understand that the mission and identity of the Church, in all she teaches and celebrates, are oriented to help God get his world back by rescuing his children from sin and death...to bring us home.

We begin to see on both sides of the veil, to have an eye and a heart on eternity and to see our daily lives in light of the supernatural mysteries of our faith. Whatever difficulties life presents, we have the courage to hold fast to

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the truth that God is always on the move, he is not worried about the state of things, and he wins in the end.

Pope Francis, in his important exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, summarized well the confidence and hope in Jesus Christ this biblical worldview can bring:

*“Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half the battle and we bury our talents. While painfully aware of our own frailties, we have to march on without giving in, keeping in mind what the Lord said to Saint Paul: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor 12:9). Christian triumph is always a cross, yet a cross which is at the same time a victorious banner borne with aggressive tenderness against the assaults of evil. The evil spirit of defeatism... is the fruit of an anxious...lack of trust” (Evangelii Gaudium 85)*

These are graces which I earnestly desire for you, the faithful of the Archdiocese of Denver, through this Advent’s extraordinary opportunity to hear The Story.

May this archdiocesan-wide retreat bear more fruit in our lives and hearts! May we fall in love with the God who has loved us first! May Our Lady of Guadalupe guide us in imitating her fiat and surrender and her attentiveness to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit.

You are continually in my prayers.

+ Samuel J. Aquila  
Archbishop of Denver

*A final note: this archdiocesan-wide time of reflection and retreat will also be the first step of our Archdiocesan Discernment Process, our implementation of the local phase of the Synod on Synodality called for by Pope Francis. If we are to begin attempting to hear and listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit through this process, we know that we need the clarity on the mission of the Church that only this biblical worldview can bring. For more information on this process, please visit our website at [synod.archden.org](http://synod.archden.org).*