



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

## LIVING IN THE WORD OF GOD

*A Call to the Clergy and Lay Faithful of the Archdiocese of Edmonton*

### INTRODUCTION

On May 10th, 1959, at just two weeks of age, I was taken by my parents to our parish church to be baptized. It is without question the best and most important action my mother and father ever undertook on my behalf. By the sacrament of Baptism, I was washed with the mercy of God the Father and given the gift of new life through a communion of love and friendship with his Son, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it brought me into the community of people who follow Jesus Christ as Lord and united me to them by the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within all the baptized. With the passage of time my gratitude for being a member of the Church has steadily deepened. It is truly beautiful to be a Catholic. What begins at Baptism is a way of life that is shaped by sacred teachings, strengthened by sacramental celebration, and marked by loving service of neighbour. When this life is fully embraced in faith, hope and charity, it bears within itself the promise of eternal life! Is it any wonder that I thank God often for the decision my parents made to have me baptized?

I recall this event in my own life because this is what Pope Francis is asking of all of us. Often he asks people gathered with him in St. Peter's Square if they know the date of their Baptism. It is an important question. At Baptism, our life in Christ as members of his Church begins. It is an anniversary worthy of attentive recall and great celebration.

From the time he became our Holy Father, Pope Francis has stressed repeatedly the need for us to understand and accept what it means to be a baptized believer in Jesus Christ. He speaks of this most often in terms of "discipleship". Baptism makes us disciples, that is to say, people who know and love Jesus Christ and respond to his call to follow him. In particular, the Pope likes to stress that Baptism makes us *missionary* disciples, endowed with many gifts and talents for the service of others in the name of the Lord. If a person is baptized in infancy as I was, it is very easy to take for granted the wondrous gift bestowed by that sacrament. Pope Francis wants us to be fully aware of what it means to be baptized, to rejoice in the gift, and to embrace completely the Christian way of living.

So, let us ask: "What does it mean to follow Jesus?" In fact, that question can be answered rather simply. It is a matter of listening and doing. An authentic disciple of Jesus Christ is one who first listens to his Word and then puts it into practice. From of old, obedient listening has been the distinctive mark of God's people. This was expressed simply and beautifully by the prophet Isaiah: "Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught." (*Isaiah* 50:4) Now that God's Word has become a human being in Jesus Christ, we listen with particular attention to the words spoken by the Saviour himself. Indeed, Jesus himself affirmed the centrality of hearing and practicing his Word for all disciples. In St. Luke we read: "*Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.' But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'*" (*Luke* 8:19-21). Commenting upon this, Pope Francis said, "These are the two conditions in order to follow Jesus: to listen to the word of God, and to put it into practice. This is the Christian life – nothing more. Simple, simple. Maybe we've made it a little difficult, with many explanations that no one understands, but the Christian life is thus: listening to the Word of God and practicing it." (*Homily at Daily Mass*, September 23, 2014)

The purpose of this letter is to offer some thoughts as to how we, as members of this Archdiocesan family, can together listen carefully to the Word of God and, in a shared commitment, put it into practice. Some reflection questions are also posed in order to help us examine how we can more fully embrace our Christian identity and joyfully follow the Christian way of life.

## **LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD**

St. Paul teaches that faith comes from what is heard (cf. *Romans* 10:17). This means that the first act of the disciple is to listen carefully to what God is saying to us in the words of Jesus.

### **Daily Attentiveness to the Word of God**

The hearing of Christ's Word demands a silent and attentive listening. This requires effort and determination. Living in a world of noise, we must be always cultivating, with the help of God's grace, an inner stillness in which we are disposed to hear and be transformed by the Word of God.

If this is not already our practice, I ask that each of us make time each day for a prayerful listening to the Word of God. We may wonder how, in the midst of many demands upon our time, this might be possible. This can be a particular challenge, especially, for parents with infants and young children. However hectic our circumstances, Jesus invites us to remember "the one thing necessary:" taking time to listen to him (cf. *Luke* 10:42).

Even if we take as little as ten minutes each day to read a few lines of the Bible, or one of the readings assigned for daily mass, this encounter with Christ will change our lives.

To help each of us encounter the Word of God daily, the Archdiocese of Edmonton is offering some new resources. A short excerpt from each day's mass readings, accompanied by an appropriate image, is being posted on the archdiocesan Facebook page and Instagram account, suitable both for a moment of personal morning reflection and for sharing with family and friends. In the future we hope to offer parishioners the opportunity to subscribe to a text service so that they can receive these lines each day on their mobile phones – the devices on which so many of us rely for important information of the day. Short video presentations of the Gospel readings will also be produced for selected solemnities throughout the year. In addition, we will enlist the expertise of local Scripture scholars to help answer questions that naturally arise from some of the more difficult or challenging passages in Sacred Scripture. The Archbishop's blog, *The Reason for Our Hope*, also offers reflections on the Scripture readings from each Sunday, and the Archbishop's Twitter account offers a daily note inspired by the mass readings of the day. I invite everyone to make use of these resources and also to share them as, together, we commit ourselves to a prayerful and obedient listening to the Word of God.

