The Church
A PASTORAL LETTER

+MOST REVEREND PATRICK J. ZUREK
Bishop of Amarillo
Easter Sunday
April 12, 2009
The Church of Amarillo in the High Plains

Greetings to the People of God of the Diocese of Amarillo

1. I especially greet my brother priests who are serving the Local Church so well and with such joy. You bring me great joy as I see your dedication to Christ Jesus, your devotion to the Faith and your service of the People of God who are the Body of Christ. I greet my fellow deacons who are called to the service of the Faith through works of Charity and the living of the Gospel. I greet my sisters and brothers in the Consecrated Life. Your good works and Charisms are well known, but your presence among us as consecrated religious constantly reminds us of our deeper calling. Finally, I greet you, the Catholic Christian Faithful of the Diocese of Amarillo, brothers and sisters all. I am proud of you and grateful for you and your lived Faith.

“Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:3) be with you all.

As you read this letter I will have been with you as your eighth bishop for more than a year. I have already traveled the entire diocese and have celebrated Mass and Confirmation in most of our parishes and missions.

The Church of the High Plains owes its humble beginnings to Father Juan de Padilla, a Franciscan missionary priest who served as chaplain to the Francisco Vasquez de Coronado Expedition. Unlike one of his predecessors, the Apostle Paul of Tarsus, he did not enter the High Plain on a highway, nor did he enter a synagogue or home to preach the Gospel of Christ. Fray Juan celebrated the first Mass in the area in a canyon on the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord on May 26, 1541. Our Catholic Faith obviously took root in our native land and so began the history of the Local Church.

2. The humble beginning of the Catholic Church in this diocese has blossomed to a beautiful jewel in the Kingdom of God. I thank God for the Faith of
our ancestors who sacrificed much to plant the Catholic faith here in the High Plains. They sacrificed in that they transplanted their very lives into this area. They transplanted the Faith into an area of a small Catholic population; this, too, required sacrifice and much determination and perseverance. They also sacrificed monetarily in order to build Churches, rectories for their priests, convents for the nuns, parish halls, and often Catholic Schools. We should all take great pride in the example they have left us of sacrifice for the Faith.

To each of you who are reading this letter I say. “I give thanks to my God every time I think of you, which is constantly, in every prayer I utter—rejoicing, as I plead on your behalf at the way you have helped promote the Gospel.” (Phil. 1:3-5) Yes, we have had difficulties, but your Faith has remained strong, knowing that it is dependent on the Grace of God and not on the actions of mankind. It is apparent to me that you realize that it is the ‘Power of God’ at work in you.

3. An individual becomes a member of the Church, the new People of God, through Faith and Baptism, that is, by being ‘born anew’ through a “birth of water and the Spirit.” (Jn 3:3-5) You must realize that you are not just ‘any people’. You are the Church of God. Through your Baptism you have been given the inheritance of the Promises made in the Old Testament. You have also assumed a new dignity. You are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people He has made His own.” (1 Peter 2:9) You are the new People of God. This is because God has ‘Called’ you out of darkness into a new wonderful light. As God chose and elected the people of the Old Covenant, He has chosen you, ‘to go forth and bear fruit’.

Because of this ‘Call’ you are somehow the same and yet somehow different. This Call came through your Baptism. In that simple ceremony, celebrated with words and Faith, you were transformed. As the Apostle Paul says, “The life I live now is not my own…Christ is living in me.” (Gal. 2:20) In Baptism God has anointed us with his Spirit. He has shared His own divine life with us. Therefore Paul can say “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation…all is new!” (2 Cor. 5:17)
An early Christian author described the Christian this way. “Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives.

“They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all people, but all persecute them. They live in poverty, but enrich many. A blessing is their answer to abuse.

