



Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap  
*Archbishop of Denver*

Pastoral Letter

## **Your Youth is Renewed Like the Eagle's**

**A pastoral letter to the people of Northern Colorado on youth ministry.**

+ Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.  
Archbishop of Denver

+ José H. Gomez, S.T.D.  
Auxiliary Bishop of Denver

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To commemorate the 10-year anniversary of World Youth Day 1993 in Denver, Pope John Paul II's historic gathering with youth at Cherry Creek State Park, the bishops of Denver promulgated the following pastoral letter on youth ministry.

### **I. The future belongs to the young**

How wonderfully God loves us, and how wonderful is the action of his love in our lives! Scripture uses a marvelous image to express the transforming effects of God's love. In Psalm 103 the psalmist imagines himself speaking to his soul. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits" — forgiveness, healing, redemption, love and mercy. Then, as if summing up all the rest, he declares that God "satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Ps 103:1-5).

The idea of life's renewal — so that it resembles the youth of an eagle — is a good place to begin a pastoral letter on youth ministry. As the eagle is a symbol of youth and strength, so we pray that our faith, that puts down roots and begins to develop early in young Catholics' lives, will continue to grow and sustain our young people, filling them with joy throughout life. As the spiritual vibrancy associated with youth is one of God's great gifts to his friends, so we look upon ministry to young people — and we invite you to look upon it, too — as a source of continuing vitality for our Church.

"The future belongs to young people," Pope John Paul II often declares.

The natural link between youth and the future explains why youth ministry is not "optional," something to do or not as we choose. It is an indispensable investment in the future — the future of young people themselves and also the future of the world and the Church. "The Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way sees herself in the young," the Holy Father has said. May we always see that very clearly, and respond with courage and love.

We address these words to all Catholics of the Archdiocese of Denver, but particularly to those with special opportunities and obligations for forming and guiding youth — parents, pastors, teachers, and of course youth ministers, including all those volunteering as youth leaders. To all of you we say: Your work is vitally important. You have our encouragement and support. Young people are the future, and you hold the future in your hands.

## II. Vision and values for youth ministry

World Youth Day in Denver in 1993 was a decisive and memorable event. And there are two vital lessons we should draw from its memories.

The first is that love and goodness are real and powerful. More than half a million people came together for the Holy Father's closing Mass at World Youth Day 1993. There was no violence, no conflict, very nearly no crime. More than 200,000 foreign visitors were in Denver that week. They were welcomed, housed, fed and otherwise assisted, with no serious problems. That is almost miraculous in itself.

It reflects the fact that young people truly are hungry for God, and God always responds to that hunger with his presence — he "satisfies you with good," as the psalmist says. Also, the young people in our archdiocese are culturally and ethnically diverse. Their welcoming response back in 1993 reflects also that young people in our archdiocese are willing to open their arms to the challenge of diversity.

The second lesson is that evil is also very real. Despite the transfiguring impact of World Youth Day, Columbine High School, with its memory of extraordinary violence, sits just a few miles from the park where Pope John Paul II celebrated his closing Mass. Evil hates goodness, and it will attack the innocent when it can.

In his book "Crossing the Threshold of Hope" the Holy Father reminds us that we are all part of a "struggle for the soul of the contemporary world." Christian life is spiritual warfare — not waged by guns and bombs but by the choices we make: love over hate, virtue over sin, respect and concern for others over our own selfishness.

It is against this background that we share with you our vision for the renewal of youth ministry in the archdiocese.

This vision is not uniquely our own. It has sources. Among these is a pastoral letter, "A Vision of Youth Ministry," published by the bishops of the United States in 1976. The bishops outlined two fundamental purposes of ministry to youth: fostering the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person, and; drawing young people to responsible participation in the life, mission and work of the community of faith. A pastoral letter of 1997, "Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry," added a third purpose: helping the young to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in today's world. These goals provide a basis for the renewal of youth ministry in the archdiocese; they are goals every parish should aim at in its service to youth.

We also gladly acknowledge as a source the many writings and talks of Pope John Paul to and about youth. Especially helpful for its insight and comprehensiveness is "The Letter to the Youth of the World," which he published for the 1985 International Youth Year. And we thank our collaborators in the ministry to youth who have worked long, hard and creatively to help shape the vision set out here.

