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Pastoral Letter

As Christ Loved the Church

A pastoral letter to the people of God of northern Colorado on forming tomorrow's priests

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I. RENEWING THE BODY OF CHRIST

To the people, religious, deacons, priests and seminarians of the Church in northern Colorado:
Greetings and peace in Jesus Christ.

1. Every Christian lives a life *on mission* and *in communion*. This flows from the two mandates all believers share: to preach and teach the Gospel (Mt 28: 19-20); and to love one another as Jesus loves us (Jn 13: 34). These tasks reflect the fundamental equality and dignity of all persons within the Church. We are all infinitely loved by God. We are all called to be His leaven in the world.

2. But, as St. Paul observed, a body has many members, each with unique gifts to offer for the growth of others in holiness (1 Cor 12: 12-13). So it is with every family. A family thrives when each member lives his or her role in joyful service to the others. The Church, as Body of Christ and family of faith, is the same. Within our shared vocation to be leaven of God's truth and love in society, we are each called to specific service in a particular state of life — lay, consecrated or ordained.

3. In founding the Our Lady of the New Advent Theological Institute, my hope is that God will build through it an environment where lay, consecrated and ordained persons can deepen their understanding of their own unique role in His plan, while also learning to respect and mutually support those called to different lives of service in the Church. Equality among the faithful does not mean interchangeability of roles. It does mean different gifts lived fully and authentically, and joined in common service for the benefit of all.

4. One of the great signs of the Holy Spirit's presence in our Church has been the renewal of the lay apostolate, especially since the Second Vatican Council. Another has been the emergence of new apostolic movements and forms of consecrated life. The Archdiocese of Denver has been unusually blessed by both. As our Institute develops new resources and grows to extend degree programs to new areas of formation, each of these signs will provide rich material for deeper pastoral reflection.

5. My task in this letter, however, is to focus on our most urgent need — a need which, if met, will most immediately advance the renewal of the whole Church in northern Colorado. The Church is not just a collection of individuals convened around a sacred text. She is a community — a community rooted both in God's Word and in sacrament. No matter how many other things bear good fruit for the Gospel in our day, there is no on-going presence of Jesus Christ in the world without the Church; there is no Church without the Eucharist; and there is no Eucharist without the priest. We need priests: good men, well formed; men of joy and courage; men who love Jesus Christ, love the Church and are eager to serve God's people. And — equally important — we need a community of faith

which will foster and encourage these men, and support them as family in their sacrifices. But if we will this end, we must also will the means to achieve it. St. John Vianney Theological Seminary — at the heart of this new Institute — will provide the spiritual and academic resources necessary to accomplish this task.

II. PRIESTHOOD AND IDENTITY

6. As Pope John Paul II writes in his 1992 apostolic exhortation, *I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis; PDV)*, the vocation of priesthood is literally embedded in the life of the Church. In fact, the “priesthood cannot be defined except through [the] multiple and rich interconnection of relationships which arise from the Blessed Trinity and are prolonged in the communion of the Church” (12). In similar manner, the relationship between St. John Vianney Theological Seminary and Our Lady of the New Advent Theological Institute represents the communion of the various calls or states of life within the Church.

7. In the same document, John Paul notes, “The seminary can be seen as a place and a period in life. But it is above all an educational community in progress: It is a community established by the bishop to offer to those called by the Lord to serve as apostles, the possibility of re-living the experience of formation which our Lord provided for the Twelve” (60). The Holy Father identifies four components of that experience: *human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation*. It is to these four aspects of formation that our present and future seminarians will need to apply themselves.

8. The primary goal of the total seminary formation program, however, is to provide a strong and healthy sense of identity to those who will serve the Church as priests. One source of that identity is found in the Scripture passage where St. Paul speaks to husbands and fathers of their responsibility to serve their families in love: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). Paul could be speaking just as directly to priests as to husbands and fathers. And, in fact, in Christ the High Priest we see the vocations of husband and priest combined. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) pairs the Sacraments of Matrimony and Ordination, referring to them both as “directed towards the salvation of others” (1534), and goes on to say: “Esteem of virginity for the sake of the kingdom and the Christian understanding of marriage are inseparable, and they reinforce each other” (1620). John Paul II likewise pairs the two vocations in saying, “The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the Spouse of the Church” (PDV, 22).