“To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. Christians animate the world and give it life and meaning! As the soul holds the body together, the Christians hold the world together.” (Letter to Diognetus)

In a very real sense, one could say that the Christian is the soul of the world. It also becomes quite clear that the Christians are truly sent to play a role in bringing others to Christ by the very way that they live their lives. We are called to be light for the world. Light certainly is distinct from darkness! The early Christians worshiped in catacombs and private homes, yet people said of them, “See those Christians. See how they love one another.” (Epigraphy of 1st & 2nd Rome)

4. The Church is the Universal Sacrament of Salvation. Salvation is Christ and is mediated through his Holy Catholic Church. The Church exists, then, “like a sacrament, as a sign or instrument of the inner communion of people with God; “abide in me, and I in you…I am the vine, you are the branches.” (Jn 15:4-5) It is also the sacrament of the unity of the human race; since she gathers people “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues.” (Rev. 7:9) [CCC 775]

It is a curious phenomenon today that we hear people say that they love Christ but without the Church, they listen to Christ, but not the Church, they
belong to Christ but outside the Church! This is not a new idea. St. Augustine commented: “The absurdity of this dichotomy is clearly evident in this phrase of the Gospel: ‘Anyone who rejects you rejects me’.” (EN, # 44; Augustine, Enarrat. 888, Sermon 2.14, PL 37, 1140) Pope Paul VI added these words. “How can one wish to love Christ without loving the Church, if the finest witness to Christ is that of St. Paul: ‘Christ loved the Church and sacrificed himself for her’?” (EN 3 45, Eph. 5:25) Isaac of Stella put it this way: “Christ is not complete without the Church, nor is the Church complete without Christ.”

The bishops of the Second Vatican Council clearly stated “…the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic…this Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, SUBSISTS in the Catholic Church.” (Lumen Gentium, # 8) “In her subsists the fullness of Christ’s body united with its head; this implies that she receives from him ‘the fullness of the means of salvation’ (Decree on Ecumenism, #3) which He has willed: correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #830)

By subsistence the Fathers mean “this perduring, historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church.” (CDF, Response: Question #2) In choosing the verb subsist the Council Fathers were specifically saying the “true Church has only one substance” and it is the Catholic Church. But it is also saying that some of the ecclesial elements proper to the Church are found in non Catholic Christian Communities.

The mission of the Church is to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Matt. 5:13-15) “This people, this Body of Christ, is a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race.” (Lumen Gentium, 9.2)

5. The Church continues the Mission of Christ. Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition tell us that each believer shares in this mission. Simply put, it is to continue the work that Jesus began during his public ministry and ratified by dying and rising. We are called to be disciples; those who learn what the Master
teaches, watch his actions and continue his work. In short, we are to “become imitators of the Lord”. (1 Thess. 1:6) Sometimes we even imitate another who has learned to be like Christ, perhaps a saint. Paul tells the Thessalonians “you became imitators of me.” (1 Thess. 1:6) Hence you are to become “models for all other believers.” (1 Thess. 1:7) Paul’s words are addressed to us, too.

Christ himself said at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, “Go and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them. Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19-20) Paul praises the Thessalonians for “proving their Faith, laboring in love and their constancy of hope in Christ.” (1 Thess 1:3) Through this they brought others to Christ in the Church.

Benedict XVI said in his first encyclical “Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but also the responsibility of the entire universal Church.” (Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, # 20)

“In the early Church “the exercise of Charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the Administration of the Sacraments and the Proclamation of the Word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and need of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the Sacraments and Preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of Charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.” (Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est # 22)

It is through our love of neighbor, which is based on God’s love for us and our response to that love, that we must be concerned with the Mission of the Church. The Mission is not just the celebration of the Sacraments and the Proclamation of the Word, it is the continued building up of the Kingdom of God. The Church has taught since the beginning that it is a DUTY, given to us by God at our Baptism for us to proclaim the Kingdom with our words and the actions of our lives. St. Paul wrote, “Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel…(it is an) obligation imposed on me.” (1 Cor 9:16-19)
Part of this mission is for Christians to assume, more clearly than ever, their duties as citizens in the world. Theirs is the task of contributing, with the light of the Gospel, to the building of a more human world, in a world fully in harmony with God’s plan. There is an urgent need to work for peace, justice and solidarity and more than ever, to defend human life from conception to its natural end. The right to life is the foundational right on which all other human rights are based. (John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae)

Proclaiming the death of the Lord “until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely ‘Eucharistic’. By this transformation of self through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we Christians can contribute to the transformation the world in accordance with the Gospel and God’s plan. (John Paul II, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, # 20)

6. Thus, the Church exists to evangelize. Christ, sent by the Father, passed through the boundaries of heaven to walk in our midst. He is the “Good News of the Father”. In Him, the entire revelation of the most high God is summed up.” (CCC, # 75) He sent the Apostles to proclaim the Gospel to others. They in turn sent their successors.

Pope Paul VI wrote in his benchmark encyclical on Evangelization.

“We wish to confirm once more that the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church.” It is a task and mission which the vast and profound changes of present-day society make all the more urgent. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of Grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection. (Evangelii Nuntiandi, # 14)

The Church is born of the evangelizing activity of Jesus and the Twelve. Having been born consequently out of ‘being sent’, the Church in her turn is sent
by Jesus. She continues ‘to send’ others to continue this essential work. Today, we see this as part of the discipleship of all the baptized. We do this by continuously listening to the Gospel as if it were the first time we heard it. We study the Tradition and Teachings of the Church so that we can clearly explain the Faith to others. Hence, Christian formation in the faith does not end with First Holy Communion or Confirmation. Adults need to deepen their knowledge of our Catholic Faith. We also evangelize, as did our ancestors in the Faith, by actually living the Gospel. This is what made Pope John Paul II so appealing and convincing to many. He truly believed all the teachings of the Church, but he actually lived them! That is our most credible witness to our love for Christ.

We have a tremendous opportunity here in the High Plains to evangelize and bring others to Christ in the Catholic Church. In this new evangelization, it is clear that we need “a new ardor, new methods and new expressions. We may need a new ‘fire’, a new conviction that will give us a new courage. We certainly cannot afford to fall into the temptation of avoiding discussions of our Faith because it may not be politically correct! St. Paul clearly stated the opposite. “May I never boast of anything except the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Gal. 6:14)

7. The need for Reconciliation and Forgiveness. The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. In brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, if she wishes to retain freshness, vigor and strength in order to proclaim the Gospel. (Evangelii Nuntiandi, # 15)

As sons and daughters of Adam we often revert to our old ways. St. Paul said “I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend.” (Rom 7:19) We all have experiences like this. Although gifted by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit from Baptism and Confirmation, we sometimes grow weak and become fragile. This may be because we have succumbed to some temptation. We may have put ourselves in a near occasion of sin, let anger get the best of us
or let greed or ambition take hold of us. We may all too easily have passed on knowledge that was best to have been kept to ourselves. Or we may have passed on that which is not true. We may have erred not by action, but rather by omission...not doing the good that I know I should do. We may not have defended the Faith. We may not have defended life, especially that of the unborn, but also life in its continuum from conception to natural death. We may not have exercised Charity when given the opportunity. We may have forgotten the ‘call’!

We are called to be reconciled with each other, with God, with his Church and with ourselves. Sin is both personal and communitarian; it affects others, not just me! Hence when in the state of sin, I need to go to Sacramental Confession. I must confess my sin and be absolved by the priest, who represents Christ, and in whose person he acts.

The offense, which has diminished the ability to do good within myself and within the Christian Community, must be overcome by the Grace that I receive through sacramental Reconciliation. St. Paul reminded us of the generous mercy of God. He wrote that no matter how great the offense, Grace far surpasses the sin. (Rom 5:20)

Sin has such a negative power that the Lord admonishes us; “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt 5:23) Paul also tells us that we are to be “ambassadors of reconciliation.” (2 Cor 5:19-20)

Christ is the one who gives us this example. “Father, forgive them,” he says to the ones who scourged and crucified him. To the thief who repented, he said, “today you will be with me in paradise.” In neither case was it considered a sign of weakness to forgive or a condoning of the sin! It is part of Christian life to forgive, reconcile, and so live in peace. It is to follow Christ’s example.

