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Pastoral Letter

Good News of Great Joy

A pastoral letter to the people of God of northern Colorado on preaching Jesus Christ to all creation

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I. Good News of Great Joy for all the People

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!" (Luke 2:8-14).

Christmas greetings to my brothers and sisters in Christ, and to all who read or hear these words. May God grant each of us the joy of knowing that the message received so long ago by the shepherds of Judea is the message meant for all persons in all times: Do not be afraid! A Savior has been born to us; the Anointed One, the Messiah and Lord.

On this Christmas Eve nearly 2,000 years after Bethlehem, I pray for the ears to hear again the angel's voice; for a purified heart to believe with all my strength; and for a courageous tongue to shout out to all creation that Jesus Christ is born. The long centuries of sinful misery and bondage are ended. Let hope fill our hearts. Let all sadness be banished. The child in the manger is the Son of God, the one spoken of by the prophets, the liberator of captives, the victor over death, the joy of the nations.

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Father's plan, the only source of eternal life. Listen: Can we not hear the angels praising God? They glorify Him for His saving will, revealed in the Babe of Bethlehem. They set the stars on fire and fill the night skies with a song of joy for us. The Creator of the universe delights in us; His favor rests on us. He loves us—all of us and each of us—with an everlasting love, and Jesus is that love incarnate. No matter how great our sin, Jesus has come for us. No matter how deep our loneliness, Jesus has come for us. Were we the only persons to ever sin, or to ever exist, still God would send His only son to live and love, suffer and die, for us. That is the depth of His love for you and me.

Today is the birth of our Deliverer. Brothers and sisters, my family in faith, let us rejoice together.

II. Let us go Over to Bethlehem

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2: 15-20).

The shepherds of the Judean hills were rough and simple men. But perhaps only in their simplicity could they hear the message which drove them urgently toward Bethlehem. They received the words of the angel with joy—and without fear. They acted on the revelation of God with faith, and that faith led them to Mary and Joseph and the child. When they had found Him, they understood, and they made known the message they had been told about this child. And all who heard them were amazed.

Today, in our lifetimes, we must hurry in the footsteps of these shepherds. We should beg God for the grace to be amazed and astonished as we draw close to the manger, because the truth of this child is beyond anything we could hope for, or expect. We should beg God for the grace to be simple and pure of heart, as they were; to radiate the excitement and joy of their discovery, as they did. Let us behold the Messiah. Let us adore Him. Let us be overcome with amazement and go in haste to make known to the whole world all that has been revealed to us about this child.

Ponder what He has done for us. He frees us from the slavery of sin and the fear of death. He comforts us. He encourages us. He teaches us. He walks with us in our sufferings. He fills us with hope. He offers us life—eternal life—free, without charge or obligation. Far from violating our freedom, He restores it, dignifies it with His own incarnate holiness, and then adds immeasurably to it with His victory over death on our behalf, won by dying for our sins on the cross and then rising from the grave. He gives us His Spirit, who breathes new life into our hearts and enables us to love one another—even our enemies and persecutors—as He loves us.

Let us go over to Bethlehem to see this child. And then let us proclaim Him to the world.

III. Woe to Me if I do Not Preach the Gospel

The beauty of these Gospel passages from Luke, announced at Midnight Mass and Christmas Mass at Dawn, fills me with joy and a tremendous trust in God's love for all of us. Each of us can say with Mary that, "the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 1:49). I thank God every day, but on this Christmas Eve especially, that He sent His only son for me and for you, whom I treasure as my family in faith. It is easy to understand why God loves the people of northern Colorado, and the clergy and women and men Religious who serve them. I arrived here in April as a "stranger in a strange land"; but you welcomed me as a brother, encouraged me, surrounded me with generosity, humor, good counsel and support, and took me into your hearts. Now you are also in my heart, and at the center of my daily thoughts, work and prayer. What a grace it is—unexpected; overwhelming at first; but now such a blessing for me—that God called me to be your servant.

Brothers and sisters, the weeks I spent in Rome this fall for the Holy Father's Special Assembly for America taught me a great deal. It was a time of "good loneliness." In my eagerness to be back home in Colorado among you, I reflected often and deeply on how much good work has already been accomplished by the Church in northern Colorado, and how many outstanding people in our parishes work selflessly for the Gospel. I also thought and prayed about the very many things that remain to be done—and how pressingly we need to do them.

But in working with my brother bishops and the Holy Father, and in walking the streets of Rome, so rich in the witness of centuries of martyrs and saints, I came again and again to the simple truth that what we are called to accomplish first and foremost is not projects or plans or programs, but the preaching of Jesus Christ, in season and out of season. If we do that well, everything else will follow, for the Church Jesus founded on the first apostles is a missionary Church. Without each of us responding to Christ's call to be evangelizers, the Church loses her identity. Where the Church ceases to be missionary, she ceases to be herself.

I return from Rome absolutely convinced that the Church must dedicate the fullness of her resources to a new evangelization (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 3). This means all my resources as archbishop, all the resources of the pastoral center and its staff, and the full commitment of our parishes, our schools and all the faithful. My task as bishop is not primarily to be a manager or an executive—though sound stewardship of our resources is obviously vital—but a pastor and a missionary. So too, the people, clergy and Religious of our local Church share the missionary task Jesus gave us all, to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). If we love Him, we must share Him with others—compellingly, persuasively, with all our ingenuity and passion.