9. We live in age which defines a person’s worth by profession and income. But the identity of the priest is not the sum of his professional or functional competence. As the Second Vatican Council pointed out in its *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (Presbyterorum Ordinis; PO)*, a priest acts *in persona Christi capitis* — that is, in the place of Christ, the Head — in his three-fold role as sanctifier (priest), teacher (prophet) and shepherd (king) (PO, 2). But he does so always in a spousal relationship of love. The priest is called not merely to do things in and for the Church, but to be the lover of the Church. He must love her as Christ loves her, and Christ gave His life for her.

10 Therein lies a compelling, but often overlooked, reason for the celibacy of the priesthood. As a child of the God of abundant life, every human person desires to procreate new life. For the priest, celibacy is neither a rejection nor a repression of his sexuality, but a positive choice to be spiritually life-giving for the larger family of faith. A celibate priest is “unmarried,” only in that he is not married to a particular, individual woman in that wonderful union created in the Sacrament of Matrimony. But he is — through the indelible mark conferred by the Sacrament of Orders, which leaves him forever configured to the celibate Christ — married to His Bride, the Church. As such, he becomes a sign to those in the married state of the radical love God asks of them. It is in recognition of his vocation as a husband to the believing community he serves that we traditionally call priests “father.” In this way, we who are born into the Church through Baptism express our love for those who are wedded to our Mother the Church.

III. FORMING TOMORROW'S PRIESTS

11. How best can we prepare men for this marriage to the Church? The great Eastern Father, Gregory Nazianzus, wrote that, "We must begin by purifying ourselves before purifying others; we must be instructed to be able to instruct, become light to illuminate, draw close to God to bring him close to others, be sanctified to sanctify, lead by the hand and counsel prudently." John Paul II has echoed Nazianzus's insight in his division of priestly formation into four main areas of focus mentioned above. (PDV, Chapter 5).

Human formation: ". . . purifying ourselves before purifying others."

12. Every priest is called to be the "living image" of Jesus, and therefore "should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible, the human perfection which shines forth in the incarnate Son of God . . . the priest should mold his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ" (43).

13. The human perfection of Christ does not make Him less fully human but precisely more so. He is what God wills all of us to become. The priest becomes more human, not less, by striving for the full human maturity which shows itself in the natural virtues. Thus the Holy Father writes that, "Future priests should therefore cultivate a series of human qualities, not only out of proper and due growth and realization of self, but also with a view to the ministry. These qualities are needed for them to be balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities. They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgment and behavior" (43).

14. As is the case for any believer, priests should not simply excuse or underestimate the common human failings against which they struggle, in the way some modern psychologies suggest. Especially when such weaknesses may give scandal, real humility requires that we not merely recognize our failings but call on the grace of God to strengthen us where we are humanly weak. This is what St. Paul means when he declares, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor 12:9).

15. John Paul II particularly stresses the importance of an affective maturity which lays the foundation for the priest's whole gift of himself in all the relationships to which his ministry calls him. Without the capacity to express and receive a mature, brotherly love which embraces all the "physical, psychic and spiritual" aspects of the human person, the obligations of the priesthood become a burden. This is particularly true of the charism of celibacy, which must be built upon an "affective maturity which is prudent, able to renounce anything that is a threat to it, vigilant over both body and spirit, and capable of esteem and respect in interpersonal relationships between men and women" (44).

16. For the celibate priest, the "nuptial meaning of the body" is expressed by reserving physical sexual expression in the same way that Jesus did. Just as Christ offered Himself on the cross as a consummation of the marriage between Himself and the Church, it is by making of their bodies a spiritual sacrifice (Rm 12:1) that priests wed themselves to the Bride of Christ. "The Church, as the Spouse of Jesus Christ, wishes to be loved by the priest in the total and exclusive manner in which Jesus Christ her head and Spouse loved her" (29).

