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Pastoral Letter

River of Mercy

A pastoral letter to the people of God of northern Colorado on conscience, reconciliation and the Great Jubilee

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I. MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY

"Christianity is the religion of the coming of God, of his breaking through into human history and life . . ." — Karol Wojtyla, Advent homily, 1974

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

1. The season of Advent, which begins this week and which opens the Church's liturgical year, has a threefold meaning for Christians. It invites us *to reflect on the past*, as we follow the history of salvation from humanity's creation and fall, through God's covenant with the Chosen People, to the birth of Jesus the Messiah. It encourages us *to prepare in the present*, as we ready ourselves to encounter Jesus in the sacraments and receive the Christ Child at Christmas. And it calls us *to look to the future*, in anticipation of the Lord's Second Coming at the end of time. It's a season of prayer, hope and self-examination. It's also a time of great joy. As Karol Wojtyla preached even before his election as pope, "Let us go with joy to meet Christ: This describes the atmosphere of the mystery of the Incarnation and of Christmas, and also that of the period of waiting for him, which the Church enters on the First Sunday of Advent."

2. This "Advent joy" has marked every moment of John Paul II's pontificate. From his very first encyclical, *Redeemer of Man (Redemptor Hominis)*, and repeatedly in the years since, he has urged us to "be not afraid." He has encouraged us to live the period leading up to the Great Jubilee 2000 as a new Advent, ". . . [f]or Advent prepares us to meet the One who was, who is and who is to come." It is this Advent spirit which separates Catholics fundamentally from the fear which seems to grip so much of the world as we approach the new millennium. It is this Advent spirit which the Holy Father invites each of us to welcome into our lives.

3. And yet, how do we do that? How do we lay claim to a joy that seems so often contradicted by the sorrows and confusions of daily life? The answer is, we *can't* lay claim to this joy — not without a radical conversion of heart. This is only possible through faith in Jesus Christ. But because of Christ's coming, it is within our grasp. Therefore, what I want to suggest is that *today, right now*, is exactly the "acceptable time" to receive the joy of the Great Jubilee. The way is open, and the moment is at hand. But the cost of passage is *conversion*, a change in the direction of our lives at their root. We need to see with new eyes, illumined by a new light. We need to turn away from our selfishness, our pride, our distractions and false freedoms, and toward the real freedom, the freedom only found in Jesus Christ. Advent 1998 brings us to the threshold of a new millennium. The Holy Father describes it as a "threshold of hope." The liturgical year we begin (1999) — designated by John Paul II as the year of *reconciliation with the Father*, bearing fruit in the virtue of charity or love — is God's invitation to the conversion we need, and the final step toward the Jubilee. So let us turn to what crossing that threshold requires.

II. THE RECOVERY OF CONSCIENCE

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' . . . "
— (Jn 1:23).

4. A central irony of our age, particularly in the developed countries, and most especially in the United States as we close "the American century," is this: Many of us have more power, luxuries, opportunities and liberties than at any previous time in history. Yet we are not happy, and we have no peace. The 20th century has seen more bloodshed than all others combined. War continues. Crime continues. Oppression of the poor continues. Suicide, divorce, abortion and family breakdown rates have climbed steadily throughout the developed nations. And even the very success of the U.S. economy has brought about a permanent culture of apprehension — a society where both parents frequently must have jobs outside the home; a society of more work and more pressure, often driven by the excessive consumption of goods, which is fueled by the relentless marketing of products, which creates more consumer debt, which generates the need for longer work hours, in order to make more money. And so the cycle goes, cutting through marriages and families like a hurricane.

5. In the midst of our prosperity, at the heart of modern society, is a drift toward reducing the human person to a purely economic animal; a coarsening of our attitudes toward the sanctity of human life; and a growing sense of powerlessness fueled by the size and seriousness of the problems we face. At the same time, science has appeared to undermine the supernatural claims of religious faith, while weakening our notions of truth and sin. This led Pope Pius XII more than 40 years ago to describe the paramount sin of this century as "the loss of the sense of sin." Thus, while we sense that something is gravely wrong with modern life, we no longer seem to possess the vocabulary to describe and correct it.

