

Pastoral Reflection on Medical Assistance in Dying

Bishops of Canadian Atlantic Provinces

“Attentive pastoral accompaniment” of the dying and their families is needed to reach an understanding of how to respond when Catholics request medical assistance in dying, the bishops of the Atlantic Episcopal Assembly of Canada said in a pastoral reflection released Nov. 27 to mark the start of Advent. Responding to the recent legalization of voluntary euthanasia and medically assisted suicide in Canada, the bishops said the Catholic minister’s response must be characterized by “healing, guiding, nurturing and reconciling.” They warned against reducing the discussion of medical aid in dying to

“The purpose of pastoral care is to communicate the compassion of Christ, his healing love and his mercy.”

*“norms for the reception of the sacraments or the celebration of funeral rites” and said people of faith are “called to entrust everyone, whatever their decisions may be, to the mercy of God.” Dialogue and compassionate prayerful support can “shed light on complex pastoral situations and will indicate the most appropriate action to be taken including whether or not the celebration of sacraments is proper,” the bishops said. They also stressed the importance of palliative care and urged additional government funding for such services. Earlier this year, the bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories issued a similar document outlining pastoral guidelines for administering the sacraments to Catholics considering euthanasia or assisted suicide (see *Origins*, Vol. 46, No. 19). The latest reflection was signed by the 10 bishops of the Canadian provinces of Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. Their reflection follows.*

In our Catholic tradition we often refer to the church as our mother. We perceive her as a mother who lovingly accompanies us throughout life and who especially wishes to support and guide us when we are faced with difficult situations and decisions. It is from this perspective that we, the bishops of the Atlantic Episcopal Assembly, wish to share with you this pastoral reflection on medical assistance in dying.

Federal legislation passed in June of this year has legalized medical assistance in

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Dec. 29, 2016
Volume 46
Number 31

The bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories in Canada issued in September pastoral guidelines for clergy dealing with Catholics who are considering euthanasia or assisted suicide.

The document, written for priests and parishes, gave guidance on when people in such situations are eligible to receive certain sacraments or a Catholic funeral.

The document specifically addressed the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing of the sick. "In our day a priest may encounter a penitent who has officially requested physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia," the document said.

"The penitent has not yet been killed nor has he/she committed suicide, but he or she has initiated the process, which is already a grave matter."

The bishops said, "If the penitent does not rescind this request, he or she will be killed. They are in this objective state of sin, which is gravely disordered."

The bishops noted that not all Catholics realize assisted suicide is a grave sin and that once a person is made aware of this and is "open to reconsidering the decision, the priest can absolve. There is at least the beginning of contrition, a willingness to reconsider and thus possibly rectify their situation."

The bishops said that "in the case of a person who is contemplating a request for medical assistance in committing suicide or for euthanasia but has not yet determined to do so, the grace of the sacrament of anointing is not to be denied," but the church's teaching should be clearly articulated.

The pastoral guidelines appeared in *Origins*, Vol. 46, No. 19, the edition dated Oct. 6, 2016.

A March column by Archbishop Terrence Prendergast of Ottawa, Ontario, appeared in the margin notes section of that edition of *Origins*.

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dying in our country. This new legislation allows physicians and nurse practitioners to provide two types of medical assistance in dying: directly administering a substance that causes death (voluntary euthanasia), or giving or prescribing a drug that is self-administered to cause death (medically assisted suicide).

This new legislation raises many questions and concerns for the sick and suffering and for their family and friends. Likewise it raises questions and concerns for medical professionals, health care providers and the pastors of souls. It challenges us as a church and as individual Catholics to grow in our understanding of the church's moral teaching on this issue, and it calls us to discern how best to accompany those who find themselves struggling with illness, pain and difficult medical circumstances.

Medical assistance in dying is a highly complex and intensely emotional issue which profoundly affects all of us. It makes us aware that some people have become convinced that at a certain point there is no longer any "value" in their lives, because their suffering has become unbearable or they cannot function as they once did or they feel a burden to their family and society. People with such a conviction or in such circumstances deserve our compassionate response and respect, for it is our belief that a person's value arises from the inherent dignity we have as human beings and not from how well we function.

In our efforts as Christians to understand and respond pastorally to this issue, the example of Jesus' own ministry is an important starting point. He ministered to those who were disillusioned as he walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). He listened attentively to the stories of these disciples, and his profound attention allowed them to share the things that troubled them deeply. He eventually led them, through a reflection on the Scriptures, to a new awareness and encounter of his presence as they recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

The example of Jesus shows us that pastoral care takes place in the midst of difficult

situations and that it involves listening closely to those who are suffering and accompanying them on the journey of their life situation.

Pope Francis also calls us to practice this "art of accompaniment," removing our "sandals" before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The Holy Father writes that this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life (*Evangelii Gaudium* [The Joy of the Gospel], 169).

He says that to accompany requires prudence, understanding, patience and docility to the Spirit. He focuses on the need to practice the art of listening, which requires the opening of one's heart to a closeness which can lead to genuine spiritual encounter (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 171). Pope Francis reminds us that the one who accompanies others must realize that each person's situation before God and his/her life of grace are mysteries which no one can fully know from without. Consequently, we must not make judgments about people's responsibility and culpability (*ibid.*, 172).

Especially within the context of the church's teaching on suicide, this pastoral approach of accompaniment is extremely important in our contact with and ministry to those who are suffering intensely and who are considering asking for medical assistance in dying. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that God is the sovereign master of life. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of (Catechism, 2280).

The catechism teaches that suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate one's life (No. 2281). However, the catechism also notes that "grave psychological disturbances, anguish or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide" (No. 2282). Such circumstances can sometimes lead persons to so grave a feeling of desperation and hopelessness that they can no longer see the value in

ISSN 0093-609X, *Origins*, CNS Documentary Service, is published weekly (except biweekly during July, August and December's last week) by Catholic News Service, 3211 4th Street N.E., Washington, D.C. 20017-1100. Copyright © 2016 by Catholic News Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Periodical-class postage paid at Washington, D.C. Editor, Edmond Brosnan; Associate Editor, Mary Esslinger; Director and Editor-in-Chief of CNS, Greg Erlandson. Editorial: (202) 541-3284. Circulation: (202) 541-3290. Email: cns@catholicnews.com. Web: www.originsonline.com.

Subscriptions: One year, \$114; two years, \$199; three years, \$284; foreign postage additional. Single copy: \$8. Back issues: Inquire for availability and rates. Attach mailing label to change of address requests and subscription correspondence. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Origins*, CNS Documentary Service, 3211 4th Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20017-1100.

Documentation in *Origins* is selected on the basis of interest and usefulness in reference to current issues. Publication does not signify endorsement by *Origins* or its sponsoring body, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

continuing to live, this desperation and hopelessness diminishing their responsibility for their actions. Only attentive pastoral accompaniment can bring us to an understanding of the circumstances that could lead a person to consider medical assistance in dying.

As bishops of our local churches, we must have a primary concern for the pastoral well-being of all those entrusted to our care. This pastoral concern is symbolized by the image of the Good Shepherd and reminds all involved in pastoral care to make visible to the flock the very ministry of Jesus Christ.

This ministry is summarized in four key words: healing, guiding, nurturing and reconciling. These four words capture the heart and actions of the Lord as he encountered people in his public ministry. These words reveal the Lord's attitude, his mission of mercy and his ministry of reconciliation. We believe that all priests, deacons and lay ministers, particularly those who care for the sick and vulnerable every day, at home, in hospices and in hospitals, need to be compassionate expressions and effective sacraments of this mercy of God in all that they do and whomever they encounter.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide may be legal, but they do not reflect our Christian view of life, suffering and death. The Gospel is a message of good news and hope in the face of pain and suffering. The Gospel offers a vision of life and death focused through the central mystery of our faith, the Resurrection. When we proclaim that Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again, we profess that death is not the last word on life and that life for a Christian is not terminated by dying.

In the pastoral care of those who are contemplating medical assistance in dying, we must remember that the purpose of pastoral care is to communicate the compassion of Christ, his healing love and his mercy. Furthermore, we must take into account the suffering person's emotional, family and faith context when responding to their specific requests for the reception of the sacrament of penance and the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, the reception of holy Communion and the celebration of a Christian funeral.

The sacrament of penance is for the forgiveness of past sins, not the ones that have yet to be committed, and yet the catechism reminds us that by ways known to God alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance (Catechism, 2283).

The sacrament of the anointing of the sick is for strengthening and accompanying someone in a vulnerable and suffering state. It presupposes one's desire to follow Christ even

in his passion, suffering and death; it is an expression of trust and dependence on God in difficult circumstances (Catechism, 1520-3).

The reception of holy Communion as one approaches the end of this life can assist a person in growing in their union with Christ. This last Communion, called viaticum, has a particular significance and importance as the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection (Catechism, 1524).

As for the church's funeral rites, there are a number of possibilities available. However, in discerning the type of celebration most pastorally appropriate to the particular situation, there should always be dialogue with the persons concerned which is caring, sensitive and open. The decree of promulgation of the Order of Funerals states that "by means of the funeral rites it has been the practice of the church, as a tender mother, not simply to commend the dead to God but also to raise high the hope of its children and give witness to its own faith in the future resurrection of the baptized with Christ" (Prot. No. 720/69).

As people of faith, and ministers of God's grace, we are called to entrust everyone, whatever their decisions may be, to the mercy of God. To one and all we wish to say that the pastoral care of souls cannot be reduced to norms for the reception of the sacraments or the celebration of funeral rites. Persons, and their families, who may be considering euthanasia or assisted suicide and who request the ministry of the church need to be accompanied with dialogue and compassionate prayerful support. The fruit of such a pastoral encounter will shed light on complex pastoral situations and will indicate the most appropriate action to be taken including whether or not the celebration of sacraments is proper.

In connection with this entire issue of medical assistance in dying, we must also emphasize how critically important palliative care is for dying patients, their families and loved ones. Our palliative care professionals and volunteers bring light, hope and comfort into very difficult life situations, both in homes and in health care facilities. Instead of providing ways to hasten death, those who serve in palliative care bring support and hope to the suffering person and to their family and friends.

Likewise, in our efforts as church to minister to the vulnerable at all stages of life, pastoral ministers and caring pastoral communities must continue to seek out new ways to be ever more present to the dying and to the families of the dying. Furthermore, we must strongly encourage our governments to provide the financial resources needed

A few months before assisted suicide and euthanasia became legal in all of Canada, he said, "There is a controversy brewing over whether it is pastorally appropriate to celebrate the sacrament of the sick with someone who has chosen to ask for assisted suicide or who is going to be euthanized. ...

"The celebration of the sacrament of the sick is a Catholic Christian's affirmation of trust in God's mercy and healing love. It is a statement of faith on the part of the suffering person that God is the Lord of our life and our death and that he can bring comfort, forgiveness of sins and healing either spiritual or physical (or sometimes both) into our lives.

"Requesting to be anointed before asking for assisted suicide is a direct contradiction of both the purpose of the sacrament of the sick and a counterwitness about trust in God's mercy. The church cannot celebrate a sacrament for the forgiveness of sins when the person asking for this grace is about to do something that is gravely morally wrong.

"The Catechism of the Catholic Church unambiguously gives the Catholic teaching on euthanasia and assisted suicide: 'Intentional euthanasia, whatever its forms or motives, is murder. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. Suicide is seriously contrary to justice, hope and charity. It is forbidden by the Fifth Commandment' (Nos. 2324-25).

"Asking for the sacrament of the sick is making a statement about the value and truth of the church's teaching and her agency as God's instrument of mercy here on earth. Asking for the sacrament in advance of rejecting the church's clear teaching on the value of human life is a counterwitness.

"Requesting that the pastor be present for this decision to

end one's life is asking for the church to sanction or bless a decision that she stands in firm opposition to as morally wrong.

"Priests and lay faithful will accompany the ill, the suffering and the dying on their journey and will prove by their presence and prayers that all human life is valued, loved and has dignity. The church and her ministers, however, cannot in good conscience condone the decision to be euthanized or to ask for assisted suicide by celebrating the sacrament of the sick with those in this situation who request it.

"It is a difficult position to take but one that is true to our Catholic faith, the tradition of our church and the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ."

With euthanasia occurring in the province of Quebec at triple government predictions, obtaining accurate statistics on medically assisted deaths across Canada is almost impossible and could lead to abuse, according to opponents of the practice.

A recent report from the Quebec government showed 262 euthanasia deaths in the first seven months after the province legalized the practice in December 2015.

Quebec Health Minister Gaétan Barrette told journalists he was surprised at the figure, which is about three times higher than anticipated. He said the number of euthanasia deaths in the province could reach 300 by the end of 2016, but the executive director of the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition believes the figure will be closer to 450.

Alex Schadenberg, coalition director, told Canadian Catholic News that, even in Quebec, where the requirements for reporting and oversight are the most rigorous, euthanasia deaths are likely being underreported. He also expressed frustration at a lack of transparency in other provinces, making it impos-

to strengthen palliative care services in hospitals, long-term care and community care facilities, hospices and homes.

Finally, as difficult as it may be to do so, it is important that we have conversations in our families about the need for quality end-of-life care that is reflective of our values and beliefs because it is important that we all understand the implications of the new law on medical assistance in dying, and that we offer truly loving and merciful alternatives.

May the Holy Spirit grant us all wisdom and guidance as we face this difficult moral and pastoral situation.

Archbishop Anthony Mancini
Halifax-Yarmouth, Nova Scotia

Archbishop Martin Currie
St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador
Archbishop Valéry Vienneau

Moncton, New Brunswick
Bishop Brian J. Dunn

Antigonish, Nova Scotia
Bishop Anthony Daniels

Grand Falls, New Brunswick
Bishop Claude Champagne, OMI

Edmundston, New Brunswick
Bishop Richard Grecco

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island
Bishop Peter Hundt

Corner Brook and Labrador, Newfoundland
and Labrador

Bishop Robert Harris
Saint John, New Brunswick

Bishop Daniel Jodoin
Bathurst, New Brunswick ■

A Reason to Hope: Pastoral Letter

Bishop Fabre

Looking toward a future "filled with creative evangelization and the forming of disciples," Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, offered Catholics a guide to assist in their spiritual maturation as the diocese approaches its 40th anniversary. The bishop recommended that Catholics read one chapter of his Nov. 1 pastoral letter, titled "A Reason to Hope," during each of the four weeks of Advent and reflect on the questions it raises, alone or in small groups. A central question, raised several times in the letter, is "What do you really want from God this Christmas?" Bishop Fabre urged readers of his letter to be honest

about what is in their hearts, to share their hearts with God and to listen quietly as God speaks to them. "Because of the frenetic pace of life we are losing our capacity for silence and self-reflection," he wrote. Recalling some painful episodes from his own life, Bishop Fabre had words of hope for those faced with economic struggles or other personal problems: "Regardless of how often you have struggled with life, God ... wants to help you." The bishop said he believes the diocese is "on the verge of something truly transformational" as it nears its 40th anniversary June 5. The day before the anniversary, he said, he will implement a new strategic plan, more than two years in the making and involving some 800 people in the diocese. Bishop Fabre's pastoral letter follows.

Peace be with you. By the time you receive this letter the holiday season will be upon us. Many of you may be reading this as you celebrate Thanksgiving, while some of you may be reading with full anticipation of Christmas. I, like so many of you, have cherished memories of Christmas: childhood joy, time with my family and a unique spirit in the air. However, while many of us begin to anticipate Christmas, it is my hope that all of us will receive this letter as my gift to you for Advent in lieu of my traditional Christmas card.

Even though December is a busy time of the year, God wants to speak to you. This Advent, even with its busyness, can be a special time with you and God. If we have the courage to slow down a bit we will be further disposed to the grace he desires to give us.

As your servant and bishop I listen to you and cherish what I hear. I sense that many of us, either because of the economy or because of our personal journeys, need something or someone to hope in this Christmas. This pastoral letter is meant to share my heart with you, to draw us all into an inspiring promise from God and to instill within us an excitement for our future.

May this Advent be filled with grace and a deepening of your relationship with God. May this Advent be a time of reflection, prayer and hope.

Sincerely in Christ,
Bishop Shelton J. Fabre
Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux

A PASTORAL LETTER: WHY AND WHY NOW?

Oct. 30, 2016, marked my three-year anniversary of being installed as bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. During the past three years I have come to know many things about us. We have great people with

generous hearts and a vibrant *joie de vivre* (“joy of life”).

We have a vibrant Cajun people, complemented by Native Americans, African Americans and Asian-Pacific Americans, alongside those who speak Spanish from a variety of native countries. We have a unique heritage steeped in the Catholic faith and expressed in unique local traditions. We have a beautiful history with an important milestone immediately upon us: June 5, 2017, is the 40th anniversary of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux.

I often hear people refer to the “diocese” as if “it” were something and not someone. Some people refer to the diocese as administrative leaders with rules and regulations who tell us what we can or cannot do. Some people refer to the diocese as a building on Highway 311. Still more think of the diocese as something abstract.

Yet, the reality is that we are the diocese. The diocese is you and me. We are 90,000 Catholics together. We are 39 uniquely beautiful parishes in harmony with your bishop who loves you. The diocese is a people, not a category. The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux is a particular people with a rich history and a unique personality.

When I consider our first 40 years, there is much to be grateful for. The shared life together. The celebration of the sacraments and the passing on of the faith. The proclamation of the Gospel in both word and deed. The standing by each other through all kinds of storms. The first 40 years have been filled with grace.

However, I know that many of you, like me, have seen changes in these past 40 years. I am aware that today we have fewer practicing Catholics in our area than we did when the diocese began. Many Catholics see this change in their families and/or parishes. It is natural to worry about our future and ask good questions. What can be done? Will the trend stop? Will the future build on the foundation of our history?

I am aware of the trends, for I believe the only way to lead is to do so with the courage to be honest with our current situation. However, I stand with you today as a man of hope. Yes, I have great hope for our future. I have hope because of what I know to be true about God as well as the people in our diocese. I have hope because I believe people are hungrier than ever. I have hope because I believe God is longing to fill the void in people’s lives.

I have hope ... and this is why I am writing to you.

I believe our diocese is on the verge of something great. As many of you know, I initiated a strategic planning process in mid-2015. To date, nearly 800 people have been actively engaged in the planning process, either through participating directly on a commission or, most recently, through the outreach to pastors and parish leadership.

The strategic planning process has opened my ears to the thoughts, concerns and dreams of our people. It has opened my mind to creative possibilities for our future. It has opened my heart to the fidelity, promise and power of God. Working with both clergy and laity has been a wonderful experience for me. It has given me a new appreciation for our people and history. It has given me a new appreciation of the reality and complexity of our current situation. Most important, it has given me a reason to hope.

A Reason to Hope

I have great hope for our future. Although I consider myself to be a positive person, I do not have hope because I am an optimist. Although I embrace the call to serve you as bishop, I do not have hope because “that’s what good leaders do.” I have hope because I am a Christian. Jesus Christ is active and alive today, and he has given me a reason to hope.

The people of our Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux have real goodness in them and long to go deeper with God. You, the people of our diocese, have given me a reason to hope. I believe we are on the cusp of an exciting new future: one filled with creative evangelization and the forming of disciples. Our future has given me a reason to hope.

I have hope in the midst of the economic struggles that I know affect so many of us personally. I have hope even though I am fully aware that many of us carry burdens and suffering. I have hope knowing that the future may present challenges that we have yet to see. I have hope because of the reality and person of Jesus Christ.

I wrote this pastoral letter so that we might all have a reason to hope. I wrote this pastoral letter because I feel so many of us need a reason to hope. My thoughts are structured in four chapters because there are four weeks of Advent. Do not get overwhelmed by the amount of text. Pace yourself. Read it slowly. Take in a little bit each day. Read one chapter a week during the four weeks of Advent.

As we journey together during Advent, I will share my heart with you. I will tell you about my family, about my perseverance through suffering and about the many ways God has been faithful to me. Most important,

sible to compile accurate statistics on assisted suicide and euthanasia, leaving no way of identifying instances of abuse.

“A system was promised, but we don’t know what it is,” Schadenberg said.

Quebec’s law resembles those of Belgium and the Netherlands, which rely on doctors to self-report instances of euthanasia, Schadenberg said.

“The doctor does the death,” but there is no way of knowing if he or she reports all of them, especially those that fail to meet the government’s criteria, he said.

Across the rest of Canada, there is no coordinated system to compile information on euthanasia and assisted suicide, Schadenberg said.

The federal law passed in June that legalized assisted suicide requires the government to establish reporting guidelines to record requests and approvals for assisted suicide, but those guidelines remain unwritten.

As of mid-October, in addition to the euthanasia cases in Quebec, there had been about 200 known cases of assisted suicide in other provinces, according to various media reports.

But Schadenberg said some smaller hospitals are not releasing any data for privacy reasons, and he predicted that could become a trend.

In Quebec, the government report included three cases of euthanasia that did not comply with the law, but there is no information on what, if anything, will happen in those cases, said Aubert Martin, executive director of the province’s grass-roots anti-euthanasia organization, Living with Dignity.

“We’re talking about killing a human being,” Martin said. “This is criminal. Is there going to be any follow-up?”

I will tell you about my dreams, for I have a reason to hope.

How to Use This Resource

Advent is a time of prayer. Even though many of us are busy, Advent calls us to spend time with God. It is a time to slow down, become a bit more reflective and pray. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2727, says: “Christian prayer is neither an escape from reality nor a divorce from life.”

If prayer is connected to our real lives so too this pastoral letter, if it is going to help us, must be connected to our real lives. Therefore, I wrote this pastoral letter to be a resource for your spiritual life. I have intentionally written it such that I offer the following encouragements:

—As you read one chapter one week at a time, I ask you to consider reading it together with other people. Perhaps with your spouse or a small group or with others over dinner. The conversations that come from reading it with others may bear great fruit.

—Each chapter concludes with questions for your personal reflection and/or small-group discussion. These questions are as important as the text itself. Pay attention to your heart and what stirs within as much as you pay attention to the words on the page.

—Each chapter also contains instructions as to how you might pray with the Scripture readings from Advent’s daily Mass.

—Let me share a few simple principles that have helped me as I pray:

1. Be honest with what is in your heart. God already knows; however, our honesty helps us be more receptive to all that he longs to say.

2. Share your heart with God. Speak to God and share everything. Relate everything to God, for nothing is off limits.

3. Listen quietly as God speaks to you. He may speak through a thought or an image or a Scripture passage. Quietly listen. Be patient. Trust that God longs to speak to you.

Chapter 1: We Are All Searching

“The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.” —

Catechism, No. 27

1. We are all searching. Some of us are searching for happiness. Some of us are searching for direction. Some of us are searching for comfort in the midst of life’s struggles. Regardless of whether or not you believe you have found “it,” what we all have in common is that we are all searching for something.

2. Many of us would say we are happy. We count our blessings daily, and we acknowledge that we are where we want to be in life. Some of us are happy, but we might also admit that we are tired. We feel the effects of trying to keep everything going. For some, the pace necessary to maintain our lifestyles can be a bit overwhelming. In our fatigue we wish we had more time to enjoy the “good things” in life rather than maintaining the frenetic pace of activity and balancing the many things that compete for our time.

Others of us may not know what, but we do know we want more; we want more out of life. We are not convinced we are flourishing at the present moment and perhaps we worry about our future. If and when our thoughts slow down we hear the questions: Where am I heading? Where will life eventually bring me? Is there more to life than what I am experiencing?

3. “I want to be happy.” If we ask most people, what do you want out of life, we will most likely hear them respond, “I want to be happy.” If we pay attention, we see that our everyday decisions are often influenced by what we think will make us happy, from the food we eat to the way we choose to spend our free time. Our ordinary, everyday happiness is fragile in that it is influenced by many things outside of our control: the weather, traffic, the news, the disposition of other people, and whether or not the day meets our expectations.

Our wanting to be happy can drive the jobs we choose, the hours we work and how much time we spend with those we choose to spend time with. It can determine if we medicate through addictions or other self-centered behavior. Our wanting to be happy can determine how we respond to adversity, how we handle our current economic crisis, how we endure marital difficulty and if we persevere through midlife crisis.

4. Does God want me to be happy? The human person is a divinely created

body and soul. We have immortal souls in our mortal bodies. St. Paul teaches us that “our citizenship is in heaven.”¹ There is an eternal reality to our temporary existence. We are not going to live on earth forever; we were never intended to.

The nature of our soul is such that we cannot satiate our supernatural thirst through natural means alone. While on this earth, we will always long for more because the human person is not merely a physical body. On the other hand, Jesus himself says: “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.”²

God wants us to be happy, to be filled with joy. Our lives are not meant to be something to be endured while we are here on earth with hopes that we can escape in death and “finally get to heaven.”

5. Happiness from where? St. Augustine wrote, “We all want to live happily; in the whole human race there is no one who does not assent to this.”³ Augustine continues: “How is it, then, that I seek you, Lord? Since in seeking you, my God, I seek a happy life.”⁴

The great Augustine might say that the question is not, Do I want to be happy? The real question is, Where do I turn? Does the desire for happiness lead me outward into relationship and the transcendent, or do I turn inward and grasp, attempting for me to make me happy? You see, there is a difference between happiness in God versus what our culture offers. They differ in source and duration.

Christian happiness is rooted in the transcendent, not circumstances. It runs deeper than emotion and lasts longer than the spontaneous. Unfortunately, what many people pursue is too often dependent upon circumstances and tends to fade once the circumstances do. It is natural to search for happiness. The question is, Where am I looking?

6. Searching in the desert. In the movie *The American President*, presidential aide Lewis Rothschild (played by Michael J. Fox) says, People will “crawl through the desert toward a mirage, and when they discover there’s no water, they’ll drink the sand.” President Andrew Shepherd (played by Michael Douglas) responds: “People don’t drink the sand because they’re thirsty. They drink it because they don’t know the dif-

ference.”

We live in a world that promises it can sustain our happiness. However, I have had to admit to myself that in the long term, over extended time, “the world” never comes through on its promises. It only lures me to more, believing that if I just had this or that then I would be happy. The unfulfilled promises leave me “thirsty,” almost as if I were searching in a “mirage.”

7. Christmas cheer. The secular Christmas season more than any other time of the year illustrates our searching. At no other time of year do we more see the tension between where we look for happiness. Let us simply pay attention to our experience.

I believe that there really is something called “Christmas cheer.” Lots of us are in a better mood during the holiday season. People tend to be more generous, nostalgic or in a better mood. In fact, how many of us have heard people say to us, “I wish it could be Christmas all year round”? I agree with the sentiment.

However, I want to ask us why. Why do we want “this” all year round? What are we really “wishing” for? What are we not experiencing the rest of the year that we experience during the holidays? More important, what does this say about the rest of the year and what we really desire? You see, there is something underneath the wish. Do we know why we want this? Do we really know what we are looking for?

8. Am I missing something? What if there were more to life than chasing the next thing or event or milestone that you think will make you happy? Imagine if there were something more satisfying than what you know now? What if it were there ... and you were missing it?

You were made for more. If we do not take time to listen to what we really want underneath what we think we want, then we will continue to run toward the mirages in the desert. This only leaves us tired ... and how many of us are tired?

Because of the frenetic pace of life we are losing our capacity for silence and self-reflection. Therein, we are losing our capacity for deeper reflection in our daily experience. Proper self-reflection not only has the ability for us to gain greater self-awareness, but it also has the ability to point us in the right direction toward what we really are desiring.

So, may I again ask, What do you really want?

9. Restless in Belgium. I recall seminary formation and my years of theological study at the American College in Leuven, Belgium. It was almost Christmas, and I was 4,900 miles from home. I missed my family. I missed south Louisiana. I wanted to be home.

While I thought I was longing for home, I came to see that the longing was for something else. You see, I was at a crossroads in my life. I had already been in seminary formation for seven years and only had one year left. That meant the clock was ticking and I had to make a decision as to if I was going to pursue ordination. I knew something was going on inside my heart. I felt restless inside. Seminary was busy and it was difficult to find time to name what was really going on within.

Eventually, circumstances were such that I could not return home. I was stuck in the cold of the Belgium winter and had to celebrate the snowy holidays in Leuven. As Christmas approached, my days became less frenetic. The pace eased. My thoughts slowed. I soon found myself quieter. With the help of a good spiritual director, I was able to name the emotion within me as “restless.” As I prayed, I asked God for help; I asked him to speak to me and to give me the courage to speak to him.

That Christmas of 1987 turned out to be one of the best of my life. I did share my heart with the Lord, and he shared his with me. Not only did God speak to my restlessness, he confirmed my call to the priesthood and gave me the courage to embrace eventual ordination.

As I reflect back on my experience I cannot help but wonder what would have happened if I would have actually returned home for Christmas. Would I have slowed down? Would I have named the restlessness? Would I have heard God speak as he did? Would I be writing this letter to you today? I do not think that I am the only one who has ever been restless. I think many of us are. So, may I again ask, What do you want from God? What do you really want?

10. Some of us may be longing for reconciliation and harmony within our marriages and families as this time of year raises various emotions with regard to those whom we will be with during the holidays. Some of us may be longing

for relief from financial burdens.

As our local economy continues to struggle, many of us may not have the capacity to celebrate as we have in years past. Some of us may be longing to be heard and known as Thanksgiving and Christmas may engender feelings of loneliness or regret. Some of us remember seasons in our life where God seemed more engaged, and we felt closer to him; therefore, some of us may long to reconnect with God.

11. Advent and Christmas are ultimately God’s initiative and response to the deepest longings of the human heart. However, while the gift of Christmas is ultimately a gift for all of humanity, we are invited to receive the gift personally and anew. To receive the gift, we must first acknowledge how and where we need the gift. So, what are you searching for? At this stage of life what are you longing for? What do you really want from God this Christmas?

For Your Reflection

For your personal prayer and small-group discussion:

1. What signs do you see that confirm that our culture is searching?
2. What signs do you see that what “the world” offers does or does not fulfill our searching?
3. At this stage of your life what are you searching for?
4. Where or how do you search?
5. What do you really want from God this Christmas?

Chapter 2: There Is Hope

“Hope is the virtue of those who, experiencing conflict — the struggle between life and death, good and evil — believe in the resurrection of Christ, in the victory of love.” — Pope Francis, Aug. 15, 2013, homily, feast of the Assumption

12. Searching ... and busy. They often say experience can teach you a lot. Permit me to offer a slight adjustment. Experience does not teach you, but experience which is reflected upon does.

My responsibilities as bishop require that I travel. Recently I found myself in O’Hare International Airport. As I waited patiently for my flight, with thoughts of this pastoral letter brewing within me, I suddenly had an epiphany as I beheld hundreds of people around me. Almost every single person in my gate area was

deeply engaged in their smartphone, iPad or tablet. Music. Texting. Internet. Facebook and more.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these things in and of themselves. But almost every person was glued to something to keep their attention. That singular moment stunned me: I wonder if we are losing the art of being at home with ourselves, with our thoughts. Is the activity we are giving so much of our attention to really satisfying us? Is it deepening our ability to find what we are searching for or is it somehow narrowing our efforts? How much silence does the average person intentionally enjoy? Do we know? Have we taken time to think about why?

13. Searching within us. My father was a hard worker. As a brickmason he worked hard to provide for our family. He had to deal with the demands of life like anyone else. He overcame the burden of alcoholism and fought hard one day at a time to stay sober. He also endured the suffering of burying two of his sons, a grief that only a parent can describe.

But, even with all of those crosses to bear, when I recall my father, I could always clearly see that he was content. He didn't have a smartphone, iPad or something to compete for his attention. He lived with a healthy amount of self-reflection. The nature of his work was such that he lived in a fair amount of silence. He had time to think. He had time to consider. He had time to reflect on life and learn from his mistakes.

His lifestyle was such that he was aware of what was going on within him. Perhaps you have noticed that when a person is truly content, they seem to live life with a healthy awareness of what is going on inside of them as opposed to feeling the need to be overly engaged in outward activity.

14. I look at my father and his lifestyle compared to the pace we live at today. We are all so busy. Some of the pace is because of the pace of others; however, many drive themselves to an increased level of activity. Why? What are we really searching for? I wonder — in the midst of the pace — if we are really searching for hope.

What are the longings that drive our busyness? It may sound like, "I want to be happy and that's why I'm working so hard." "I want my kids to have more

than I had and that's why I'm working so hard." "Once I retire then I'll be happy." "If I only had (fill in the blank) then I'd be happy."

I wonder if all that work and that pace is our desire for tomorrow to be better than today. This is the basic longing within hope: believing that tomorrow can be better than today.

15. Searching, happiness and God. We are searching. Why? The church in her wisdom gives us an insight into our longing. "Man is in search of God. In the act of creation, God calls every being from nothingness into existence. ... Even after losing through his sin his likeness to God, man remains an image of his Creator and retains the desire for the one who calls him into existence. All religions bear witness to man's essential search for God."⁵

We all want God. When God created us, the Creator left his imprint on the creature. Our souls were made by God and therefore innately long for him. In that true happiness is found in the one who created us for communion with him, our pursuit for happiness is actually a pursuit for God. We are searching for God; therefore, we are searching for happiness.

Unless we come to know that God is our happiness, our natural longing for more in life may propel us to grasp at temporal pleasure. If unchecked, this pattern leaves us inevitably dissatisfied. At the same time the "world" tempts us with promises it cannot keep. We soon try to keep up with empty promises, and life becomes a treadmill: We exhaust ourselves in being busy only to feel that we are not really getting anywhere. There, in that cycle of staying busy, we innately hope for more.

16. God knows you are searching. God knows us. He knows our desire. And, if the Creator left his imprint on the creature then perhaps our desire for God is merely because he desires us. The good news is that God has taken the initiative in Christ and the story of Christmas to reach out to us. It was God who took the initiative in Mary's annunciation. It was God who took the initiative in reaching out to Joseph in the dream. It was God who took the initiative at Christmas; he reached out to us, not vice versa.

17. Our hope is Christ. The good news of Christmas is that the Incarnation is not simply about a baby, it is about a

Savior. The catechism teaches: "When the church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Savior's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming."⁶

The liturgical season of Advent is an annual pilgrimage of sorts where we join ancient Israel in their hope for the Messiah. The chosen people were chosen for this very reason: to be a people who brought the Son of God into the world. Israel longed for this. Their hope was in God, who promised this. In Jesus we see the incarnation of God, and in Jesus we see incarnation of hope.

At the very core of the Christian message is hope. We believe that God's intervention into the human story came through his initiative in the Annunciation. We believe Christ freely chose to give us the gift of his passion and death on the cross because of his insatiable love of us.

We believe Christ conquered all fear, all sin and therein conquered the greatest of all evils — death itself. We believe through Jesus Christ's resurrection he opened for us eternal life. We believe through his ascension, God's plan has entered into its fulfillment. We believe we are not alone — we are never alone. We believe God is among us. We are "convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁷

Our hope is in Jesus Christ, and as such it is important for us to be reminded of who we are speaking of and what victory he has won. We hope because of a person. Our hope is in a person — Jesus Christ.

18. Living with the future in the present. The reality of Jesus Christ not only reveals God's desire for us, but his conquering death gives us hope. Our future, because of Christ, gives us hope.

"Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: It is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present

as well.”⁸

When I live in the reality that my ultimate searching cannot be quenched in this life, I no longer live with the compulsive fear that life has to fulfill all that I search for. Even if my life is marked with suffering, pain or uncertainty, I am certain that true joy ultimately awaits me because of Christ.

19. Living with the future when the present hurts. I share the following story with you because I know that many of us need the promise of the future in order to carry the burdens of today. My oldest brother, Luke, drowned accidentally in 1973 at the age of 20. I was only 10 years old. His death introduced me to suffering and grief in ways that I did not have the language for at the time.

Looking back on Luke’s death, the words of Pope Benedict XVI articulate what I knew to be true deep beneath my pain: “They know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness.” Even at the age of 10, even with a broken heart and a lack of adequately expressing how I felt, I knew then that life did not end in death. Knowing this offered a strange but very real sense of comfort.

Luke’s death also confirmed the Holy Father’s words: “Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well.” Certainty about Luke’s future gave me the strength to make it through the grieving process.

20. Hope is with us. We have hope because God is with us. Returning to Pope Benedict XVI’s *Spe Salvi*:

“(One) cannot accept another’s suffering unless he personally is able to find meaning in suffering, a path of purification and growth in maturity, a journey of hope. Indeed, to accept the ‘other’ who suffers, means that I take up his suffering in such a way that it becomes mine also. Because it has now become a shared suffering, though, in which another person is present, this suffering is penetrated by the light of love. The Latin word *con-solatio*, ‘consolation,’ expresses this beautifully. It suggests being with the other in his solitude, so that it ceases to be solitude.”⁹

Christian hope is founded in the truth that Jesus is with us in the suffering. Through Jesus, God entered the world. In the incarnation Jesus entered into all that is a part of humanity, including suffering.

Hebrews says: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.”¹⁰ On the cross, Jesus embraces all suffering. Therefore, even now, if we are able to be with Jesus in the suffering he will offer us consolation.

The word *consolation* can be understood in three root words: the prefix *con*, the word *sol* and the suffix *ation*. *Con* literally means “with.” The word *sol* literally means “light.” The suffix *ation* literally means “the process of.” Thus, with Jesus, in the suffering we can “be with the light.” We are not alone. There, in the light, we experience compassion.

Again, the prefix *com* means “with.” With Jesus in our suffering we experience his *com-passion*, for we are “with his passion” in our suffering. We have hope in suffering, not merely because of our wish to change the circumstances, but because the victor of all things is with us in our suffering.

21. Looking vs. facing. One of our deceased yet legendary parishioners of Houma-Thibodaux was Charles Mack. Charles was a wisdom figure at St. Luke’s in Thibodaux. As I listen to the beautiful people in the St. Luke community, I recall their sharing that Charles once said, “Life has a lot less to do with what you’re facing and a lot more to do with where you’re looking.”

Christian hope gives us someone to look to regardless of what we are facing. When facing any form of suffering, we look to Christ, who is with us in it. Perhaps a personal example will help illustrate. I shared with you earlier the story of my brother Luke’s accidentally drowning when I was 10.

Seven years later, when I was 17 years old, my brother Clyde died of leukemia. He was 20. Clyde’s death brought back much of the pain of Luke’s death. As a senior in high school, I needed God in a desperate way. It is here that Charlie Mack’s wisdom gives words to my experience.

My family was facing excruciating pain, but our eyes were fixed on the Lord through it all. We looked to God and the promise that is Christ and found hope in the midst of the pain. Looking at God did not necessarily change what we were facing. However, it did change our sense of isolation, fear and feeling overwhelmed.

Looking at God did not bring Luke or Clyde back. However, without the posture of looking at God I would not have come to the stunning realization that God was looking; God was looking at me. I had every “right” to focus all of my attention on what I was facing: the funerals, the questions, the grief. When I looked at God during the funeral with the questions and in the grief, I discovered God looking at me.

I discovered firsthand the truth of Psalm 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” I still felt everything in my heart, but when I discovered God was looking at me I had a sense of what was in his heart: compassion, mercy and a deep sense of strength and peace.

22. Hope and suffering. Thus far I have shared with you several quotes from *Spe Salvi*. Allow me the privilege of sharing a few more beautiful insights from the Holy Father.

“Suffering is a part of our human existence. Suffering stems partly from our finitude and partly from the mass of sin that has accumulated over the course of history and continues to grow unabated today. ... We can try to limit suffering, to fight against it, but we cannot eliminate it.

“It is when we attempt to avoid suffering by withdrawing from anything that might involve hurt, when we try to spare ourselves the effort and pain of pursuing truth, love and goodness, that we drift into a life of emptiness, in which there may be almost no pain but the dark sensation of meaninglessness and abandonment is all the greater.

“It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love.”¹¹

What Pope Benedict XVI is saying is this: Suffering is a part of life. We may not know when or how, but what we all share in common is the fact that each of us will feel the effects of sin and suffering at some point of our life. The Holy Father reminds us “we can try to limit suffering, to fight against it” but, he continues, “we cannot eliminate it.”

The answer to inevitable suffering is not isolation in an attempt to protect ourselves from pain. The isolation only

intensifies pain, for we are made for relationship. Spiritual maturity is often measured by how we learn from suffering, progress through it and with Christ mature through it.

However, human instinct runs from pain. Sometimes our running is intentional. Other times we shield ourselves through clichés because we do not know what to do with our suffering or the suffering of others. This is unfortunate, for nothing prevents growth in hope more than clichés.

23. Hope ... questions ... and answers given. Looking back on the deaths of my two brothers, I remember the questions that I asked. I remember the answers I was given. Some comments comforted me for a while, only to fade with time. With reverence for the holy ground we are on, let me attempt to illustrate a few things I heard in the midst of pain.

24. “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I cannot tell you how many times I heard this. In fact, I admit I used to say it myself. Then, I began to think about what the statement says about God. I asked myself, “Would God really be the cause of an accidental drowning or the disease of leukemia?” When we say this, I suspect we are simply trying to make sense of suffering and we don’t know what else to say.

It is difficult to fathom why bad things happen to good people. It is difficult to know how to comfort those in pain. Sometimes we do not know what to say. This cliché may come from a genuine desire to help; however, it may be misleading if not placed in a much greater context. It may suggest that God “gives” us suffering or it may suggest that we have to handle the suffering alone. Neither of those implications match our understanding of God. Neither of those implications describe my experience of God.

I remember speaking with my father at one point years after the deaths of my brothers, and he stated that for him it was always as if “they died yesterday.” In spite of this great suffering, my father found hope in Jesus. He trusted that in spite of his ongoing suffering that God would be gracious to him and bless him. In this way, my father was a great witness to hope for me in spite of my own suffering. I came to see that sometimes bad things simply happen to good people. Through it all, what God does give

us is strength to persevere. He gives us people to rely on. Those are the things God gives you.

25. “Why is this happening to me?” I know many of us ask this question. I did. I asked this question a lot. My mom asked that question. My dad asked that question. We all asked why. Why is a powerful question. I can only look to my own experience in attempting to respond. Reverently, may I say that the reason I think we ask this question is because when we are suffering we often feel out of control. Thus, we instinctively seek something we can control: an answer. Once I have an answer, I have someone or something to blame.

When my brother died, I asked why. I was 10. I did not have the capacity to absorb the answer to that question; I merely wanted someone or something I could direct my anger toward. I took comfort from my father’s strength and my parents’ faith. I stopped asking why and simply started begging God for faith. Trusting in those I trusted, I begged God for the strength to get through life one day at a time. In doing so, the need for an answer lessened. I discovered that God was actually with me in the midst of the suffering. I discovered God in the midst of the pain.

26. With great love I admit that sometimes there are many questions and sometimes there are no answers. Even if we had the answer it is likely our suffering would still be there. The answer will not remove the pain nor is our hope in an answer. However, here is the good news; here is what I discovered in my life: I am not alone, you are not alone.

There is a specific temptation that accompanies a specific emotion. The emotion is fear. We are often afraid when we feel out of control. The specific temptation that accompanies fear is this: “You have to protect yourself. You are alone. You have to carry this by yourself.” The truth is, We do not have to be in control, for we do not have to carry the burden alone. He is with me.

27. Hope and the economy. As you can tell, my father was a significant figure in my life. I aspire as a spiritual father to emulate what I learned from his fathering me. He was a man of practical wisdom. If my father were writing this letter with me, at this point he would say, “Okay Shelton, let’s get practical.”

The catechism teaches us, “Prayer is neither an escape from reality nor a divorce from life.”¹² Prayer and hope touch our real lives. Hope must imbue our particular circumstances. From suffering to anxiety and everything in between, many of us beg God for help in the real details of our lives.

I specifically want to speak to our need to have hope now in the particular details of our lives here on the bayous. I know many of us are praying for the economy to rebound quickly. Let me pause here and share my heart. Often when we speak of “the economy,” we do so speaking of a depersonalized set of charts, figures or trends. People, real people, our people, are affected by the economy. I have heard your hearts. I know your fear. I feel your anxiety.

What I offer in response is all that I have: Jesus Christ, our faith in him and the real hope that comes from him. I do not pretend that God is a magician and “just like that” will change our economic situation overnight. There are lots of reasons why things are the way they are.

