

Most Reverend John Michael Botean, DD
Pastoral Message—Christmas, 2012

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

There are many occasions for sadness and fear in life. There are times when, whether personally or as a community, a parish, a nation, or even a whole culture, sadness seems to take over our thinking, and fear appears to be the sole rational response to a future whose only certainty is death. Winter, that season of cold darkness, weighs ever more heavily upon our spirits until our mood feels incapable of warmth and light. We forget what “normal” feels like; we focus instead on all the pain we have endured in the past, and we anticipate nothing better than that we seem certain to endure even more pain in the future.

As we prepare for and celebrate the feast that comes yearly in the very heart of winter, we find that the birth in the flesh of our Savior is capable of lighting a flame within us that can help us penetrate the darkness and cold outside. As each successive celebration of Christmas comes upon us however, year by year, we note that this interior flame burns some years more brightly, some years more dimly, some years with greater warmth and love for those around us, and some years with a bit of anxiety that can keep us at a distance from them.

Anxiety over the future of the Church, however and wherever that is experienced, seems to be large upon the horizon this year. Indeed, there is something unique about this Christmas: it is the only Christmas that will fall within the “Year of Faith” (October 11, 2012–November 24, 2013) proclaimed by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* of October 11, 2011. This letter, which announces the Year of Faith, calls upon the universal Church in its dioceses, parishes, and other church bodies to deepen its commitment to faith in Christ as well as to greater reflection upon and study of the truths of our holy faith.

The Year of Faith may be seen as the product of anxiety about the future of the Church on the part of the Holy See, and I have no doubt many do see it as such. Europe has been characterized as “de-Christianized,” and in the United States fully ten per cent of Americans describe themselves as “ex-Catholics.” While survey numbers and their interpretation are beyond the scope of my letter, it is still the case that these trends can help us see why we Catholics are entering upon a year of special emphasis upon faith itself throughout the Universal Church.

The Year of Faith began on the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, a truly significant event of the Holy Spirit in the life and history of the Church, the Body of Christ. Pope Benedict encourages Catholics everywhere to re-read, study, and internalize the documents that issued from that blessed assembly. In particular, the Holy Father has stressed study of the sacred scriptures and of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* during this time.

There have already been many events associated with the Year of Faith and its call to what has been termed the “New Evangelization” by Blessed Pope John Paul II.

Pope Benedict created a new office of the Roman Curia, the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, and named Archbishop Rino Fisichella as its president. More significant, perhaps, was the recent (October 7-28) world Synod of Bishops in Rome on the subject of the New Evangelization. The bishops in attendance in Rome issued a "Message to the People of God" at the Synod's conclusion that likewise encourages Catholics everywhere to take up the task of the New Evangelization.

What does any of this have to do with Christmas? And why would I want to call your attention to the Year of Faith precisely now? In fact, the New Evangelization is about bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to lands and peoples that have been de-Christianized, particularly Europe and North America. I am bringing it up in the context of this pastoral letter for Christmas because this feast is a fitting place to start an observance of the Year of Faith within our diocese, which is, despite its geographic size, our "local" church. We are celebrating the decisive in-breaking of God in human history, the Incarnation of God in the Child Jesus. Just as Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, becomes flesh and enters our reality as a member of the human race for the salvation of all people, so it is that by the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus enters our individual lives, incorporating us in Him in baptism. We reflect upon the mystery of *our own* faith at the same time as we reflect upon the mysteries of *the Faith*.

In past letters, even though I have complained about consumerism and violence, I have also tried to reflect a bit of awe-filled gratitude at the incredible generosity and love of a God who chooses to become one of us, accepting our poverty and indeed taking the lowest place in it. A reflection upon Christmas has to be upbeat, hopeful, and certainly joyful, because that is what Christmas is. You don't have to be a priest or a theologian to know that Christmas, whatever else it may be, is all about the joy and delight one takes in little things: little children, a favorite Christmas recipe that comes out "just right," an extra minute of daylight in the afternoon, the friendly face of someone who drops by "just to say hello because it's Christmas." It does not take ordination or a theological degree to appreciate all the "stuff" of Christmas, its colors, sounds, smells, its traditions, its music—its, well, Christmas-ness. You just know that all these things are right and good, and that we need them from time to time.

