



Pastoral Letter

Lent 2020

Die with Christ and live eternally in Him

"This is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ." (John 17: 3)



Resurrection of Lazarus (John 11 : 1-45)

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Pastoral Letter

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In the Catholic Church, Lent has for centuries begun with an unusual celebration: we put ashes on the foreheads of the faithful. Ashes, dirty, colourless and distasteful, are the result of something being destroyed. To accompany their use in the liturgy, the Church offers a choice between two Bible verses.

The first is taken from the Gospel: *“Repent, and believe in the Gospel.”* (Mk 1: 15) By receiving ashes, the faithful recognize that some of their actions and attitudes have been sources of death for themselves and for others. From now on they want to open themselves more to God, to adopt a new way of living, to make a positive contribution in the world. They enter into a process of change, of moral conversion.

The second verse proposed is found in the first pages of the Bible, more exactly in the Book of Genesis: *“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”* (Gen 3: 19) Here the Church draws attention not only to evil and the sins produced by man but to the human condition itself that ends in death and dissolution of the body. By receiving ashes, the faithful show that they are aware of the limits of their earthly life but that they are opening themselves to God and to eternity. They learn to view their existence in the light of faith.

In this current Pastoral Letter, I want to focus on this aspect of our human condition. Over the last two years, we have reflected on the personal relationship with Christ in his Word (Fall 2018) and in his Sacraments (Fall 2019). Now it is time to take a closer look at death, the moment of the final encounter with God. I propose a few avenues for reflection on the universal reality of death and openness to eternal life (I), the death and resurrection of Christ (II), the Christian message about eternal life (III), personal preparation for death (IV), accompaniment of people in this crucial time of their existence (V), concern for the faithful departed (VI).

I – Human death

1- Death is a universal reality: the human being dies, like animals, plants and lakes. Astronomers study the death of stars ... they predict the death of the solar system and even of the universe. Death is present every day ... it touches parents, friends, strangers, young people, the elderly, the rich, the poor. Its causes are diverse (illness, accidents, disasters). Death can also happen voluntarily through human actions (suicide, homicide, attacks, wars).

2- Since the beginning, the human being has shown particular concern for the deceased. Thus, he has taken particular care of their remains, placing the body in a certain position, surrounded by familiar objects. He has organized specific places for burials. Although different from one another, such measures are found in all civilizations, as demonstrated by the pyramids of Egypt, the Inca tombs, Western cemeteries.

3- In our country, we observe diverse practices concerning the departed: obituaries in the newspapers, a wake of varying length at the funeral home, embalming, cremation, religious or secular celebration or absence of rites, reduction in the time of mourning, burial of the remains in a cemetery or columbarium ...

4- However, an essential element draws attention. Different from animals, the human being knows that he will die, even if the time and manner of his death eludes him. *“Death is the end of earthly life. Our lives are measured by time, in the course of which we change, grow old and, as with all living beings on earth, death seems like the normal end of life. That aspect of death lends urgency to our lives: remembering our mortality helps us realize that we have only a limited time in which to bring our lives to fulfillment.”* (Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 1007)

5- *“It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute”* Vatican II

recalls. (*Gaudium et Spes* n. 18) Even if death has almost become a taboo subject, we have to face it. In fact, it is the place for fundamental questions about the ultimate meaning of human existence. Is it the absolute end or does it lead to something else? Is it the dissolution of my being or is there a form of survival for the human being?

6- To answer these questions, two main visions are presented. One is closed on this visible world: here death is perceived as the complete end of the individual so we emphasize the past of the deceased person, what was dear to him before death snatched it from him. The person survives only in the memory of those who knew him. The second vision opens to another dimension ... the at least partial survival of the human being. The individual remains not only in the memory of others but objectively. He has his own consistency.

7- It is in this second line that different religions are situated. In fact, they teach that physical death is not the last word. For some among them, one part of the human being survives (immortality of the soul). For others, the soul migrates from one body to another (reincarnation). For Christians, the human being will be resurrected in his body.

8- The ‘I believe in God’, clearly explains this conviction in its last two sentences: *“The Christian Creed - the profession of our faith in God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and in God's creative, saving, and sanctifying action - culminates in the proclamation of the resurrection of the dead on the last day and in life everlasting.”* (Catechism n. 988) Faith in God and in eternal life are in fact closely linked, which means that for someone who does not believe in God, everything ends with death, eternal life does not exist. On the contrary, for someone who believes in God, death does not have the last word. Since God exists, eternal life is possible and is offered. This then is a

fundamental element of the critical message of the Bible: *"God formed us to be imperishable."* (Wisdom 2: 23) *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."* (John 3: 16) *"This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."* (John 6: 40) Thus we are able to live genuinely and eternally in God. We preserve traces of this deep conviction in our daily language: when we say *'adieu'* to someone, we are entrusting that person *"to God"*; when we say *'goodbye'*, we are hoping that God is with them: *'God be with you'*.