That is because the good news of Jesus Christ is decisive: Souls depend on it; all creation depends on it. Jesus alone, and no other, is the answer to humankind's longing for God. His Gospel must be announced, heard, received in faith and retold. It is meant for all people; in fact, evangelization is the sign of a living faith. It is never completed. And all of us—including bishops; and perhaps sometimes especially bishops—have an ongoing need to hear the Good News.

In Rome, many of my brother bishops voiced this same hunger to recover a radical missionary zeal within the Church. By "radical," I mean oriented toward the root, for the times in which we live leave no room for the lukewarm. Zeal cannot be delegated. But it can be shared, and when shared, it multiplies like a spreading fire. This is God's will for His Church in every time and place, and especially today on the threshold of the third Christian millennium. This is God's will for me as archbishop, and God's will for all who are baptized. Radical missionary zeal is the fruit of conversion, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us take to heart the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). Likewise, on the first Pentecost, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

This passionate missionary zeal must be at the core of our life in Christ. All of our pastoral plans and activities, every budget, every hiring decision, indeed every one of our institutional structures, must be reviewed and revised in light of this primary mission of the Church. Our handbook for mission effectiveness is not modern organizational theory, valuable as that may be. Rather, it is the Word of God.

If we sincerely wish to prepare the Church for the third millennium, we should turn first to the Acts of the Apostles. That is what we must become again.

IV. Toward the Great Jubilee

As I write this pastoral letter, the Church has begun her second year of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, as outlined in the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, *As the Third Millennium Draws Near*. My sincere hope and intention is for the Church in northern Colorado to be ready to celebrate the fullness of Jubilee, now that the transition of my predecessor, Archbishop J. Francis Stafford, to Rome is complete and my own arrival and opening months of ministry have concluded.

Jubilee is not merely a calendar date. It is much more than that. It is a holy year of conversion, forgiveness and renewal rooted in Hebrew Scripture and celebrated by the Church throughout her history—but never more urgently or significantly than in 2000. Jubilee is the manifestation and celebration of joy which God pours into the hearts of those who believe the Good News and trust His promises. It is a joy to be shared by all people and with every nation. It is the joy which filled John the Baptist in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth; the joy of Mary's heart as she sang her Magnificat; the joy the shepherds experienced as they beheld the child in the manger and told everyone of the angel's message; the joy of Simeon as he encountered the child who fulfills God's promise of salvation. It is the joy of the man blind from birth who receives his sight from Jesus; the joy of Mary Magdalen meeting her Rabboni in the garden of the resurrection; and the joy of the travelers on the road to Emmaus who recognize the Risen Lord in the breaking of the bread.

Jubilee is Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and the Return of the Lord in Glory. Jubilee is Eucharist—the fullness of Word and sacrament, worship in Spirit and in truth.

In our archdiocesan preparations, I wish to acknowledge first, and thank in a special way, the discernment done by the Emmaus Committee throughout 1995 and 1996. Their recommendations for preparing for the Great Jubilee remain a valuable resource for the local Church. I ask all parishes to review the Emmaus Plan's excellent materials on the Jubilee and adapt these wherever possible to their particular needs.

In light of the Emmaus recommendations, I further ask all pastors who have not already done so to appoint a millennium/Jubilee coordinator for their parishes no later than March 25, 1998, the Solemnity of the Annunciation, with the task of bringing the message of *As the Third Millennium Draws Near* alive for the local community. On that date also, it is my intention to appoint an archdiocesan Jubilee committee to assist my office in our Church-wide Jubilee preparations, and I welcome the recommendations of the people, through their pastors, of suitable persons to carry out this work.

I ask our archdiocesan communications staff—the Denver Catholic Register, El Pueblo Catolico, The Catholic Hour, along with our radio, newsletter and internet efforts—to begin, with the help of my office, an ongoing, weekly presentation of the themes of Jubilee preparation, continuing through the year 2000. Many very useful materials on the millennium already exist at the national level. It is my hope that our communications tools, beginning in January 1998, will refocus even more clearly on the task of evangelization. An important part of this refocusing will be providing parishes with an awareness of the resources available to prepare fully for the Jubilee.

In like manner, I ask our archdiocesan education staff—again, in concert with my office—to provide our schools, parish millennium coordinators and parish religious education programs with the resources they need to integrate Jubilee preparation into their apostolic work with Catholics of all ages. It is my hope that in addition to pilgrimages and gatherings of Jubilee celebration, various lectures, seminars and courses of study on critical documents of Vatican II, the work of Pope John Paul II, and other materials relevant to the Jubilee will be made available to the general public.

But our Jubilee preparations will neither succeed nor fail at the archdiocesan level. They can only bear fruit if they are lived by our people, clergy and Religious at the parish level. Therefore, in whatever we do to answer the Holy Father's call—no matter how elaborate or simple—we must never misunderstand our Jubilee preparations as just another program or another pastoral burden. The new millennium should be a new encounter with the person of Jesus Christ; it is He whose birth it marks.

In that light, I ask pastors of the archdiocese to open their parishes to all which the Holy Spirit desires. New ecclesial movements and charisms are works of the Holy Spirit and signs of Jubilee; it is my hope that pastors will welcome these groups and movements so that our people, families and parishes may blaze with the fire of the new evangelization.

Radical missionary zeal is radical availability to the Holy Spirit. This is the foundation of Jubilee. This is the faith and witness of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of the New Advent. She is the perfect disciple, the model of every virtue. She is our guide star to the Jubilee.

As we resume our journey to the Great Jubilee, I entrust this local Church and all our plans and aspirations to her maternal intercession.

May God bless each of you and your families this Christmas season. May He fill you with the joy of the shepherds throughout the coming year. And I ask you to pray for me, your brother, as I pray daily for you.