If all of these things—these very natural, very human things—are so valuable to us as Christians it is because they are rooted in the very goodness of this world that is the Father's creation, and the joy of them points us toward that other world where all the questions are answered and all the tears are wiped away. We take the time and expend the effort to make the world of time and space a little more like the world God created us for. And that is as it should be, because at Christmas we do not celebrate the mere event of a birth some two thousand years ago; we rather celebrate the reality that this birth brought into the world, a reality that is still present, still alive.

The Incarnation, God-become-human, was not something that was accomplished in the past and is now over and done with. It is being accomplished now, even now,

because, in Jesus, God enters the human world and never leaves it. This Jesus who was carried in the womb, was born as an infant, was raised as a child, was crucified as a man, was raised as a God—no, let me correct that—was raised as a God/man in order to become the first example of what we are to become in Him, this Jesus now lives in the world and loves it as *us*, as the Church. And that is why reflection on our Faith is so appropriate to this season.

The Church's New Evangelization is fundamentally directed at herself. It is we who, baptized into the very Body of Christ, must encounter Him in a new and very deliberate way if the world is to believe and be saved. One of the saddest things that ever happened to me occurred when I was attending a meeting at one of our parishes. A man in the group, who seemed to be fed up with my "pious chatter," said, "Stop talking about religion! We know all about religion!" He did not comment upon, nor did I ask about, the form his knowledge took, whether in fact he made any effort to practice what he claimed to know.

Unfortunately, though his frustration was very understandable, it meant that he was also not in the least bit interested in enlarging his thinking or being consoled by the truth of the Gospel. He could not take "all he knew" about faith and use it to interpret and deal with the situation he was facing. This happens sometimes. What was sad to me was not being told to stop talking about religion. That part of what the man said actually struck me as kind of funny: I'm a Catholic bishop, right? What *else* do you expect me to talk about? The part of what this gentleman said that struck me as sad was his claim that everyone "knew all about religion." It was sad because anyone who thinks he or she knows all about religion clearly has not the first clue about what religion, or more specifically, Christian faith, is all about.

Religion is about matters of ultimate concern, and the Catholic Christian faith is about matters of ultimate importance and concern. We use a particular expression to indicate this: "the salvation of souls." To speak of religion is to speak of God, of eternity, and of ultimate meaning. To be a religious person means to be one who is willing to embark upon a journey into profound mystery. To be a Christian means that one is deliberately making that journey in, with, and through Jesus Christ.

I think that when a person says he or she "knows all about religion," what they are saying is that they know some of the details of cult, they have memorized and perhaps reflected upon some of the more important doctrines of that religion, etc. Very often, I think it practically means that they have a clear memory of what they learned from their grandparents or in religion class in elementary school, or from catechism in their parish church, and that they are not willing to go beyond that early childhood formation. Out of this bit of information, the person who "knows all about religion" believes he or she need go no further in exploring the faith, or studying it, or deepening his or her relationship with Christ.

This is an extremely dangerous position to be in, because it puts one beyond God's reach, even though God is always reaching out. God's call to the depths of the soul is constant and urgent, but hardness of heart, which comes from a sense of self-

sufficiency and self-righteousness, makes one deaf to His call and incapable of the repentance that is necessary for salvation.

Having shut the mystery and sovereignty of God out of their lives, people who “know all about religion” then substitute something else for God. Often that is country, or culture, or family, or social status, or social and political activism. People who gather together to form groupings around these substitutes for God nevertheless tend to call what they are doing “religion” and their particular grouping “church.”

Now, there is nothing wrong with social clubs, cultural groups, and heritage centers. These things are all wonderful and we all need them. They are not, however, Church. Church is not about gathering a group of people who have certain things, like language and ethnicity, in common, or who possess a certain collection of rituals in common, or who simply like each other’s company. That would be a club, not a church. All these things are fine, but Church is about so, so much more.

Likewise, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with institutions, or even (necessarily) with the Church being itself an institution in some respects. But institutions are only human realities, and being an institution with money and real estate and rules is not the whole reality of the Church. There is so much more to her than that, so much more. This means, of course, that *our parishes can and must be much more than social groups or institutions*. They may not be so now, but they can be. Our parishes can be truly, really, and in every respect, “Church,” though without being, of course, the “whole Church.”