God’s mercy is infinite. So our exercise of seeking and granting forgiveness must imitate that of Jesus. How often must I forgive another? Christ simply
said, “Seventy times seven times.” (Matt 18:22) In other words, there is no limit to our call to forgive another or to accept forgiveness from someone.

St. Paul says not only to forgive one who has wronged you, but also to “encourage him” and “reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Cor 2:7-8)

8. The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. The Church was born of the Paschal Mystery. From the very beginning, the Eucharist stands at the center of the Church’s life. In Acts St. Luke provides a summary of early Christian life. He says “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles, to the community life, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42) As Christianity unfolded in history, the Church came to realize “the entire spiritual good of the Church is contained substantially in the Eucharist.” (St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, III, q. 65, a. 3, ad 1)

When St. Paul and St. Luke gave us the account of the Institution of the Eucharist, each ended the narrative with the mandate, “Do this in remembrance of me.” (1 Cor 11:24-25; Lk 22:19) Paul actually adds it after the consecration of the bread and of the wine, hence, twice. This is significant because he really wants the Community that he founded to be centered in the Eucharist.

Further, the use of the word, ‘remembrance’ is not just a reference to a historical meal. In the Jewish religious context, it means that through the very action of the blessing, the community is actually made sacramentally present to the Paschal Mystery of Christ’s Dying and Rising. Hence, from the beginning the Church realized that Christ is present in the Eucharist substantially. He is truly present in his body, blood, soul and divinity. “The whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained” in the Eucharist.” (CCC, 1374, p 346)

The Eucharistic Liturgy is meal because of its connection with the supper which the Lord took with his disciples on the eve of his Passion. It is also the Holy Sacrifice because it re-presents the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior on Calvary. (CCC, # 1329-1330) It is not the one or the other; it is both.
The celebration of the Eucharist is obligatory on Sunday because it is the day on which Christ rose from the dead. It is the Christian Sabbath. No Catholic is to lightly excuse himself from the celebration of Mass on Saturday evening or Sunday. The Eucharistic celebration is the most perfect way of giving thanks to God for all that He has done for us in Christ. We are made present to His Dying and Rising. We receive the very Body and Blood of the Lord and so are strengthened in faith to give faithful witness to our love for Jesus.

Through it we experience our ‘weekly Pentecost’ in which we are gifted and empowered to resist evil and grow in holiness...in the very likeness and the ways of God. In the Eucharistic Prayer the priest says “grant that we who are nourished by his body and blood may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ.” (Eucharistic Payer III) No other service, no other ritual or prayer can substitute for this rich feast, this sacred nourishment, in which our deepest desires are fulfilled.

It is only the validly ordained priest who can give us this Eucharist; hence the need for priests to lead our parishes. I entreat you, then, to pray fervently to God to call men to the service of the Altar and the Word. Pray for our families and parishes to develop a culture of Faith that is conducive to the development of vocations.

9. The Church is called to unity as the one Body of Christ. The night before his death Christ fervently prayed for the unity of his followers. “I pray that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (Jn 17:20-21)

St. Paul encountered communities that were divided and hence limited the credibility of their witness to Christ. In Corinth he found those who “belonged to Paul, to Apollos or to Peter.” (1 Cor 1:12) Do we not all belong to Christ? Disputes were recorded in Acts between the Greek speaking and the Hebrew speaking.

This call to unity is a perennial concern. Historically here in the Diocese
of Amarillo we were of varying European backgrounds and Native Americans. Today we have recent immigrants from the Asian, African and Hispanic cultures. Paul had a keen insight into the relationship between the baptized and God the Father of Christ, and also between each of the baptized with one another; we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. A new family has been forged through the Dying and Rising of Jesus. Early Christians were very conscious of this relationship, especially as they approached the altar to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. Whether they were Jew or Greek, free or slave, male or female, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, they were very conscious that they were truly brothers and sisters in Christ.