9- Faith in God is decreasing among some people. As a result, we note a decrease of faith

in eternal life. On the other hand, in a materialistic world such as ours, it might seem impossible to imagine eternal life. A comparison could be useful here. Within its mother's womb, a child has no idea of the life to be found outside: the child knows neither colours, nor odours, nor peoples' faces. Only after birth does the child discover the wonderful universe that surrounds him or her. In the same way, we cannot imagine in this world what eternal life is, nevertheless, since we trust God, we know that he is offering us a life without end and the true happiness. *"The Christian who dies in Christ reaches at the end of his earthly existence the fulfillment of that new life which was begun in Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nourished in the Eucharist, the foretaste of the heavenly banquet."* (Compendium n. 354)

10- Spiritual Applications

- a. Look at the different attitudes to death that are around us today.
- b. Allow questions related to our own death or that of someone else to rise up in us.
- c. Look back at the reflections of the philosopher Blaise Pascal who was addressing someone who loved to gamble. Looking at the existence of God and of eternal life, there are two possibilities: it's either true or false. There is a 50% chance that it is true which are much better odds than a lottery ticket where there is one chance in a million to win. If we believe that this is true and that after your death there is nothing, we will have lost nothing, since we will not even be there to realize it. If we believe that there is nothing and after death discover that God and eternal life exist, we would have lost everything if we have not prepared for it. Therefore, it is more advantageous to believe in God and in eternal life.
- d. In connection with the diocesan pastoral priority that proposes we intensify our personal relationship with Christ, ask myself who God, in whom I believe and who promises eternal life, truly is for me. Slowly say again the *'I believe in God'*.



II- The death and resurrection of Christ

11- The Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes* n. 22), teaches that *“only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light”*. It is in Christ that his disciples find the light they need to understand the reality of death. Saint Paul says: *“If we have died with him, we will also live with him.”* (2 Tim 2: 11)

12- In his teaching, Jesus revealed the face of a good God who offers eternal life. *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (Jn 10: 11) He shows the truth of his words by giving life to Jairus’ daughter (Mt 9: 18-26; Mk 5: 21-43; Lk 8: 40-56), to the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7: 11-16), to his friend Lazarus (John 11: 1-45). Thus, since he has the power to restore earthly life, we believe that Jesus can also offer access to eternal life.

13- In addition to these words and extraordinary gestures in favour of life, Jesus shines an irreplaceable light on the human condition because he himself goes through death. This fact deeply marked the four evangelists. In fact, each of them devoted the two longest chapters of their gospels to the story of his passion and death: Saint Matthew ... two of 28 (26-27); Saint Mark ... two of 16 (14-15); Saint Luke ... two of 24 (22-23); Saint John... two of 21 (18-19).

14- These texts are unlimited sources for discovering Christ: he reveals himself to us and he reveals to us who we really are for him. I propose a few elements for meditation.

- a. On the eve of his death, Jesus goes through a painful agony and prayed intensely: *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”* (Lk 22: 42). We can understand this prayer by thinking about a person who has to undergo a serious operation, for example, a heart transplant. In the grip of great anxiety, the person would undoubtedly want to recover their health immediately, without having to go through a painful operation and prolonged convalescence. Like every human being, Jesus undoubtedly did not want to die, especially with the suffering that he anticipated. Saint Luke, who was a doctor, noted that *“his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.”* (Lk 22: 44) That phenomenon well demonstrated his distress. Something similar was observed among people condemned to death in concentration camps.
- b. Then the Gospel writers mentioned the different forms of suffering that Jesus experienced. He suffered consciously and refused the wine mixed with myrrh that was offered to him. (Mt 27: 34) He experienced intense physical pain. The scourging tore at his skin; carrying the cross was accompanied by painful falls; the crowning with thorns penetrated his scalp; the crucifixion with nails pierced his hands and feet; the asphyxiation gradually took hold of him.
- c. Jesus also knew psychological suffering: he found himself alone, abandoned by his disciples, rejected by the authorities of his people, despised by passersbys who laughed at him.

15- From high on the cross he pronounced **seven short words** that the gospel writers carefully gathered and that have given us access

to his inner world. The faithful have piously meditated on them for centuries and they can still inspire us.