The Church is the extension of Jesus Christ in time and space and history. Like Christ Himself, it is both divine and human. The divine and human elements are fused by love into one being, and thus can only be seen and understood properly with the eyes of faith. Historians will rightly judge the Church for its holiness and for its sin, and social scientists may well analyze how the Church has and has not contributed to the welfare of the human family. But only the believer can look at this mess and call it beautiful, see the activity of divine love at work in it, because only the believer, baptized into the Body of Christ and transformed in his or her relationship with Christ, has acquired God’s own eyes with which to see the real beauty behind the mess. Sinful as the Church may be, because it is human, still it is the means Jesus Christ has chosen to continue his work of saving the world, beginning with each one of us. As one of the Doctors of the Church, St. Theresa of Avila (1518-1582), so poetically puts it:

*Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion
must look out on the world,
Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.*

The Year of Faith is intended by the Holy Father to be a time of reflection, re-commitment, learning, and, to be sure, confession and repentance. We have fallen

far from the golden destiny toward which our baptism has aimed us, and as a consequence it is the very capacity of Christ to save His beloved children, exercised through His Body, the Church, that is compromised.

It is no wonder that He has so little effect upon the world—He is having a hard time making a difference in our own lives. Materialism and secularism have all but pushed Jesus to the margins, not only of our society, but also of our individual existences. I would go further and say that secularism and materialism have pushed Jesus to the margins even of some of the most valuable institutions of society, such as family and religion: we now live in a world where we can scarcely avoid running out on our families on Thanksgiving day in order to get deals on the stuff we already have, which we were thanking God for an hour ago. Of course, for us to be able to go shopping, others who may want to spend the day with family have to go to work instead. We live in a world where a Catholic school organizes a trip to Disney World for Easter, packing the kids up on the bus to go there on Good Friday—and fails to see what the problem might be in that.

Our children and we are full up with “stuff,” and we fly from activity to activity as if we would stop breathing if we took a break. We no longer have room in our lives, not simply to attend Church, but to *be* Church. We are so comfortable in that cozy bed-and-breakfast we found in Bethlehem that we utterly miss the arrival of that pregnant girl with the guy who had to find a cave for her to have her baby in because there is a “No Vacancy” sign where we are staying. We leave no room for Jesus, and we push Him to the margins of our lives.

But if we look at the stories of Jesus’ birth and infancy in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we find that Jesus was, in fact, at the margins from the beginning. It was the shepherds, poor, smelly, marginal people indeed, who received the message from the angel and responded to this vision by leaving their flocks and hastening to find the child just as the angel had said. It was the Magi, foreigners and unbelievers, but lifelong seekers after truth who traveled a very long distance to see the fulfillment of what had been foretold. But it was Herod, not at the margins but right in the thick of things, the center of his royal universe, who had no use for the child-King and set out at once to destroy Him and everyone else His age, just to be on the safe side.

Where do we situate ourselves in these stories? Out on the hills with the shepherds—and the angels? On a long and difficult road out of the comforts of Persia and into a poor country, following a star and finding a King? Or are we in a royal palace (with a mortgage, naturally), too busy and too important with what we are doing to pay any more attention than it takes to send someone out with the trash?

If we Christians discover that we have pushed Jesus out to the margins of our once-Christian society, then it is to the margins of society that we must go to find Him now, to make sincere and authentic the “I believe” we profess week after week. We must listen to those around us who find faith impossible because of the sinfulness and hypocrisy of Christians, both leaders and laity. As we listen to them to

learn why the faith they may have had has shriveled up and blown away in the course of their lives, we may gain some insight into how it is that the faith has become so trivial to us, something we “know all about,” and which challenges us not one bit, neither in our hearts nor in our homes nor in our parishes.

I pray our Father to give us a chance, in our tiny parish families, to discover, or re-discover, the joy of encountering his Son as the real, live Person He is before it is too late. From my knees I beg the Lord to invade our complacency and our fears, our self-sufficiency and our despair, to shake us up out of the torpor of wanting only the survival of our social clubs and institutions and instead give us His Kingdom that is already within us.

Both the Holy Father and the Fathers of the Synod of Bishops have hit on a very important key in understanding and observing the Year of Faith: *it is the quality of the witness of Christians, not what we say, that the world will be moved by*. We can only witness to what we have seen; hearsay evidence is no longer convincing to the jury of our contemporaries. Until Jesus Himself becomes our leader and Lord, until we see Him active in our miserable lives and feel the strength of His mighty arm when ours is too weak, we can only talk *about* Jesus, not *of* Him. And the Church wants witnesses—martyrs—who can be relied upon to tell the Truth because they know it, have studied it, have cast their destinies upon the waters of baptism and have built their lives upon the Rock Who is Christ, and upon all the teachings of the Apostles and of the Church throughout the ages.

