



“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In my travels throughout the diocese, I see firsthand the many challenges that parishes are facing. We live with increasing secularisation in the world, and a loss of the sense of God and relevance of Jesus. In every parish I hear the same concerns. You want to know how to reach youth and families and bring them back to church. Many of our parishes are struggling financially as attendance is on the decline. We all have our own personal and family lives, and many are suffering as a result of the struggles and challenges we face in our daily circumstances. The weight of these burdens can cause anxiety, hopelessness, and even despair. Yet surrounded by darkness, the season of Advent calls us to set off in search of Jesus, the “light of the world” (John 8:12).

Jesus cares for you. He cares so much that he took on a human nature, so that he could dwell among us, while remaining fully divine. Far from being indifferent to our suffering, Jesus our God is present in our lives, waiting for us to encounter him. When we let him in, when we seek him and allow him to penetrate our hearts, when we encounter the living God, our lives are transformed, and perspectives change. The Holy Father tells us that, “thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption...Here we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?” (*Evangeli Gaudium* par. 8)

It is our encounter and re-encounter with the living God, rooted in prayer and the sacraments, that is the fuel for all missionary activity. Evangelization needs to be followed by catechesis, discipleship, formation, training in prayer, and equipping for the mission. Of primary importance is our encounter with Jesus and sharing him with others. In addition to our meditation on God’s word and our participation in the sacraments, there are so many other tools that can facilitate a deeper encounter, such as Alpha or CCO faith studies, programs like the Search on Formed, or retreats to encourage ourselves and others to deeper prayer. We need to respond to our Lord’s mandate to go to all the nations proclaiming the Good News, going to the peripheries to reach the alienated, the marginalized, the needy, and in the spirit of Matthew 25: 31-46 seeing the face of Jesus and serving Jesus in them. We need to encounter the living God! He’s alive, he’s real, and he cares.

Lately, I have felt a particular call to pray and intercede, and to invite all the faithful to intercede as well. We can no longer treat problems downstream: we must be proactive. We need to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, the highest prayer, and to spend time in Eucharistic adoration for the needs of our diocese, our parishes, and our individual needs when so many decisions are having to be made. We need to be seeking God's wisdom and direction because man-made solutions are bound to fail. There is no better time than the season of Advent to quiet our hearts and truly make time to listen to Jesus in prayer. I am asking each one of you to pray that our diocese will be led by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, raising up disciples who are joyfully living out the mission, proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and making disciples of others. Let us pray for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and to married life. Let us pray for the needs of our parishes, the needs of our families and loved ones, and those on the margins, the alienated, those who have no one to pray for them.

If we are serious about seeing our parishes thrive, we must return daily to the source of all life. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) When we prioritize our relationship with Jesus, when we are connected to the vine, he flows through everything we do. The desires you expressed to me – community, discipleship, growth in family and youth ministries, an increase in vocations – will be evident when we prioritize our relationship with him.

Mary is a model of intercessory prayer. We see in the wedding at Cana how she desires to intervene on our behalf, always pondering and desiring to fulfill God's plans. Let us come before the Lord with the same boldness and humility as the Blessed Mother, asking him to fulfill our needs with deep trust in his goodness and gracious Providence. Faced with many challenges, let us proclaim with bold and expectant faith that Jesus Christ is born among us, he is Emmanuel – God with us - and that changes everything.

As we cast our anxieties on him, let us give God permission to draw each one of us into a new and deeper encounter with Jesus and the Church.

With heartfelt prayers for a blessed Advent and Christmas season, I remain

Sincerely yours in Jesus and Mary,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christian Riesbeck". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and a long, sweeping underline.

✠ Christian Riesbeck, CC
Bishop of Saint John

December 8, 2022
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception