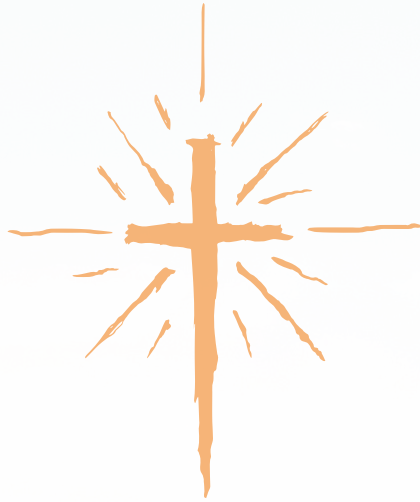


OUR APOSTOLIC MOMENT

A Lenten Pastoral Note to the
Faithful of the Archdiocese of Denver



ARCHDIOCESE
of
DENVER



Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

At the outset of our collective Lenten journey of prayer, penance and almsgiving, I am writing this pastoral note to reflect on where we are in our cultural moment, to share how I believe we as an archdiocese are being called to respond and, finally, to invite you personally to three practices this Lent. Ultimately, it is my wish to propose to you, in a turbulent time, the one answer to every question and longing of the human heart: Jesus Christ, and him crucified. He who is “*the way, the truth and the life,*” who leads us to and shows us the Father (Jn. 14:6-7).

The Close of Christendom

The COVID-19 pandemic, social and political unrest, and even strife within the Church has left many of us reeling, wondering where to turn for answers and consolation. The bewildering confusion and discouragement many feel is certainly a consequence of all three of these events, but these symptoms also arise from something far deeper.

*“Ours is not an age of change but a change of age.”*¹ In this phrase, Pope Francis summarizes our period in history well. Our Church has always encountered challenges in proclaiming Christ to the culture. Today, however, you and I are now living our Catholic faith in a post-Christian world.

What do I mean by “post-Christian?” The successful evangelization of the early Church during the first apostolic age flowered into a culture, referred to as “Christendom,” that was itself built on Christian principles and ideals. While Christendom was rarely the perfect embodiment of those ideals, it was a cultural period based on them, at least in principle, and striving to live them. It was marked by an explosion of art, science, universities, hospital systems, countless social services and the formation of peaceful societies based on the rule of law in what had previously been a barbaric and pagan Europe—all for the greater glory of God.

A secularizing momentum, which has had its ebbs and flows over the last few hundred years, has now brought this Christendom culture to a close. Archbishop Fulton Sheen put it most bluntly, as long ago as 1974, stating, *“We are at the end of Christendom. Not Christianity, not the church. Christendom is the economic, political, and social life as inspired by Christian principles. That is what is ending and, because we live in it from day to day, we do not see the decline.”* We can see two clear and devastating effects of secularism in the empty churches of Europe, once a bastion of Christianity, and in the rapid growth in the numbers of “nones” in the United States.

Called to Hope

But more than a collapse in Church attendance, as people forget God, we can observe and experience a general collapse of hope. This clarifies so much of what we see going on today. In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, “*A spiritual desert is spreading: an interior emptiness, an unnamed fear, a quiet sense of despair.*”² Perhaps more frighteningly, we see a growth in violence, born of deep restlessness and the death of supernatural charity in many souls. Again, to quote the Pope Emeritus (then Cardinal Ratzinger), “*The deepest poverty is the inability of joy (which) presupposes and produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice—all defects that devastate the life of individuals and of the world.*”³ To lose God is to lose the purpose and meaning of life, and in that barren landscape where can hope and love take root and thrive?

We could find ourselves tempted to wish for smoother sailing, a time that was more supportive of Christian beliefs and practices, but God did not choose you and me for those times. We are living in an apostolic era that calls for joyful witness in the face of opposition. He picked us for this moment for a reason and he wants us to engage with both the unique obstacles and opportunities of our time for the sake of the Gospel. He is calling his Church to go on mission.

Our Apostolic Moment

How do we as an archdiocese respond to this “change of eras?” In this new apostolic age, we will respond as we always have, with the Gospel. Like the early Church, we must become capable of compellingly proclaiming Jesus Christ and the freedom he won for us from the current and eternal damage inflicted by sin.

The way to return to fruitfulness is to encounter Jesus personally, repent and return to him. It is he who shows us what it really means to be fully human; he alone can teach us in these critical days how to find the fullness of life for which we all long.

Jesus is calling us to be bold in fighting trends in the world that are opposed to the Gospel, and to be even bolder in loving people as we invite them to the joy that can only be found in his Church. This is a difficult challenge; doing so will require even greater conversion for every Catholic and institution in the Archdiocese of Denver. Still, I believe this is what God is calling us to and he promises to supply us all we need. By his grace, we will become the forerunners of a new and fruitful missionary age of the Church.

How do we begin? This Lent, I sense that the task before us is to begin by begging the Lord to make us an apostolic people. To that end, as we prepare to celebrate our Lord’s resurrection at Easter, I want to invite you to three important practices that will begin to guide us.



Invitation #1

To Rediscover the Lens of the Gospel

First, I invite you to encounter – or re-encounter – the vision of the Gospel. This story, of a God who, out of love, created and then sent his Son to win his world back when it had fallen far from him, is the “why” that animates everything we do as a Church. The fundamental message of the Gospel firmly establishes us in our identities as beloved daughters and sons of the Father and spurs us on to embrace the complementary calls of holiness and mission.

