



CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2020
The Most Rev. Richard Gagnon
Archbishop of Winnipeg
President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

Dear Friends,

We approach the celebration of Christmas this year with some important new realities that are very present to us. There is our experience of a world pandemic over the past nine months, an unprecedented period of uncertainty and hardship that we have never experienced before. There is the reality of the cancellation of public liturgies and many months of reduced congregations and a decline in parish and diocesan life. Above all, we are now realizing in a dramatic way how vulnerable we really are in the face of natural disasters and disease.

I recently read a transcript of a radio message from Pope Pius XII, given in Rome on The Solemnity of The Apostles Peter and Paul in 1941. It was a dark period in the middle of World War II when there was great uncertainty about the outcome of the war and often very little hope. The Pope said: *“The Heavenly Father continues and will continue to guide our child-like steps with firmness and tenderness, only if we allow ourselves to be led by Him and trust in the power and wisdom of His love for us.”* These words of this great Pope during the dark days of war, can apply very well to our lives today as we celebrate Christmas this year under the shadow of COVID-19. The reality of uncertainty, vulnerability and fear that has been part of our lives, is not the whole story because there is another reality that is also present. This reality is the experience of determination to move forward without knowing all the answers. It has been nine months of living our faith in new ways, of reflecting on our family life, our personal lives and relationships with others and a time for building up our Christian families, our domestic church, through prayer and reflection on the Word of God. It has also been a time that has allowed us to gain a greater appreciation for the faith of the many “hidden Christians” we do not often see at church and how an opportunity is opening up for us in rebuilding our Church in new ways with the Father’s unfailing help.

We celebrate the Sunday liturgies accompanied especially by the Gospel of Mark this year and in this too, we can find great solace. Mark’s Gospel has been called the Gospel of “Discipleship”. He shows clearly how the followers of Jesus struggled with uncertainty in recognizing Him as the Son of God as well as with their call to be Evangelizers in a culture very different from the Gospel ways. Mark records the words of the disciples after Jesus calmed the sea when they said: *“Who then, is this?”* This is at the very heart of Mark’s Gospel and Jesus affirms this when he says to them: *“But who do you say that I am?”* It is Peter who responds by saying: *“You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”* Mark shares with us that it is not enough to intellectually understand our faith; we are to have a personal encounter and relationship with Jesus, above all.

During these days of the pandemic, all of us have been invited to encounter the Lord through his Word, through quiet times of faith and prayer, through the occasions to reflect on our lives and our priorities and even on the new and amazing opportunities that Jesus is opening up for us. This is a blessed and privileged time in our lives when the Lord can bring change within us, make us better disciples, help us appreciate how valuable the Sacraments truly are for each of us and help us to focus on rebuilding our Christian communities.

The Liturgies for Christmas speak of a new light and a new hope that has dawned upon the world: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us: authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* This light and this new hope is for all times and places, even during our days, since we often *“walk in darkness”* as the Scriptures reminds us. The shepherds hurried off to Bethlehem *“to see this thing that had taken place”* as they were filled with the joy of the heavenly proclamation: *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”*

We are very much aware that the glorious proclamation of the birth of the Christ Child did not put an end to the shadows ever present in the world, for even the Holy Family suffered persecution and exile. Yet the Christmas hope that is in the Child at Bethlehem, is a light that guides our steps – steps which can be child-like, yet steps towards renewal of our Christian lives and discipleship.

Wishing to you all and your loved ones and communities of faith a happy and healthy Christmas season and a New Year filled with the Lord’s choicest blessings.

16 December 2020