We want to help young people develop a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a deeper commitment to their Catholic faith and a willing acceptance of the challenge of Christian discipleship. We urge every parent, pastor, pastoral council member, parishioner and youth minister or youth leader in the Archdiocese of Denver to ponder those words and make them his or her own.

### **Several components are key to realizing this vision.**

**Formation.** Youth ministry programs must include human formation, catechesis, prayer, worship and service that are aimed to deepen a personal relationship with Jesus. The formation is directed to the young people themselves, of course, but those involved in ministry to youth also open themselves to ongoing conversion by sharing in these elements of the program.

**Catholic doctrine.** Youth ministry is grounded in the teaching of Christ transmitted and proclaimed by the Catholic Church. To know God is to love Him and to know God more deeply is to love Him more deeply. Thus, growth in knowledge of the content of the faith and in Catholic identity is essential. IAn inviting atmosphere. Young people should be able to explore their faith and develop a relationship with Jesus in a setting that is loving, enjoyable, open to diverse cultures and forms of expression of the faith — and challenging. It is up to pastors and parishioners to make their parishes places like that.

**A relational ministry.** Relational ministry is incarnational. Just as the second person of the Blessed Trinity became man in order to be in relationship with us and reveal to us the Father's love and plan for our lives, so must adults go where young people are and incarnate the love of God by building relationships with them. In the end, youth don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. IParticipation and commitment. Participation in the life, mission and work of the faith community should

include opportunities for young people to express compassion and concern by serving others. That means much more than being the clean-up crew at parish socials, as helpful as that is. Youth should have active roles in liturgy, parish leadership, and the full range of parish events and programs.

**Partnership.** Effective youth ministry is a team effort involving parents, pastors, youth ministers, other parish members, the resources of the archdiocese, and, naturally, young people themselves. Everyone in the parish ought to be prepared to share his or her experience, energy and talents to make youth ministry a success.

**Competent, professional ministers.** The Church's support for youth ministers takes several necessary forms: certification, continuing education, financial support, consultation. We are fortunate that the Archdiocese of Denver already has a training and certification program, both in English and Spanish that includes, among others, components in theology, pastoral ministry, mentoring and ongoing formation.

**Communication.** Today we are dealing with a significant cultural and generational gap between young people and adults. This is especially difficult for those among our youth who are first or second generation immigrants. Thus, openness and dialogue are essential. For example, a youth minister needs to bridge the gap by communicating to the parish the needs of young people today, the challenges they face, the distinct characteristics of their culture and the ways adults can bless their lives.

Finally, a word about a special focal point of youth ministry — vocational discernment. This is the name for the process by which a person comes to see the particular role God has in mind for him or her. It is not something done once-for-all but continues all through the life of someone who wants to do God's will in all things. Youth ministry walks young people through this discernment by helping them recognize their value and dignity as a child of God, the gifts God has blessed them with and how God is communicating to them in their desires. To be sure, an effective youth ministry convinces young people that all Christians are called to minister to others.

When we speak of vocational discernment, we do not mean only recruiting candidates for the priesthood and religious life — although if real discernment were more widely practiced, we believe many more would see that God is calling them to be priests and religious. Still, pressing young people in that direction is not what discernment is all about.

Pope John Paul II explains it very well. Typically, he says, young people at a certain stage begin to ask themselves: What should I do with my life? Taking their circumstances — talents, tastes, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses — into account, they begin to form a life plan. But at this point another question arises for young people serious about being disciples of Jesus: How is this life plan at the same time also a Christian vocation?

Before the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Father points out, "the concept of 'vocation' was applied first of all to the priesthood and religious life." But the council "broadened" this way of looking at things. "Christ's 'Follow me' makes itself heard on the different paths taken by the disciples and confessors of the divine Redeemer. There are different ways of becoming imitators of Christ — not only by bearing witness to the eschatological kingdom of truth and love, but also by striving to bring about the transformation of the whole of temporal reality, according to the spirit of the Gospel. It is at this point that there also begins the apostolate of the laity" ("Letter to the Youth of the World," 9).