### **The Word of God in the Home**

I encourage families, too, to listen together to the Word of God. Through a careful listening to this Word, families encounter the Lord in their very midst and hear within the depths of their hearts his assurance of love and call to holiness and service. Here I suggest three simple ways by which our families can make the Word of God central to their daily living and draw from it guidance and peace.

#### *Grace at Mealtime*

In line with a specific request of the Holy Father, I ask that all our families return to the beautiful practice of praying before and after meals (cf. *Laudato Si*, 227). Together with our traditional prayer to God for the blessing of the meal and our sharing of it, this can be an opportunity to hear a line from Sacred Scripture and respond to it. To facilitate this, the Archdiocese has created a prayer card for use at mealtime. This was distributed to parishes in the Spring of 2016, and is available on our Archdiocesan website. Added to the traditional prayers, there is also on the card a verse from the Bible, offered as one small way to help families remain centered daily upon the Word of God. Families may wish to substitute the card's biblical citation with others that I send out by Twitter on a weekly basis, and which are shared with parishes through the *Quid Novum* email bulletin for inclusion in their Sunday bulletin.

*Creation of a Prayer Space in the Home*

I recall from my days as a parish priest the practice of one family that created a "sacred space" in their home by simply placing a candle in the corner of one room. They would gather daily around the lit candle to offer their spontaneous prayers to God for his blessing upon their day. Many families have similar practices. It is important that spouses find time and ways to pray together and that parents and children together do the same. The heart of that family prayer should be the Word of God, who speaks to us in the varied circumstances of our lives. Perhaps, in addition to a candle, a Bible could be "enthroned" on a stand or table. The Gospel of the day or of the Sunday could be read, or included in the family's prayers might be the suggested scriptural citations and response offered by the Archdiocese as mentioned in the preceding paragraph.

*Family Discussion of the Sunday Homily*

Central to the disciple's rhythm of life is the Word proclaimed on Sunday at mass. By means of the homily, the priest or deacon helps us understand the message of Sacred Scripture and apply it to our daily living. By what means do we carry that message forward into the events of our week? One way to do so is to make time as a family to discuss what was heard at mass and share together how each one will allow God's Word to direct their thoughts and behaviours throughout the week.

**Listening to the Word of God with Fellow Disciples**

It is important to create opportunities for fellow disciples to gather and reflect deeply upon the Word of God. In this way we not only support one another as we grow in our relationship with Jesus, but also encourage one another to embrace the common mission that is ours in virtue of our Baptism into his Church. This can happen in a variety of contexts. For example, many of our parishes have been doing this for some time now through programmes of Bible study. Members of ecclesial movements come together in homes to hear and reflect upon Sacred Scripture. Administrative staff in our Catholic school districts begin many of their meetings by focusing upon the Word of God through a method of prayerful Scripture reading called *Lectio Divina*. Chaplains in hospitals and prisons regularly read and reflect upon the Bible with patients and inmates. What other opportunities might we fashion? I ask our parishes, ecclesial movements, and Catholic institutions to consider this question carefully and offer ways in which God's sacred Word can be commonly heard and embraced.

## PUTTING THE WORD OF GOD INTO PRACTICE

Throughout the history of the Church, the Christian response to God's love revealed in Christ has been threefold: worship, witness and service. In these three ways we put into practice the Word of God.

### **Worship**

In all of Scripture, the words of Jesus likely most familiar to Catholic ears are these: "Do this in memory of me." Spoken by the Lord at the Last Supper, these words have always been understood by the Church as his command to repeat in his memory what he did with his disciples the night prior to his crucifixion. This is why we gather for Sunday mass, the sacrament of the Eucharist, and why the Church insists that doing so is a sacred obligation. Yet, Christians respond to this command of the Lord not as a heavy and unwanted burden. Rather, it is a joyful duty. At mass, enabled by the Holy Spirit we offer our lives to God the Father, through Jesus his Son, as an act of joyful praise and heartfelt thanksgiving for God's saving love. Through the reception of Holy Communion, we are nourished with the very Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus and thus receive from him all that we need for our life as his disciples. This is why disciples of Jesus have recognized from the early days of the Church that they cannot live without the Eucharist.

From our awareness of this wondrous gift that is the Eucharist, and of the Lord's command that it be celebrated in his memory, arise some questions: Am I, in fact, putting the Word of God into practice by participating fully every week in Sunday mass? Do I allow other activities to take priority over my sacred obligation? Do I take time to prepare for mass by reading in advance the mass readings, pondering the many blessings for which to give thanks, or considering the needs I wish to place before the altar of God's mercy?

Of course, our Catholic Tradition esteems many ways of worshipping God and the Church encourages their practice. The very heart of all worship is the sacrament of the Eucharist. Do we consciously make it the heart of our lives?

### **Witness**

St. John writes these beautiful words at the beginning of his first letter: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (*1John* 1:1-4)

Here St. John is expressing what we know from experience to be true. When we have encountered Jesus Christ and been transformed by his mercy and love, we naturally want to tell others about it and invite them to be one with us in a community of joy! The making known to others of what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ, and for each of us in our own individual lives, is what is meant by giving witness. The desire and ability to be witnesses to Christ is granted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Acts* 1:8), whom we have received in a particular way in the sacrament of Confirmation.

There are many ways we can put the Word of God into practice through the act of witnessing to Christ. The most effective is by the way we live our lives. People pay more attention to what we do than to what we say. Yet, there are times when we are called upon to speak on the basis of our belief, particularly in those moments when people close to us, co-workers or society in general take directions contrary to the teachings of our Lord.

I ask that we each undertake a careful review of our lives in the light of the call to be witnesses to our Lord in the sight of other people. What message do I communicate to others by my way of living, patterns of thought and speech, or modes of behaviour? Out of concern for reputation or fear of rebuke, do I stay silent when circumstances require that I speak the truth? The Holy Spirit has been given that we might be witnesses. Let us call upon him to provide us with the ability to do so and thus put into practice the Word of God.

## **Service**

On the night of the Last Supper, after Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he taught that by this action he was giving us an example to follow, and then spoke this command: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (*John* 13:34-35) Putting the Word of God into practice means serving our brothers and sisters in love. To love as Jesus loved means that we make sacrifices daily for the good of the other. This typically takes place by the gifts we make of time, talent and treasure. Let us consider this carefully and seriously. These are God's gifts to us to be used according to his purpose and in keeping with our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ.

What use do I make of time? Do I set aside time for prayer, for Sunday mass, for the enjoyment of family? Am I able to dedicate some time to volunteer in the parish, our schools, hospitals or charitable organizations? What time can be dedicated to the study of the faith, or to understanding in the light of the Gospel the issues that impact the poor, both at home and abroad, and the environment?

Am I sharing with the Church the talents and experience with which I have been blessed? There are ample opportunities for service at the Archdiocesan and parish levels, and in our Catholic institutions.

Of course, the call to give of ourselves relates not just to the direct support of Archdiocesan and parish ministries. It pertains, as well, to the embrace of our baptismal call to be missionary disciples. Each of us is sent "into the world" in service so that it be transformed with the power of the Gospel of our Lord. What is the Lord asking of me?

How am I using the gift of financial resources? The Word of God calls us to offer God "the first fruits" of our labours (cf. *Deuteronomy* 26: 1-15; *Proverbs* 3: 5-10; cf. *2Corinthians* 9: 6-15). This means that our budgeting and financial planning should include the mission of Christ's Church and the needs of our brothers and sisters among our first priorities. I ask everyone, as we heed the call to embrace our Baptism, to consider the needs of the parish, the Archdiocese, our institutions and the community in general. Let us reflect upon the proportional, even sacrificial giving that can be offered through both regular gifts and future estate planning.

### **Mercy at the Heart of It All**

The disciple lives from the mercy of God. The Lord calls us precisely in our weakness, and mercifully bestows upon us all the gifts we need for the fulfillment of our Christian calling. Our need for mercy is especially clear as we strive to do God's Word through worship, witness and service. True worship, especially through celebration of the Eucharist, requires that we examine our way of living so as first to seek forgiveness and reconciliation (cf. *1Corinthians* 11:27-29). Credible witness demands that we be healed of any sinful ways of living that do not correspond to what we profess to believe. Joyful service of others arises when God's mercy heals us of sin that closes us in upon ourselves.

I invite each member of our Archdiocese to examine their practice of turning to God for mercy. Let us each consider: When was the last time I went to confession? How often do I seek the Lord's mercy in this wonderful sacrament? These are essential questions that every missionary disciple must ponder with great seriousness, because only by receiving God's mercy can we become its agents for others.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this letter we have considered together the call of Pope Francis to embrace fully the meaning of our Baptism and to live consciously as disciples of Jesus Christ. This means hearing the Word of God and practicing it. As we move forward in response to this invitation of the Holy Father, it would be important to consider this one simple but urgent question: "Whose word do I, *in fact*, hear and follow?" Many different voices speak words to us daily. Consider the Internet, television, radio, books and magazines. We are putting those words into practice when we allow them to influence and shape our ways of thinking and living.

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Yet, there is only one voice that we know is fully worthy of our trust. That is the voice of Jesus, who is the only one who speaks the words of eternal life (cf. *John* 6:68). To be disciples, to live in accord with our Baptismal identity and dignity, is to allow only his words to guide and direct our lives. Let us take great care to hear only his Word, to turn away from any voice that leads us from him, and to put into practice that which he tells us. Then we shall know the joy of living as his brothers and sisters.

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This letter is also available online at <http://caedm.ca/letter>.