17. While grace can overcome any weakness, seminarians should strive for an understanding of self which neither discounts the importance of their God-given sexuality nor naively underestimates the demands of a celibate life. In a very real way, the seminary is a period of prenuptial preparation in which a man seeks, by the grace of God, to make himself the sort of man the Church wants and needs as her Spouse. Again, as John Paul II notes, "the priest's life ought to radiate this spousal character, which demands that he be a witness to Christ's spousal love and thus be capable of loving people with a heart which is new, generous and pure — with genuine self-detachment, with full, constant and faithful dedication and at the same time with a kind of 'divine jealousy' (cf. 2 Cor 11:2) — and even with a kind of maternal tenderness, capable of bearing 'the pangs of birth' until 'Christ be formed' in the faithful (cf. Gal. 4:19)" (22).

18. Just as marriage requires free and willing consent, the gift of celibacy can only be received if it is freely and willingly embraced by the priest. Unfortunately, some people in recent decades resent it, hope it will be changed, or internalize it in a purely legalistic way. Yet without consent to the bride, the priestly life will never be as fruitful as it can be. This consent to the Church is expressed and consummated in each priest's loving and generous availability to God's people. As the *Catechism* so beautifully says, "Accepted with a joyous heart, celibacy radiantly proclaims the Reign of God" (CCC, 1579).

Spiritual formation: "Be sanctified to sanctify."

19. A proper human formation leads to an openness to the possibility of sanctity. That possibility is realized through intimacy with God in the Trinity. "Spiritual formation," declares John Paul, "should be conducted in such a way that the students may learn to live in intimate and unceasing union with God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit." (PDV, 45, quoting the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on the Training of Priests* [*Optatam Totius*; *OT*], 8.)

20. As the Holy Father teaches, Christ is the key to entry into that divine communion of love. "Those who take on the likeness of Christ the priest by sacred ordination should form the habit of drawing close to him as friends in every detail of their lives" (ibid., emphasis added). In his apostolic letter *As the Third Millennium Draws Near* (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*; *TMA*) John Paul II adds, "It is therefore necessary to inspire in all the faithful a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal in a context of ever more intense prayer and of solidarity with one's neighbor" (42). Without daily prayer a priest cannot meet the responsibilities of his vocation. This is true for Christians in every vocation — but how much more so for the priest, who must serve as a kind of scout, guide and agent of hope for those who choose to tread the spiritual path cut by Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2).

21. The obligations of the priestly state in fact include daily recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours, with and for the whole Church. Priests should above all seek to offer the Eucharist daily, since it is "[from] this unique sacrifice their whole priestly ministry draws its strength" (CCC, 1566). A regular recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation is also a requisite to any advancement in the spiritual life.

22. Seminarians should never think of these anchors of the priestly life as burdens from which one might need a break or respite. They are not just things that a priest does, but integral to who the priest is. The priest cannot be just a man who prays; he must be a man of prayer, a man transformed by constant prayer. The life of prayer must also include daily reading of and reflection on the Sacred Scriptures, the Word of God. Without a deep familiarity with the "plan of the mystery" revealed in Christ (Eph 3:9), a priest cannot disclose that mystery to others.

23. Of course, celebration of the Eucharist, recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours and the reading of Sacred Scripture form the solid foundation for meditative prayer. This, too, needs to be a daily part of the life of a priest. Many use the Rosary as a springboard for deeper meditation. This staple of Catholic piety deserves a place in the daily regime of priests. One great advantage to the Rosary is that it generates in us a Marian, and, therefore, maternal outlook which can bring the priest to a deeper sense of the complementarity and ultimate unity of the masculine and feminine dimensions in the plan of God. Our modern schedules can make time for prayer a scarcity — but a priest must schedule God first and other duties second. Without the first, he won't have much to offer those which follow.

24. A few words should also be said about what used to be called "mortification." Fasting and other forms of self-discipline are essentially a form of practice in self-giving. If we are constantly allowing ourselves the many luxuries which the modern world places before us, we will not be ready to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of those we ought to love: God and neighbor. This is particularly difficult for young men today who have been raised in a culture — new to human history — in which news, food and all forms of entertainment are constantly available. These things can rob us of the time, space and silence we need to grow in the spiritual life. They can also subtly distance us from the suffering of the poor at home and abroad. Little, quiet gifts of self to God in the form of small sacrifices go a very long way toward reorienting us away from an addictive concern with the consumption of things toward a loving availability to God and neighbor.