No one can discern a vocation for somebody else. It is certainly not the job of youth ministry to do that. But ministry to youth can and should point out to young people that they need to start giving serious — though not stressful — thought and study and prayer to the question: What does God want me to do? It should remind them that they will face no more serious question in their lives. Without pressure of any sort, it should offer them the tools of spirituality, information and good advice that eventually will help each one of them find the right answer for him or her — God's answer, that is.

Regarding specifically the development of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, a campaign for Vocational Discernment should be coordinated by the Archdiocesan Office of Vocations with all youth ministers. This is especially needed among Hispanics, where the low percentage of Hispanic priests per population is dramatic.

### **III. A ministry of courage and faith**

In many ways this is not an easy time to be growing up. All around us we see symptoms of a continuing assault on moral values, religious faith and the sense of solidarity with others. Consumerism, hedonism, corrupt media and advertising, alcohol and drugs, easy sex, reluctance to make lasting commitments, racism, discrimination, alienation, gangs — especially among immigrants living between two cultures —, confusion about the meaning of life or whether life even has a meaning — all these things and more threaten young people today.

But Pope John Paul II, who began his pontificate urging people “Be not afraid,” does not hesitate to declare his confidence in youth.

“You are strong for the struggle,” he tells them. “Not for the struggle of one against another in the name of some ideology or practice separated from the very roots of the Gospel, but strong for the struggle against evil, against the real evil: against everything that offends God, against every injustice and exploitation, against every falsehood and deceit, against everything that insults and humiliates, against everything that profanes human society and human relationships, against every crime against life — against every sin” (“Letter to the Youth of the World,” 15).

We believe the Holy Father shares a vision of life “renewed like the eagle’s.” Let us make this vision ours as we undertake a renewed ministry to youth. We pray for all who are involved in this noble enterprise, so full of hope for the future of our world and our Church. We pledge you our wholehearted and loving support.

### **Appendix**

Renewing the vision of the Office of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministry in the Archdiocese of Denver: Goals and Programs

Along with presenting a vision and a statement of general principles for the renewal of youth ministry in the Archdiocese of Denver, it seems appropriate to indicate some specific goals and the means of reaching them.

#### **A. Communicate the vision for youth ministry**

IBring together various groups — parents, priests, youth ministers, parish representatives, the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, the Catholic Foundation, young people themselves — for awareness training that includes defining youth ministry and exploring its relationship to the parish.

ICreate a marketing program to focus attention on the importance of youth in the Church; it should include resource materials for parishes and communication tools for the Office of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministry.

#### **B. Strengthen the Office of Youth, Young Adult and Campus Ministry**

IReview and revise staffing, structure and functions to make the office a more effective source of support for parishes.

IDevelop audience-appropriate training and certification programs for youth ministers, pastors, vision teams, ministry teams and youth.

IPrepare program guidelines and resource materials, including a resource manual with a job description for youth ministers, training program outlines, relevant legal and insurance forms (liability, permission, etc.), and other practical information.

IOffer administrative support for pastors, youth ministers and volunteers including job descriptions, qualifications, accreditation and guidelines for pay.

#### **C. Strengthen processes and procedures for parish programs**

IDevelop a self-assessment instrument, guidelines and suggested action steps.

IAssist parishes in making self-assessments and preparing short- and long-term recommendations.

IBased on parish assessments, develop a phased archdiocesan plan for initiating and upgrading parish youth ministry programs.

#### **D. Create a strong financial base**

ISeek funds from various sources — grants, endowments, etc. — to help youth ministers and volunteers with the costs of training and certification programs and the Catechetical School; to carry out the marketing program described above; and to assist in funding the salaries of youth ministers in needy areas of the archdiocese.

**E. Establish a youth ministry retreat center, training center and camp**

Develop a clear, detailed plan including the purposes and possible uses of such a facility and the method of funding it; and explore site options in the Front Range.

**D. Since there is also an office for Hispanic Youth Ministry, under the Secretariat for Hispanic Ministry, all of the above applies also to this office. Among their programs and goals they will add also the following:**

- Promote the hiring of paid Hispanic youth ministers in parishes with large Hispanic populations.
- Develop and/or search for already developed programs for a diversified Hispanic youth ministry:
- Groups of Adolescents
- Youth Groups
- Young Adults
- Young Couples
- Promote cooperation between the Office of Youth, Young Adults and Campus Ministry and the Office of Hispanic Youth.