I said before that we already are so much more than we think we are, and we can become so much more than even that! We worry so much about what will become of our little Church, both our Church in Romania, which struggles to assert its value in a context in which it seems to some people superfluous, and in the United States and Canada, where the very existence of even our most venerable and established communities seems to become more precarious year by year, devoured more and more by the powerful currents of demographics and culture.

As we celebrate Christmas, we have the opportunity to welcome anew the Christ-Child in our hearts, tossing aside those preoccupations and fears that leave no room for him. We can choose to go out to the margins—to the poor, the homeless, the lonely, the sick and imprisoned, where we are sure to find Christ Himself (Matthew 25). Entering upon the new year, a new Year of Faith, each of us can find some special commitment to make the Lord that we have not yet made: daily prayer at a specified time; more frequent participation in the Eucharist; monthly or weekly confession, more time spent in reading and studying the scriptures, and so forth.

Though your diocese lacks the resources at this time to establish a program of religious education for all parishes to follow, both for adults and children, I call upon our pastors to make a special effort in each parish to provide a meaningful, regular, and substantive program of adult catechesis in their parishes for the remainder of the Year of Faith. Father Paul Volda and I are ready to assist you in this in any way we can. These steps are minimal observances of the Year of Faith, and I sincerely hope that they will be seriously taken to heart throughout the diocese.

I urge that each parish refocus its efforts on becoming a family of faith first, leaving all other considerations aside as secondary, for God calls us to fidelity to His will, not to the successful accomplishment of earthly goals we set for ourselves. This is why He gives His Son to us as a newborn, to remind us that we have been called and chosen by God to live lives of *metanoia*, of repentance, that is, of continually starting over, of being “born again,” again and again and again. In commenting on Jesus’ advice to his disciples, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (John 14:27), the Fathers of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization remind us:

The work of the new evangelization rests on this serene certainty [that evil will never have the last word, whether in the church or in history]. We are confident in the inspiration and strength of the Spirit, who will teach us what we are to say and what we are to do even in the most difficult moments. *It is our duty, therefore, to conquer fear through faith, discouragement through hope, indifference through love...* [Emphasis added].

There is no room for pessimism in the minds and hearts of those who know that their Lord has conquered death and that his Spirit works with might in history. We approach the world with humility but also with determination. This comes from the certainty that the truth triumphs in the end [World Synod of Bishops, *Message to the People of God*, October 26, 2012, §§ 5-6].

Dear brothers and sisters, I am aware even as I write this letter that so much remains to be said and done by all of us, but especially by me and by our clergy, to commit ourselves to radical faith. Up to now I have been very concerned not to promise what I, conscious of our poverty am unable to deliver in terms of the pastoral services that are needed to promote and strengthen such faith in our parish families, which is to say in *you*.

But the Year of Faith has bolstered my enthusiasm, and seeing it as not only an opportune time, but also as a free and potent gift God has given to the Church in this Christmas season, I am emboldened to declare to clergy and laity together: **it is the intention of the Romanian Catholic Diocese of St. George to bring an end to the game of “playing Church,” to cease business as usual in its administration and in the life of its parishes; to work tirelessly to fan the flames of faith into a roaring blaze, and not to cease working until our little flock becomes a movement of the Spirit in the Church for the life of the world, or has burnt itself out entirely on the altar of the love of God.**

This Christmas, we have neither gold, nor frankincense, nor myrrh to offer Jesus. We have only ourselves, our entire beings, to offer Him. And so, having followed the star of Truth to the place where it stops where the Child is, let us enter in and, prostrating ourselves, do him homage. Let us lay our gifts, our very selves, at the knee of His most pure Mother where sits our Savior. We know He will accept these gifts if we will but offer them.

May the gift and virtue of faith burst in upon you in the coming year, enlightening your hearts and your homes with the love and peace that come from above.

Wishing you the warmest and most joyous Christmas ever, and with fond prayers and the blessings of this great and holy season, I remain

Sincerely in Christ-God,

+john michael, bishop
a sinner