However, I do have hope. I know that God is with us. We may indeed have to wait still longer for the economy to bounce back. But while we wait, we do not merely wait for God to do something. We wait with God as he does something. He is with us, leading us daily, showing each of us the very next step. While we may not see the big picture, he does. If we follow him today, then all of our small steps of obedience will soon lead us to a chapter within his grand story of fidelity.

28. Where do you need hope? Prayer “is neither an escape from reality nor a divorce from life.”¹³ Likewise, you might say hope “is neither an escape from reality nor a divorce from life.” If hope is going to be real in our lives, it must become a part of our real lives.

I carry a quiet grief in my heart that our world has forgotten the truth of Christmas. Therein I fear we are losing our capacity for Advent. Christmas celebrates the Incarnation — the reality that God really did take the initiative to actually become a human person so as to enter into the story of our humanity, the story of your life. God is real. He has a name. God is not invisible. And, that my dear friends, gives me hope.

When you and I are in desperate need of light in the darkness, we need

not turn to anyone other than Jesus. In the midst of it all what we need in those moments is a Savior. God is coming at Christmas; he is coming to you. The question is, Where do you need him? Where do you need hope?

For Your Reflection

For your personal prayer and small-group discussion:

1. What phrase, concept or section most spoke to your heart?
2. What phrase, concept or section causes you to think differently?
3. What phrase, concept or section gives you hope?
4. How is God speaking to you about the circumstances of your life and his desire to give you hope?
5. What do you really want from God this Christmas? Has your answer changed at all since Week One?

Chapter 3: Living in Hope

“Our consolation and our hope is Christ himself.” — Pope Francis, Dec. 21, 2014, letter to Middle East Christians

29. The vicar of hope. Pope Francis has been a beacon of light and a messenger of mercy. His words of encouragement have inspired me and millions like me. I would like to share with you now a few passages that have offered me great comfort.

“You have asked me for a word of hope, and the one word I have to give you is Jesus Christ. When everything seems too much, when it seems that the world is crashing down around you, embrace his cross, draw close to him and please, never let go of his hand; please, never leave him.”¹⁴

“Are we often weary, disheartened and sad? Do we feel weighed down by our sins? Do we think that we won’t be able to cope? Let us not close our hearts, let us not lose confidence, let us never give up. There are no situations God cannot change; there is no sin he cannot forgive, if only we open ourselves to him.”¹⁵

“May we not be robbed of hope, because this strength is a grace, a gift from God that carries us forward with our eyes fixed on heaven.”¹⁶

Imagine if we lived in hope in such a way that nothing or no one could rob us of hope. Imagine if we lived in such a way that Christ were as real to us as the “real world” we live in. What if Jesus

Christ himself wanted to give this gift to you at Christmas?

To live in communion with Christ. To never be robbed of hope. To live like this. Imagine if that were possible ... for you.

30. Is that really possible? As I write to you, I feel my heart leaning toward the hope of “living in God” and then, almost immediately, I hear the whisper: “Is that really possible?” After all, I must admit I can sometimes barely get through the day, much less do so in perfect communion with Christ.

Soon after I hear the invitation to live in Christ, I hear the temptation that I cannot do so. Then I realize the temptation is just that: a temptation. Perhaps you can hear it too. Perhaps you too would like a deeper relationship with God. You too would like to live in hope. Then you too hear the temptations. Perhaps they sound like this:

“You can’t do that, look at all your sin.” “You can’t do that, you’re too busy. You can barely keep up now, much less if you had to try to be perfect.” “You can’t do that; you don’t want to become one of those fanatics do you?” “You can’t do that, you barely believe in God, much less religion.”

These are temptations. The reason we believe all those temptations is because 90 percent of the statement is true: You cannot do this. No, you cannot do this alone.

31. What I have come to know in my own life is this: God is merciful. God’s fidelity runs deeper than the patterns of our fidelity. Regardless of how often you have struggled with life, God does not struggle in that way. He is faithful. He is pursuing you. He wants you. He wants to help you.

To live in God, to live in hope, is to believe that he is who he says he is and he does what he promised he would do. I remember the day when I for the first time read Pope Benedict XVI’s *Spe Salvi*. Among the many insights that inspired me, I found great comfort in his practical wisdom teaching us all how to live in hope. In Chapter 1 he mentions three keys to living in hope: patience, perseverance and constancy. Let us together unpack these three keys.

32. Patience. I remember the day I found out I was to become a bishop. It was the fall of 2006. I was 43 years old and had been ordained 17 years. I never dreamed of being a bishop. I was happy

as a pastor and thought I would live the rest of my life as such.

However, God called, and I trustingly said yes. I was ordained auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of New Orleans on Feb. 28, 2007, almost exactly one year and six months after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. It was all so new: a new home, a new diocese, a new people to love and serve. What I discovered in the hearts of the people I came to love was this: In order for them to hope, they had to be patient.

Katrina’s wake of destruction would take years to recover from. Families were split, neighborhoods were destroyed, entire cities had to rebuild. It took time, a lot of time. My fatherly heart did not want people’s suffering to unnecessarily linger. However, I too needed to be patient. I learned that as a bishop the most important thing I could do was accompany them, to walk with them. I, with them, needed to be patient.

To live in hope, we must be patient. If hope is a person, I am called in patience to trust that God is always actively involved in the ordinary circumstances of my life. Even if I cannot see what or when or how, I trust that God is doing something.

During Katrina’s rebuilding I learned from the holiness of people that I served that God really does want what is best for us. It may not come on our timeline, it may not look like what we expected, but God is faithful.

I especially want to encourage anyone reading who may be struggling with the economy or with more personal suffering such as your marriage, your family or your health. Be patient. God is active; he is doing something. Even if you cannot see what God is doing, have hope that he is with you and soon will ease the burden.

33. Perseverance. Hebrews 10:36 reminds us: “You need endurance to do the will of God and receive what he has promised.” Notice here that St. Paul says three things. First, God has promised. He has promised to be with us. He has promised he will never abandon us.

Second, we are to receive what he has promised. Christianity is not only a belief in a person but is also a belief that the person is actively involved in the circumstances of my life. God wants to bless me. Of course, we cannot have a false receptivity, merely sitting back

expecting God to do everything for us. We are called to an active receptivity where we are intentionally looking to him, letting him lead us.

Third, we need endurance or perseverance, especially when the blessings do not come on our timeline. As I recall the many sacred conversations with Katrina victims, I remember the distinct fatigue that comes in waiting. As we wait for light in the darkness, it is easy for us to grow tired of waiting, to grow tired in the waiting. I saw many good people in their fatigue grow more susceptible to temptation. It sounded like this:

“God is not going to come through for you.” “Nothing is going to happen.” “You’re alone.” “Why don’t you move on and take control of your life.” “You’d be better off without God, after all it doesn’t look like he’s going to answer your prayer.”

I heard those voices tempting the many I served. They were good people, simply growing tired in the waiting. They heard those temptations. I suspect many of us reading have heard them too. When we grow tired in the waiting, we pray for perseverance. The temptation in fatigue accuses God of abandoning us.

Perseverance requires that I hold fast to what I know to be true even when I cannot see it in front of me. When we cannot see our way out of our current situation, we hope in the truth that God is always with us. Here we choose to choose. We choose to believe, even when our situation is not changing.

34. Constancy. Constancy refers to a firmness of mind. Constancy is a disposition of sorts. St. Paul speaks of the virtue of constancy in his Letter to the Ephesians when he writes: We should “no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head.”¹⁷

St. Paul urges us to be firmly rooted in truth, in Christ. To live in hope requires a firm grounding of our interior disposition. Constancy is like the rudder of our disposition. You might look at it as our predetermined attitude. We are constant in our choices: in our prayer, in our turning to God, in reminding ourselves of who he is and what he promised.

What keeps us constant? We need both interior and exterior structures. Interiorly we need a commitment to prayer and self-reflection. We need time to pay attention to our attitudes and from where we make decisions. Exteriorly we need people, the right kind of people, in our lives. We need people who believe in hope themselves.

During those early months in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, constancy was a grace I prayed for. Not only did I see people who needed grounding in their own lives, but I myself needed to not be “tossed by waves and swept along by every” form of distraction or discouragement.

I experienced so much change: from a pastor to a bishop, from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, and all of it in the intensity of post-Katrina trauma. In the overwhelming period of transition and change, I found myself surrounded by people who were struggling with suffering and the fatigue of unanswered prayers. There I discovered that constancy is a grace to pray for. When we grow weak, when we can no longer hope on our own or persevere on our own, we need to ask God to give us the grace. He is eager to give, if we but merely ask for help.

35. Choosing to choose. Life has been a great teacher. I have learned much about life in the school of struggle and suffering. As a person of hope, I have learned that to live in hope requires that I choose to hope.

Pope Francis encourages us: “Christian hope is not simply a desire or wish, it is not optimism. No! For a Christian, hope is expectation, a fervent, passionate expectation of the ultimate and definitive fulfillment of a mystery: the mystery of the love of God in which we were reborn and are already living.”¹⁸

I choose to have hope because I believe that Jesus is who he says he is. I choose to have hope because of the “passionate expectation” that God is real. I choose to hope when I do not feel it. I choose to hope when I do not see the change I long for. I choose to hope when making a choice is all I can do.