6. This results in two predictable temptations. The first is *collective*: We seek structural solutions for structures of sin. Herein lie the roots of the great totalitarian projects of our era: National Socialism, Marxism-Leninism, and others. The second is *individual*: We absolve ourselves from responsibility for problems which we feel we cannot control, and withdraw into self-absorption. This individualism is the engine of today's consumerist materialism, the "atheism with a happy face" which dominates the developed world and buries moral issues and yearnings under a landslide of goods and services. The first temptation involves pride: the idea that we can, by our own ingenuity, remedy the effects of sin. The second implies despair: the abdication of work for the common good out of unwarranted fear, futility and self-interest.

7. Both of these temptations have led, in our day, to the destruction of human freedom and happiness. The first crushes the individual in the name of the greater good, replacing community with the machinery of social control. The second fragments community in the name of individual sovereignty. It then isolates and reduces individuals to the sum of their appetites, replacing true freedom with an idolatry of distractions which masquerade as meaningful choices.

8. Against these temptations, the Church speaks the simple truth of human dignity. God created us out of His infinite love, and endowed men and women with the gift of free will. Man freely chose to abuse that freedom and reject God's love through disobedience to God's will — in other words, through sin. In separating himself from God, man darkened his reason, weakened his own will and his ability to see the truth, and inherited "the wages of sin [which] is death" (Rom 6:23). But again from His infinite love, God sent His only son to redeem us and restore human dignity. It is now our free choice to accept that redemption and its implications, or persist in sin. Explicit in the drama of salvation is the fact that we are infinitely valuable because of our creation by God; that we are genuinely free to choose right or wrong; and that *our choices matter*. We are responsible for ourselves, and for the world, as active moral agents.

9. What's right and wrong with the world, therefore, is not something remote from our daily lives. We are each in part accountable for it. This is why John Paul II, in his 1984 apostolic exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance (Reconciliatio et Paenitentia)*, writes that ". . . cases of *social sin* are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many *personal sins*." And he notes that ". . . there is no sin, not even the most intimate and secret one, the most strictly individual one, that exclusively concerns the person committing it. With greater or lesser violence, with greater or lesser harm, every sin has repercussions on the entire ecclesial body and the whole human family" (16).

10. This is why issues of personal conscience have much wider impact than an individual's private spiritual health. Just as we can speak confidently of a "communion of saints," so too there is a "*communion of sin*, whereby a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the Church and, in some way, the whole world" (RP, 16). Unfortunately, in our day, conscience is often distorted to serve exactly the false freedom God designed it to discern and guard against. Therefore, developing a *rightly formed conscience* is vital not only for individuals seeking to do God's will, but for the entire Church as we approach the Great Jubilee. Right conscience is the cornerstone of reconciliation, for without it, we cannot distinguish sin from virtue. And reconciliation — with God and within God's human family — is the foundation of Jubilee.

11. What then is the human conscience? Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* defines it "as man's most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and one's neighbor" (16).

12. The Council Fathers add that, "Through loyalty to conscience, Christians are joined to other men in the search for truth and for the right solution to so many moral problems that arise both in the life of individuals and from social relationships. Hence, the more a *correct conscience* [emphasis added] prevails, the more do persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and try to be guided by the objective standards of moral conduct" (GS, 16). In its *Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae)*, the council goes on to observe that, "It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law. He is bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all his activity, so that he may come to God, who is his last end. Therefore he must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters" (3).

13. We are always obligated to follow our consciences. But, if we're sincere in our Catholic faith, we must also acknowledge that conscience does not "invent" truth. Rather, *conscience must carefully seek truth out and conform itself to truth once discovered, no matter how inconvenient*. Conscience is never merely a matter of personal opinion or private preference. It is not a pious alibi for doing what we want. It is not comfortable or "tame," any more than Isaiah and John the Baptizer were tame for the rulers of ancient Israel. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' . . ." (Jn 1:23). As John spoke to Israel, so a right conscience speaks to the individual heart. And always, as the Council Fathers noted in their *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, ". . . [I]n forming their consciences, the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and *teach with authority* [emphasis added] the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature" (14).