It is our response to this proclamation which brings vitality to our faith and provides meaning and context for all of life. Grounding ourselves in these timeless and fundamental realities can cut through the noise of our moment, no matter the troubles we face. It is a declaration of Good News to a weary world.

To let this story wash over us anew and to re-encounter Jesus Christ, I encourage you this Lent to read the four Gospels. You are also invited to participate in our archdiocesan Lenten initiative to host small groups who together go through the program, *The Search*, from the Augustine Institute and Chris Stefanick, as a way of re-encountering this message.

I am hopeful that parishes will find many opportunities in addition to those above to let this proclamation of the Good News ring out: through preaching, retreats and efforts to announce the Gospel. I invite everyone to let the Gospel shape our perspective of who we are as a Church and what Christ has promised he will accomplish through us.



Invitation #2

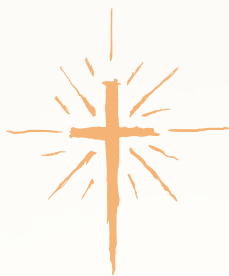
To a Movement of Prayer and Fasting

My next invitation to you is to the spiritual battle of an earnest prayer and fasting. Undoubtedly, you will be taking on various mortifications for Lent this year. I ask in your prayer that you add an intention to your list: for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Archdiocese of Denver, that our local Church might be boldly focused on mission and committed to preaching the Gospel.

Today, I am inaugurating a wave of intercessory prayer that will wash over northern Colorado so that hearts, minds, parishes, schools and civic institutions might be flung open wide to the workings of God. This will include, but not be limited to:

- A prayer to be read at all Masses from Ash Wednesday through Easter
- A 54-day Rosary novena for renewal, beginning Ash Wednesday and ending Divine Mercy Sunday (April 11)

I ask you to add your own prayer and fasting to this effort. Offer Holy Hours that we may grow humble and docile to the inspirations of the Father, like St. Joseph, in this year set aside in his honor. Fast, so that in our lack, we might become a Church that is hungry for the love of the Father, a deeper encounter with Jesus Christ, especially in the Eucharist, and ready to be filled by the fire of the Holy Spirit.



Invitation #3

To Form Our Consciences

Finally, I invite us all to engage in the formation of our consciences. In the messiness of apostolic times, we must root our minds in the truths of the faith that will keep us from being blown about by the fierce cultural winds coursing through society and even the Church today. Each one of us must take this important duty seriously. We must ask ourselves: which voice do I listen to and is it the voice of Jesus Christ? Do I subordinate my thoughts, words, actions, and, yes, my entire life to Jesus Christ and to the Father? Prudential judgment is needed in responding to each of our spheres of influence, and all these efforts must be anchored to the Gospel.

Today, a myriad of voices surrounds us. We hear from the world, priests and bishops, fellow Catholics, secularists, and yes, even the voice of the Devil. Beware which voices you listen to, which fill your time and your heart. The Devil, whose name in Hebrew, Satan, means accuser, is the one who seeks to sow division, doubt and animosity by constant accusation. We cannot allow our minds and hearts to be filled with bitterness and anger, lest we become a brood of vipers—those who seek to tear down others with anger and poisonous speech. We must test, in the Holy Spirit, every voice with the teachings of Jesus Christ, which we discover in Sacred Scripture and Apostolic Tradition. We must test our own motives when we speak, to ensure our voices align with Christ's.

While we must proclaim the truth and not shy away from conflict, when necessary, there is a distinctly Christian way to approach those who do not agree with us. We must begin with seeking the good of everyone we encounter, approaching them with charity in our hearts.

Ad hominem attacks against others cannot be a work of the Holy Spirit. We should also ask ourselves what is forming our hearts and minds; is it podcasts, blogs and social media, or the Gospel? As St. Paul reminded the Romans, he reminds us today, “*watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve,*” (Rm. 16:17-18).

I feel a pressing duty to remind you that Jesus Christ calls us, as a Church, to a supernatural unity that is more than what the world offers. Of course, we must always stand for the truth and the dignity of the human person, but we must never let that undermine our witness to God’s love. What matters for us is that we are not creating or fueling division ourselves but are patiently enduring the trials that such divisions bring. We must maintain our fidelity to Christ and the deposit of faith we have in the Church, while never losing charity for our neighbor, or even our enemies.

Conclusion

These three simple invitations: to encounter Jesus Christ anew in hearing the core Gospel message, to pray and fast for our archdiocese, and to form your conscience, might not seem like grand spiritual quests, but I assure you: each is essential and foundational to the apostolic conversion to which we are called. I am grateful for your prayerful consideration of each request. Over the coming years, I intend on continuing to periodically release these pastoral notes as a method of sharing my heart and prayer with you as your archbishop.

Since Pope St. John Paul II's visit for the extraordinary occasion of World Youth Day in 1993, our archdiocese has long been known as a bellwether of the New Evangelization in the United States. Yet, what Christ said is true, "Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more" (Lk. 12:48). May we continue to fulfill the vision he set before us on that great occasion.

This Lent join me in praying for the fire of the love of Jesus Christ to be enkindled in our hearts. May he remain our first love!

God bless you this Lenten season,



Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila

Endnotes

- 1 Pope Francis, Meeting with the Bishops of Brazil, 28 July 2013.
- 2 Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, World Youth Day Mass Homily, July 20, 2008.
- 3 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "On the New Evangelization," Address to Catechists and Teachers, December 2000.