This Christmas many of us are called to choose to have hope. You may not see the change in your life that you are longing for. There, may I ask you as a spiritual father: Can you choose to hope? You may be fatigued in the waiting. There,

may I ask you: Can you choose to hope? May I ask you, as I have before in this letter: What do you need from the Lord? To live in hope, to be a person who lives in hope, what do you want from God this Christmas?

For Your Reflection

For your personal prayer and small-group discussion:

1. What stirs within as you consider living in hope?
2. How particularly is God speaking to you about patience?
3. How particularly is God speaking to you about perseverance?
4. How particularly is God speaking to you about constancy?
5. What do you really want from God this Christmas? Has your answer changed at all since Week Two?

Chapter 4: A Reason to Hope

“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” — 1 Pt 3:15

36. A new season of hope. As I mentioned in my introductory thoughts, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux will celebrate her 40th anniversary on June 5, 2017. As we anticipate our anniversary, I feel as if we are on the verge of something truly transformational.

On Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017, we will promulgate a new strategic plan designed to lead our diocese into its 40th year and beyond. I initiated strategic planning in May of 2015. I did so because I sensed our diocese would be stronger by our 50th anniversary if we further cultivated a culture of planning during our 40th anniversary. However, the call for renewal actually came from the Holy Father himself.

37. A call for renewal. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”), Pope Francis urges us:

“Each particular church, as a portion of the Catholic Church under the leadership of its bishop, is likewise called to missionary conversion. ... The bishop must always foster this missionary communion in his diocesan church, following the ideal of the first Christian communities in which the believers were of one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. ... At yet other times,

he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and — above all — allowing the flock to strike out on new paths.”¹⁹

He continues: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion that cannot leave things as they presently are. ‘Mere administration’ can no longer be enough. ...

“I encourage each particular church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform. ... Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says, ‘We have always done it this way.’ I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization.”²⁰

38. A reason for my hope. Inspired by Pope Francis’ call for “a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform,” the aim of our strategic planning is the renewal of parish life. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he continues:

“The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution that evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.’”²¹

To date nearly 800 people have been actively engaged in the planning process, either through participating directly on a commission or, most recently, through the outreach to pastors and parish leadership. The strategic plan, with its focus of forming disciples and tools for creative formation, has given me a reason to hope.

39. A year of hope. In 1 Peter 3:15 St. Peter exhorts us: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” I have great hope for our future. I have hope because of what I know to be true about God as well as the people in our diocese. I have hope because I believe God has inspired the process of strategic planning. I have hope because I believe the strategic plan is going to help parishes more effectively form disciples.

I have a reason to hope and I want you to have a reason to hope. Therefore, the theme for the 40th year of our Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux is “A Year of Hope.” Our Year of Hope peaks on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017, when we will promulgate our new strategic plan. It is a plan aimed at helping parishes in the formation of disciples. At the heart of the strategic plan is a blueprint for forming disciples.

40. One process, five words. How do we form disciples? What’s the process? Believe it or not, he has made it somewhat clear to see how we form disciples. When we look at the Scriptures and the teaching of the church’s great documents on evangelization as well as common human experience, we will notice five dimensions of spiritual maturation in Christ. They are *connect, encounter, conversion, grow, mission*. Rather than looking at these five words as linear steps, consider these as descriptions of inner experience that describe aspects of spiritual maturation.

I remember my years of being a pastor. I had the privilege of watching people mature in their faith. For many, the first step was connecting with other people who were also searching. Then, over time, they had a personal encounter of God. This personal encounter was often life-changing, and they gradually experienced conversion. They began to learn more about God, the Bible and the church. They began to grow in their faith. Finally, they felt more comfortable sharing their story with others. They began to participate in the mission of Christ.

During the stages of spiritual growth, all five “words” are active, however, depending on where you are in your relationship with God, one of these words might describe where God is taking the initiative to meet you. For example, while participating in a Bible study (grow), I deepen my relationships with others in the class (connect) and experience God’s presence (encounter) in the truth of the study. It’s like a spiral staircase.

I move through the same five aspects of spiritual growth throughout the rest of my life; however, I do so going deeper and deeper. For example, I have had several deeply personal encounters of God. Each of them has led me to deepening conversion. Each conversion has led me

to a deepened growth in faith. Knowing these five words helps me know what’s the next step for continued growth.

41. Connect. We cannot come to full maturity in Christ alone. We need other people. This is why today’s tendency toward isolation and relational atrophy is so threatening. We need to connect to people. Whether you consider yourself familiar with Christ or whether you consider yourself a novice at best, the easiest place to start the journey is with other people who are on the journey.

As I look back on my earlier years as a young adult in my 20s I recognize a pattern. There were seasons in my life where God “felt” close, and there were seasons where God felt more distant. Interestingly enough, one of the common threads in this dynamic was whether or not I had people in my life who wanted my holiness more than I did.

Likewise, there were countless moments when I wanted to “take the next step with God.” Sometimes I did and I grew closer to him; sometimes I did not. Again, one of the common themes as to whether or not I was able to “take the next step with God” was whether or not I surrounded myself with people who wanted this to happen. As I reflect upon my spiritual history, I recognize that I need people to walk with me as I walk with Christ.

If there are any of us reading now who recall moments in your spiritual life where you were once closer to Christ, may I reverently ask, What happened? What led to the distance in your spiritual life? May I reverently ask if there were a lack of people in your life to help sustain the fervor?

Similarly, if there are any of us reading now who recall wanting to take the next step with God but struggled to do so, I invite you to consider if you had people to help you stay committed to the commitment. If we are going to live in Christ, we need people to help us. We need to connect with others. We need to stay connected to others who support us on the journey.

42. Encounter. Pope Benedict XVI teaches: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea but the encounter with an event, a person, that gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”²²

We encounter him in a variety of

ways. There is no single program, event or ministry that has the monopoly on how God initiates his presence in our life. However, most people will not give their lives to someone whom they have not first met. And, if our encounter of them was not memorable or life-changing, then we probably will not remember them or change our life.

Encounter is not a singular event, as if I experience Christ and then walk away from the relationship. I encounter him for rest of my life through sacraments, study, prayer, community, service, etc. However, notice the Holy Father's implicit description of the encounter: It is one that "gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." Our encounter with Christ, especially if it is a life-changing encounter, is critically important today. Luckily, God wants this more than we do.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us: "God calls man first. Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer."²³

What gives me deep encouragement is the catechism's description of my life and perhaps your life. I often "forget" God. I often "hide far from his face." Admittedly, I too "run after idols" and sometimes "accuse God of having abandoned me." In it all, with all of those patterns, God "tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter." Jesus, our hope, is pursuing you. He is inviting you into a personal encounter with him.

43. Conversion. When we encounter Christ, especially if it is a profound experience, we become awakened. It is as if just for a moment our eyes are opened. In the encounter we see things differently, we feel things differently. For a moment, life is different.

However, as the days wane and the initial experience fades, it becomes harder and harder to recapture the experience. This is most often because encounter is most naturally followed by conversion. The experience of encounter is a gift from a person — Jesus. The gift is given not so that I love the gift, but that I love the giver of the gift.

Many of us in the moment of encounter say yes to God. For many of us, the most concrete way to live in the

yes is to learn to say no. This is where the tough work of the spiritual life takes place: learning to say no. We have to choose to choose. As mentioned earlier, Pope Francis encourages us, "May we not be robbed of hope." The thief that most often robs our hope is sin, for I cannot live in a new yes unless I learn how to live in a new no.

In 1 Corinthians 13, St. Paul speaks eloquently about love. St. Paul had a life-changing encounter with God and as he speaks of love he is speaking from firsthand experience.

It is there he writes: "When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things."²⁴

Another biblical image is that of the rich young man. There he is face to face with Christ himself; however, he is unable to let go of the things that prevent his taking the next step with Christ. I believe the rich young man was afraid: afraid of change, afraid of the unknown, afraid of what might happen. However, it is clear that after the encounter with Christ the rich young man needed conversion. After our encounter we need conversion.

44. To help us understand conversion, let us listen to the words of Pope Benedict at a homily during a priestly ordination. "In the words *I do*, spoken at our priestly ordination, we made this fundamental renunciation of our desire to be independent, 'self-made.' But day by day this great yes has to be lived out in the many little yeses and small sacrifices. This yes made up of tiny steps that together make up the great yes, can be lived out without bitterness and self-pity only if Christ is truly the center of our lives."²⁵

Here, he teaches us two essential things about conversion: "This fundamental renunciation of our desire to be independent, 'self-made,'" and "day by day this great yes has to be lived out in the many little yeses and small sacrifices."

Conversion is perhaps easiest to see in marriage and family. Let us look at marriages. As a priest of 27 years I have spent countless hours with married couples. Marriages only work if two people choose to let go of living independently and choose to live for something bigger than themselves.