25. Prayer and fasting, along with constant dedication to the service of God's people, teach priests to draw close to Christ as a friend in every detail of their lives. In every detail, because through the disciplines of prayer and the self-offering, whether formal or spontaneous, Christ is explicitly invited into every circumstance of the priestly apostolate, into every circumstance of a priest's life. "Through this identification with Christ crucified, as a slave, the world can rediscover the value of austerity, of suffering and also of martyrdom within the present culture, which is imbued with secularism, greed and hedonism." (PDV, 48).

26. The "Spirituality Year" which we have established in the Archdiocese of Denver as the first year of vocational discernment builds on the success of similar efforts elsewhere, especially in the Archdiocese of Paris. Our first two years of experience with this program have been uniquely fruitful in acquainting men with the joys and challenges of priestly commitment before they begin formal philosophical and theological studies on their road to ordination. The Spirituality Year has captured the hearts and minds of the men who have experienced it, leading them to a deeper intimacy with Jesus, the Church and particularly with Christ's presence in the Eucharist. It is therefore a program we will gladly and gratefully continue.

Intellectual formation: "We must be instructed to be able to instruct, become light to illuminate."

27. One of the greatest challenges faced in opening any new seminary is the design of a sufficiently strong academic program. As an archdiocese, our sincere gratitude goes to Regis University for generously enabling us to complete the college education of some of our undergraduate seminarians through its programs. Moreover, by the good graces of the Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, we have been extended affiliate status as a theological institute. This is a marvelous honor, and it means that the Lateran itself will grant all degrees conferred at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary. That status is based upon what the Lateran's theology faculty perceives to be the quality of the program of studies we will be offering. The Church, of course, supplies specific guidelines for seminary studies. These stress that intellectual formation is not a thing apart from human, spiritual or pastoral formation. The desire to know is, after all, a central part of being human. Seminary study aims at an ever deeper understanding of the mysteries expressed in the spiritual life; and it prepares the seminarian to offer the pastoral guidance to those who need to find in those same mysteries the meaning of their joys and sorrows.

28. The particular social problems of our day, the high level of educational achievement among many Catholics in America, and the demands of prudent leadership in the Church all require that seminarians receive "an extremely vigorous intellectual formation" (PDV, 51). That kind of a formation is especially needed for those who will serve as future agents in the Church's *diakonia* [service] of the truth (see Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Faith and Reason [Fides et Ratio]*, 2). Therefore, for most of those who come to our vocation program with a bachelor's degree in some area other than philosophy, their intellectual formation will include two years of philosophy study and four of theology.

29. Like good stewards of the Kingdom, we intend to draw out both the old and the new to present to our seminarians. They will be exposed to the masters of intellectual history in the areas of philosophy and theology, from the ancient Greeks and Apostolic Fathers to the most contemporary authors. We will aim at a combination of philosophical, theological and practical pastoral training that will result in the "unified, internally coherent curriculum" that the Church calls for in seminaries (see the U.S. bishops' *Program of Priestly Formation [PPF]*, 351; see also Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, *Christian Wisdom [Sapientia Christiana; SC]*, Art 67.2). Of course, that must include an approach to theology which is "comprehensive and extensive, covering the range of Christian doctrine" (PPF, 339). And, in keeping with the declaration of the Second Vatican Council that "the 'study of the sacred page' should be the very soul of theology" (see the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum]*, 24, and *SC*, Art 67.1.), we seek to make the Scriptures the very foundation of the curriculum.

30. It is vital that the various components of seminary life, classes, liturgies, service in parishes and to the poor, as well as the time set aside for personal prayer, all contribute to a unified vision of the Gospel message in all its beauty. By this means "a purely abstract approach to knowledge is overcome in favor of that intelligence of heart which knows how 'to look beyond,' and then is in a position to communicate the mystery of God to the people" (PDV, 51).

Pastoral formation: “Draw close to God to bring Him close to others . . . lead by the hand and counsel prudently.”