14. Exercising right conscience, therefore, is *never* a matter of balancing what the Church teaches against her theological critics or popular opinion surveys, then doing what we find more attractive. This is evasion. It is a subtle form of self-flattery — and we should remember that “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1:8). Guilt, after all, is a good and healthy thing — and a gift of God’s mercy — when it corresponds to the facts of a sinful action. Right conscience implies humility before the truth. It directs us toward God and reminds us of our sins. And in doing so, *it calls us to repentance.*

III. THE URGENCY OF RECONCILIATION

“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Is 1:18). 15. The first words of Jesus’ public ministry provide the key to His entire mission: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand: Repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). *Repent and believe in the Gospel*, the “good news” of salvation. Even as right conscience makes us aware of the sins which separate us from God, Jesus the Redeemer comes to restore our dignity; reconcile us with His Father; and offer us the means — repentance — to turn away from sin and accept the free gift of salvation. In every sense, repentance is the *gateway to joy, including the joy of the Great Jubilee*, just as, through his repentance, the Prodigal Son was welcomed home to his father’s love and forgiveness in a feast of reconciliation (Lk 15:11-24).

16. Jesus reconciled humanity to the Father through His life, sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection. So too the Church, in “intimate connection with Christ’s mission, [has as her central task that of] reconciling people: with God, with themselves, with neighbor, with the whole of creation” (RP, 8). Moreover, to “evoke conversion and penance in man’s heart and to offer him the gift of reconciliation is the specific mission of the Church as she continues the work of her divine Founder” (RP, 23).

17. The Church carries out her mission of reconciliation in various ways, but first among them in the life of the Catholic faithful is the sacrament which Jesus instituted exactly for this purpose: the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also known as Penance. Since the Second Vatican Council, many Catholics have unfortunately neglected the practice of personal confession to a priest. In doing so, they’ve robbed themselves of a tremendous source of consolation. *I strongly encourage all Catholics of the archdiocese to return to personal confession on a regular basis as a vital part of their preparation for the Great Jubilee. I ask parents to draw their children into this sacrament by word and example. I ask my brother priests, where the demands of their ministry allow, to extend the hours of confession in their parishes and to make available more communal celebrations of the sacrament, with private confession included, as part of their planning for the Jubilee.* Finally, I ask parish and Catholic school catechists to *emphasize the Sacrament of Penance as an experience of pardon and peace; cleansing and healing; honesty and restoration; weakness and strength; guidance and correction; judgment and penance; conversion and joy.* In a very real sense, Penance is the *sacrament of conscience*, because the sins we confess are those disclosed by a careful examination of the secret sanctuary of the heart.

18. The Sacrament of Penance can be intensely fruitful because it is intensely intimate and private: The penitent admits his sins with a contrite heart, confessing them to Christ in the person of the priest, who is bound to absolute secrecy by the sacramental seal. Yet it is also *expansive in its scope.* Not only is the sinner reconciled to God; he is reconciled to the Church and all her members. In this, we better understand the banquet given by the father of the Prodigal Son: Not only do the father and son rejoice, but all those invited to the banquet share their joy. Moreover, Penance, the *sacrament of mercy*, enables us to become more merciful ourselves, and disposes us to more deeply celebrate the Eucharist as a foretaste of heaven.

19. The question sometimes arises: Why do we need to confess our sins to a priest? Why not seek forgiveness in private prayer before the Lord? The answer is that, while private contrition before God is always a crucial first step, *Jesus Himself established Penance as the ordinary means of a sinner’s forgiveness.* As we’ve already seen, the rupture caused by sin is not just vertical, between child and Father, *but also horizontal*, among brothers and sisters. All sin has a social dimension. In Penance, the priest not only acts *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”), forgiving sins through the unique authority Jesus Himself invested in the priesthood through His apostles (Jn 20:22; Mt 18:18), but he also takes part in the reconciliation as a representative of the ecclesial community. Finally, on a very satisfying human level, *the things we speak out loud to another person have a finality and personal commitment which thoughts rarely do.*

20. Another question involves the spirit best suited to receiving this sacrament. Here we can return to the example of Advent. Properly lived, Advent involves emptying ourselves precisely of our *selves* — removing our selves from the altars of our own hearts, the better to prepare our hearts as mangers to receive the poverty of Jesus. In like manner, Penance involves emptying ourselves of our sins, which are an expression of our selfishness, in order to be filled with new life in Christ. A good confession should therefore be honest and thorough; it should follow some period of mature self-examination where we ask God for an accurate knowledge of our sins; it should seek God's grace in humility; it should be clear, concise and to the point; it should trust in God's forgiveness; and it should bear fruit in conversion and tangible acts of charity.

21. Regarding the examination of conscience, the Holy Father reminds us that it "must never be one of anxious psychological introspection, but a sincere and calm comparison with the moral law, with the evangelical norms proposed by the Church, with Jesus Christ Himself who is our teacher and model of life, and with the heavenly Father, who calls us to goodness and life" (*RP*, 31:III). Penance will often involve elements of spiritual direction and personal counseling, but it is a substitute for neither. *The Sacrament of Penance exists as a tribunal of mercy and a place of spiritual healing; its purpose is to restore the sinner to freedom from his or her sins, and to set the sinner on a new path of conversion.* In that light, scrupulosity and a mechanical resort to the sacrament are *not* signs of grace, but rather the opposite. They imply a fear of a wrathful God, distrust of His forgiveness and even a kind of narcissism. They are simply the negative image of the other primary sin against the sacrament, which is laxity.

22. The healthy conscience neither withholds indictment where real sin exists, nor indicts where there is no sin. *What brings balance to our lives in Christ, is love.* The key to right conscience, to repentance, to conversion and to reconciliation — in fact, the key to understanding and celebrating the Great Jubilee — is an overriding *trust in God and His love for us*, which is greater than the greatest sin and stronger than death.

IV. LIVING THE GREAT JUBILEE

"Oh God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is" (Ps 63:1).

23. Each of us is born with a yearning in our souls for "something more." We have a natural longing for happiness, but we cannot be happy alone. We were made for wholeness, for fraternity with one another, and for communion with our Creator. This is what Augustine means in his words from the *Confessions*: "Our hearts are restless, [God,] until they rest in thee." This reminds us of the second, and even more important, task of conscience. John the Baptizer not only cried out against the iniquity of Israel; *he also pointed toward her Deliverer*: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). In like manner, a right conscience not only alerts us to what is wrong in our actions, but also urges us toward the One who is beautiful, life-giving and true. Like Augustine, our hearts are restless, and like the psalmist, our souls are thirsty, for the abundant life which only reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ can bring.

24. In his 1994 apostolic letter, *As the Third Millennium Draws Near (Tertio Millennio Adveniente)*, John Paul II defines "the joy of every Jubilee" — but especially the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 — as "above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion" (32). And elsewhere in the same document, he notes that "preparing for the Year 2000 has become . . . a key of my pontificate" (23).

25. The importance of the Great Jubilee is this: It is a countersign to the sinfulness of our age. We live at a pivotal moment in history, a time of unsurpassed achievement and unsurpassed inhumanity. We're closing a century which has served as a great battleground between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death." Around the world, humanity struggles for freedom and dignity. At the same time, it methodically creates the instruments of its own destruction. In contrast to this culture of death, the Great Jubilee calls us to *turn again to God's Son*; and it lifts up His cross so that we might see and believe in our salvation — "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

26. Our role in this drama is simple, but crucial. The future is not determined; we co-author it with God. As John Paul II observes, ". . . sin, in the proper sense, is always a *personal act*, since it is an act of freedom on the part of an individual person, and not properly of a group or community" (*RP*, 16.). In a similar way, *the choice to be virtuous is also a personal act*. Each of us has free will. We are each a seed planted by the Sower to bring forth justice and reconciliation, through the power of the cross of Christ, by our personal actions and the witness of our lives. We are each — and especially together — the Gospel leaven which can begin to change the "culture of death" from within.

27. In the light of the Great Jubilee, says the Holy Father, "the whole of Christian history appears to us as a single river into which many tributaries pour their waters. The Year 2000 invites us to gather with renewed fidelity and ever deeper communion *along the banks of this great river*: the river of Revelation, of Christianity and the Church, a river which flows through human history starting from the event which took place at Nazareth and then at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. This is truly the 'river' with which its 'streams,' in the expression of the Psalm, 'makes glad the city of God' (46:4)" (*TMA*, 25).

28. I began these pastoral reflections by asking: How do we lay claim to an "Advent joy" that seems so often contradicted by the sorrows and confusions of daily life? We know the answer now: by *drinking from that river of mercy* which is God's free gift of love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ; and *bringing that same love, that same forgiveness, to others*. In the desert of our sometimes sinful hearts, in the desert of our often sinful world, this river of God's mercy is the *river which brings life*.

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