Regardless of the distinctions that are made in society today, or the varying ethnic groups that are present in our local Church or the languages that are spoken, we are called to the unity of the family of Christ in the Church. Unity must be the aim and goal of the members of each parish, of all the parishes with each other and with the bishop, the priest, the deacons and all the lay faithful. Unity is our call and the natural and logical outcome and goal of Eucharistic Communion. Pope John Paul II stressed this unity when he exclaimed there is “only one America, one Church, one family!” (Apostolic Exhortation, Church in America)

Paul wrote “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17) Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his first encyclical: “Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards Him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians; we become one body, completely joined in a single existence.” (Deus Caritas, # 14)

It is the Apostle Paul who wrote that it is ‘unworthy’ of a Christian community to partake of the Lord’s Supper amid division and indifference toward the poor.” (1 Cor 11:17 — 22, 27-29)
10. **The Church is called to Prayer.** The task and mission of Christ and his Church may seem difficult and sometimes impossible. With prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible! We must remember the words of Gabriel to Mary in speaking of the pregnancy of Elizabeth, who was old and barren. Gabriel said, “For nothing is impossible with God.” (Lk 1:37)

Each individual Christian must pray. So must families pray. Pope John Paul II called for every family to be a “school of prayer” (NMI). How I would like to see Christian couples pray together so that when children come, it is a natural part of their life together. How I would like to see families pray together, at meals and at other times. How I would like to see every Catholic family make Sunday Mass a priority throughout the diocese. What a powerful transformation could take place in each of us individually, and in the Body of Christ of the Diocese of Amarillo if we had such a prayer life.

In the absence of daily prayer, frequent reflection on the Word of God, especially the Gospel and Sunday Eucharist, many have grown weak in Christian spirituality and witness. St. Luke calls us to a life of prayer that is made in “one heart and one mind.” (Acts 4:32) St. Paul admonishes the community to remain in the ‘mind and heart’ of Jesus that “together you may glorify God in one voice.” (Rom. 15:6) Luke adds that it should be continuous, “praying always and not loosing heart.” (Lk18:1) Finally Luke says that our prayer must be persevering or tenacious, like the man who tenaciously keeps knocking on his neighbor’s door at night for bread. (Lk 11:5-13) He will not give up, all depended on that action. Luke implies that all may depend on that prayer.

Scripture emphasizes that prayer is necessary for the gift of the spirit. Jesus was “at prayer” when the Spirit descended on him. (Matt 3:21) The Apostles and Mary were in prayer in the Upper Room when the outpouring of the Spirit gave birth to the Church. (Acts 1:14) And we know that it was only with the Spirit that the followers of Jesus were able to “proclaim the marvelous works of God.” (Acts 2:11) In the Gospel Luke associates the coming of the Spirit with prayer, also. “If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those

I encourage you to join Mary, the Twelve and the others in the Upper Room. Pray with them, not only for vocations to the Priesthood, but also for vocations to the Consecrated Life, and the Diaconate. Pray, too, that each baptized person may realize and actualize their call to discipleship in the service of Christ and His Church.

I thank you for your Faith. I praise God our Father for your practice of the Faith. I glorify Christ Jesus for your example and of the witness of the Faith here in the High Plains of Texas. I offer prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving to God for the hospitality and the warmth with which you have greeted me as your new Bishop. I also pray daily that “you learn to make still greater progress. It is God’s will that you grow in holiness.” (1 Thess. 4:1-2)

May Our Lady of Guadalupe and our patron, St. Laurence intercede for your spiritual growth and physical well being.

May the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with you and your families always.

+Most Reverend Patrick J. Zurek, Bishop of Amarillo, Pastoral Letter to the People of the Diocese of Amarillo, Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009, St. Laurence Cathedral, Amarillo, Texas