31. As John Paul II writes, “The whole training of [seminary] students should have as its object to make them shepherds of souls after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd.” (PDV, 57, quoting the Second Vatican Council in PO, 4). The formation of the candidate for ordination must aim at inculcating a pastoral charity which will enable the priest to be the “living image of Christ” he is called to be. To image Christ — the Good Shepherd and Spouse of the Church — the seminarian’s formation must have a specifically pastoral orientation. It is not enough that one be emotionally, spiritually and intellectually mature. All these attributes have to be placed at the service of others in the priesthood.

32. Thus, add-on “ministry” courses are not enough in the pastoral formation of young men for the priesthood. Pastoral formation requires that the seminarian be able to integrate what he has learned by study, with what he has learned by experience. Every moment of the process of growth in the seminary should make reference to the pastoral setting. In addition to specific classes in areas like pastoral counseling, parish management and homiletics, we will rely heavily on our pastors and people in this process of introducing and preparing men for work in parochial ministry. It is my sincere hope that summer placement with the pastors of the Archdiocese of Denver and with the people in the parishes of northern Colorado will be real occasions for growth for our seminarians. In these places above all, they will learn how to love the Bride of Christ as she needs to be loved: as Christ Himself loves her.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF OUR FAMILY OF FAITH

33. It is particularly appropriate that our new seminary is named in honor of St. John Vianney, patron saint of parish priests. He had a tremendous esteem for the priesthood while, in his great humility, he always seemed to distance himself from the dignity he recognized in the office he had received. Whenever others offered him compliments or praised his holiness, he always deflected those toward the office of the priest. We can do no better in our reflections on priestly formation than to pray over his own words as they appear in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “If we really understood the priest on earth, we would die not of fright but of love . . . The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus.”

34. Inviting, fostering and encouraging this love in young men is the work of the whole Catholic community. We live at a unique moment in the life of our local Church. The Institute and Seminary we inaugurate this fall offer us the opportunity to bring the “new evangelization” alive in a fresh and dramatic way. But this cannot be achieved in a vacuum.

35. I ask every Catholic young man of the archdiocese to listen deeply for God’s will in his life, and to consider the priesthood honestly and sincerely. I have spoken here of the sacrifices required of priests, and rightly so. As with married life, priesthood is a serious choice in response to God’s call. It has life-changing consequences. But — also as with married life — it is not merely life-changing, but life-giving. When genuinely given over to Christ, priesthood is a life of joy, courage, freedom and fraternity; a life of fruitfulness and meaning. And these things far outweigh its challenges. This is not merely my own experience of priesthood. I have seen the same witness again and again in dozens of brother priests. To give in to fear is to give in to the biggest lie of our age. Do not be afraid to answer to God’s call.

36. I ask the priests of northern Colorado — men who serve the Lord and His Church so well — to encourage our young men in their discernment, to enthusiastically support the new opportunities this Seminary provides for our Church, and to communicate the happiness and fulfillment they have experienced in their priestly ministry.

37. Finally, I ask the Catholic people of northern Colorado to open their hearts in support of this effort. To pray daily for vocations to the priesthood is essential. But God answers our prayers when we actively seek to cooperate with His will. I ask parents to cultivate a love for the Church and her sacraments in their children. I especially urge them to model a love for the priesthood to their children by supporting our priests in daily parish life. Nothing wounds the priesthood more than uncharitable and unthinking criticism of the priest by his people. And nothing so wonderfully energizes our priests as the sincere respect, gratitude and love of the parish family. Above all, I ask our Catholic people to create an environment in their homes where vocations to the priesthood are stimulated, discussed, and received by children as a worthy and holy personal choice.

38. I began this pastoral letter by observing that every Christian life is lived on mission and in communion. I close on the same note. The Church is an ecology of love. She is most fruitful when her members love well. This fall, God brings to fruition a hope for our Church first voiced by my predecessor, Cardinal J. Francis Stafford, and built on the foundation of his good stewardship and the zeal of the many priests, deacons, lay and consecrated persons who collaborated in bringing this project so far, so fast. With the opening of Our Lady of the New Advent Theological Institute and St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, we have a unique invitation to listen and respond to God's call. We need priests. God will surely send them. May He inspire those he sends, and each of us to whom they are sent, to love with the kind of love which makes all things new; to love one another and the Lord "as Christ loved the Church."