Two independent lifestyles can-

not coexist and expect that a marriage is going to work. At some point, if the relationship is going to work, couples have to choose to change their lifestyle. Likewise, in order to be present to their children, parents have to often say no to what they want in order to say yes to being a parent.

We often see people encountering God in a personal way. Yet we live in a church culture where we assume that the next step after encounter is ministry. Perhaps this is the invitation from God; however, many times the next step after encounter is not ministry. Instead, many times people are called to deepen their conversion. Here, we learn to say yes to God in an ongoing way by saying no to sin. Our conversion supports the ongoing encounter.

45. Grow. What is next after conversion? Let us simply look at human relationships. Often the natural can help us appreciate the supernatural. Imagine that a man meets a woman. He has a profound encounter with her. He thinks about her often. He wants to pursue a relationship with her. He cleans himself up a bit and begins to show interest.

After the first few dates, he realizes the only way he can continue the relationship is if he stops drinking to excess. With others' help, he, one day at a time, embraces sobriety. One date is followed by another date. Over time he learns more about her: about her family, her dreams, her interest in him.

The natural progression of natural relationship is growth. Likewise, conversion leads to growth. Growth grounds the conversion in something bigger than personal determination or subjective experience. Growth fills the hole within.

When we let go of vice during our conversion, the letting go created a vacuum. Growth fills the vacuum with something healthy for our soul. Growth in the spiritual life looks as different as the individual person. However, for many it is an exciting time of lifestyle change.

I begin to study, learning who Christ is. I begin learning how to stay in relationship with the person of Christ. I begin learning what that church teaches us about him and about my life. I learn what it means to be human and what my life is really meant to be. I begin to learn what God envisions for my role

as a husband and father or a wife and a mother. I learn about virtue and about healthy discipline in prayer and decision-making.

My subjective experience of God is now grounded in the objective teachings of the church. Here, as I grow, I come to see the wisdom of St. Paul: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God."²⁶ Encounter leads to conversion, and conversion leads to growth.

46. Mission. Let us go back to the example of the man who pursues a relationship with the woman. He is sober. He has changed his lifestyle. He no longer lives only for him. As their dating relationship deepens, the man chooses to live appropriately committed in relationship with his now-girlfriend. She has captured his heart. He may even be falling in love. We see it happen all the time.

The same is true in our relationship with God. If our man in the example were to be asked by anyone why he changed his life or if he were even dating, the only appropriate answer would be the truth. The most natural response is to be unashamed in telling others about what has happened in his life. He loves to tell others about who she is and what she has done for him.

In mature Christians, there is no fear of sharing the good news. Pope Francis says:

"All the baptized, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization. It would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged to be actively engaged in evangelization."²⁷

These are challenging words, but they are true nonetheless. Mission is never the fruit of a perfectly planned program or a well-organized manual. Mission is always the fruit of a life which knows what it is to be found and healed, encountered and forgiven. Mission is born of a constant experience of God's mercy.

At some point during my growth I will learn to hear God's voice in my life.

As I learn to listen, I will inevitably hear him call me into the mission, for I want to share with others how he has changed my life. Encounter leads to conversion, and conversion leads to growth, and growth propels me into mission.

47. Where are you? As I mentioned earlier, rather than looking at these five words as linear steps, consider these as descriptions of inner experience that describe aspects of spiritual maturation. During the stages of spiritual growth all five are active; however, depending on where you are in your relationship with God, one of these words might describe where God is taking the initiative to meet you.

You no longer have to figure things out on your own. Connect, encounter, conversion, growth and mission are indicators of where God is calling you. However, the call of God is personal and personalized. God can call, God can offer the gift; however, we have to be ready to hear, respond and receive the gift.

So, where is God calling you? Which of the five words most speaks to you? Where have you succeeded in the past? Where has your spiritual momentum faded? Where do you need help? What do you really want this Christmas?

For Your Reflection

For your personal prayer and small-group discussion

1. What phrase, concept or section most spoke to your heart?
2. What phrase, concept or section causes you to think differently?
3. Connect, encounter, conversion, growth and mission: Which one of these do you feel people struggle with the most?
4. Connect, encounter, conversion, growth and mission: Which one of these do you feel is the most natural place for you to start if you were going to take the "next step" in your spiritual life?
5. What do you really want from God this Christmas? Has your answer changed at all since Week One?

Notes

- ¹ Phil 3:20.
- ² Jn 15:11.
- ³ St. Augustine, *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* 1, 3, 4: PL 32, 1312.
- ⁴ Ibid., *Confessions* 10, 20: PL 32, 791.
- ⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2566.
- ⁶ Catechism, No. 524.
- ⁷ Rom 8:38-39.

- ⁸ *Spe Salvi*, 2.
- ⁹ Ibid., 38.
- ¹⁰ Heb 4:15.
- ¹¹ *Spe Salvi*, 36.
- ¹² Catechism, No. 2727.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Pope Francis, Feb. 16, 2016, address to youth, Morelia, Mexico.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., March 30, 2013, Holy Saturday homily.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., Aug. 15, 2013, Assumption homily.
- ¹⁷ Eph 4:14.
- ¹⁸ Pope Francis, Oct. 15, 2014, general audience.
- ¹⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 30 and 31.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 25 and 33.
- ²¹ Ibid., 28.
- ²² *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.
- ²³ Catechism, No. 2567.
- ²⁴ 1 Cor 13:11.
- ²⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, April 9, 2009, Holy Thursday Chrism Mass homily.
- ²⁶ Rom 12:2.
- ²⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120. ■

Jan. 26-27

National Prayer Vigil for Life. Sponsor: U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Washington, D.C.

Jan. 28-30

Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities Annual Meeting. Theme: "Inclusion on Campus: Exploring Diversity as an Expression of God's Grandeur." Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Washington, D.C. www.accunet.org

Jan. 31-Feb. 3

Christian Churches Together in the USA 2017 Annual Convocation. Theme: "500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation: Signs of Hope and What Divides Us Today." Hotel Sheraton and Christ Cathedral, Garden Grove, Calif. <http://christianchurchestogether.org>

Feb. 16-18

Mid-Atlantic Congress 2017. Sponsors: Association of Catholic Publishers and the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Theme: "Blessed as Living Witnesses." Baltimore Hilton Hotel. Baltimore, Md. www.midatlanticcongress.org

Feb. 16-19

U.S. and Canadian Regional Meeting of the World Meeting of Popular Movements. Sponsors: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. Central Catholic High School. Modesto, Calif.

Feb. 20-23

National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy Annual Convention. Theme: "Making the Time Count: Forming a Pastor With a Shepherd's Heart." Oblate Renewal Center. San Antonio, Texas. <http://nocercc.org>

***Feb. 23-26**

Los Angeles Religious Education Congress. Sponsor: Los Angeles Archdiocese. Theme: "Embrace Trust." Anaheim Convention Center. Anaheim, Calif. www.recongress.org

*signifies new listing

On File

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is establishing a working group charged with developing spiritual, pastoral and policy advocacy support for immigrants and refugees. Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, USCCB president, has named members of the working group, with the mandate of closely following developments related to immigrants and refugees in the United States. The USCCB Public Affairs Office announced formation of the group Dec. 16. Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, USCCB vice president, will chair the group. Members include the chairmen of USCCB committees and subcommittees involved in immigration concerns: the Committee on Migration, the Subcommittee on Hispanic Affairs, the Committee on Domestic Social Development, the Subcommittee on Pastoral Care of Migrants and the Committee on International Justice and Peace.

Expressing his condolences to victims and their families, Pope Francis called for an end to terrorism following deadly attacks in Berlin and in Ankara, Turkey. Similar to an attack with a truck that took place in July in Nice, France, a tractor-trailer veered into the crowded Breitscheidplatz Christmas market in Berlin and plowed through bystanders, killing 12 people and wounding nearly 50. In a Dec. 20 telegram sent by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, to Archbishop Heiner

Koch of Berlin, the pope prayed for the families of the dead and the wounded, "assuring his closeness in their pain. Pope Francis joins all people of goodwill who are working so that the homicidal madness of terrorism does not find any more room in our world," Cardinal Parolin wrote. Cardinal Parolin said the pope received news of the attack with "profound emotion" and joined the families of the victims in their mourning and "entrusts the dead to the mercy of God." The attack in Berlin occurred not long after the assassination of Russia's ambassador to Turkey, Andrey Karlov, by a lone gunman during the opening of an art exhibition in Ankara. Cardinal Parolin conveyed the pope's condolences to President Vladimir Putin of Russia, saying he was "saddened to learn of the violent attack in Ankara." "In commending his soul to almighty God, Pope Francis assures you and all the people of the Russian Federation of his prayers and spiritual solidarity at this time," Cardinal Parolin wrote.

Pope Francis granted clemency to a Spanish monsignor who had been sentenced to 18 months in prison for leaking confidential Vatican documents. Msgr. Lucio Vallejo Balda, former secretary of the Prefecture for the Economic Affairs of the Holy See, was given "conditional freedom" with his early release from a Vatican prison cell after serving more than half his sentence.