16- *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”* (Lk 22: 34) Jesus did not condemn the people who made him suffer and die. On the contrary, he interceded for them, offered the forgiveness that he constantly taught and demonstrated. ‘They’ included the Roman soldiers, the Jewish leaders, the unfaithful disciples, the sinners of human history. When he was facing death by stoning, Saint Stephen endorsed these words and feelings of Jesus, forgiving his executioners: *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”* (Acts 7: 60) Jesus also knew that people do not sufficiently understand the gravity of their sin that destroys their relationship to God and among themselves. His death on the cross then becomes the most perfect indicator of the malice of sin, which goes as far as to kill God’s envoy, as he himself proclaimed in the parable of the vineyard tenants. (Mt 21: 33-45)

17- *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”* (Lk 22: 43) Despite the extreme situation that he found himself in, Jesus was aware of being God: he declared to the good thief that to be with him was to be in paradise. Saint Paul will write: *“Thus we shall always be with the Lord.”* (I Thess. 4: 17) Crucified for committing a wrongdoing, the thief turned to Jesus in the last minutes of his life. The Saviour rejoiced to see this lost sheep return (Lk 15: 7), this labourer at the last hour (Mt 20: 1-16). Thus he invites us to hope for the salvation of each person until the last minute of his or her life.

18- *“Woman, behold your son ... Behold your mother.”* (John 19: 27) Among the few courageous people at the foot of his cross was his mother and his beloved disciple. Jesus entrusted one to the other, so that they mutually support one another in this painful hour. Thereafter, as we say in the ‘Hail Mary’, the faithful will be able to ask Mary’s help ‘at the hour of our death’... she who accompanied her Son dying on the cross can support each of his children at the critical hour of their own death.

19- *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mt 27: 46; Mk 15: 34). These words are very mysterious ... did Jesus feel a form of abandonment on the part of his Father? Very daring for the one who would claim to describe what happened in his soul at that time. However, some saints believe that Jesus wanted to assume into his human nature the infinite emptiness that sinners feel when they become aware of the absence of God in their lives. One image might perhaps shed a little light on this experience. Having a child who is experiencing serious financial problems, a parent provides surety for him, that is to say, he commits to paying the debts of his child if the latter is not doing it himself. Now this is precisely what is happening ... the parent pays the debts of his child. Without having done anything bad himself, he is deprived of some benefits that he has accumulated. Then there is an empty feeling within him since he is depriving himself and at the same time a feeling of love, since he is saving his child. In this line, Jesus who has never committed evil, takes upon himself the emptiness that sinners feel. Nevertheless, he continues to love them and to want salvation for them. The words that he pronounces are those that begin Psalm 22. This text prophetically describes the torments of the passion of Jesus and at the same time explains an unwavering trust in God. These are the two experiences that Jesus takes on himself.

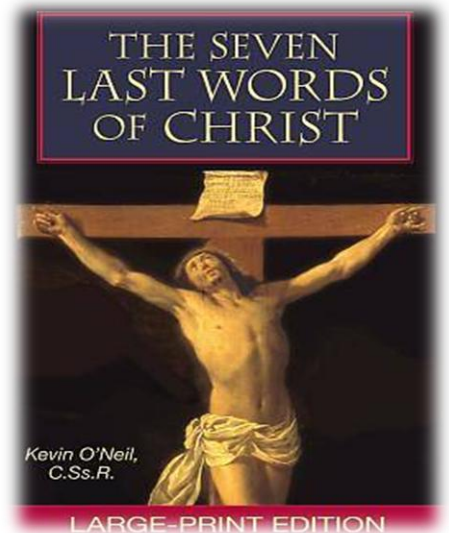
20- *“I thirst.”* (John 19: 28) There is undoubtedly a physical basis to this declaration. However, we can also read something deeper, by using Psalm 43 for example: *“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?”* (v. 2) Thus Jesus wants to meet his Father again in glory. On the other hand, in his encounter with the Samaritan, Jesus expressed his thirst (John 4: 7). He also revealed: *“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”* (4: 10) The true thirst of Jesus is the thirst for salvation that he wants to communicate to everyone.

21- *"It is finished."*(Jn 19: 30) His earthly life has come to an end but Jesus indicates that he has accomplished the mission that the Father entrusted to him.

22- *"Into your hands, I commend my spirit."* (Lk 23: 46) The last words of Jesus are a citation from Psalm 32:6 ... the expression of confident abandoning into the hands of the Father, awaiting his hour for the resurrection. Saint Stephen will say something similar (Acts 7: 59): *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

23- Spiritual Applications

- a. Slowly read an account of the passion and death of Jesus, for example, Lk 22-23.
- b. Admire the courage of Jesus who faced great suffering and death.
- c. Appreciate his concern for others (persecutors, Mary, good thief), even in his difficult hours.
- d. Be inspired by the confident prayer that Jesus addressed to his Father right to the end.
- e. Meditate on Psalm 22, in the certainty that it speaks about Jesus: *"Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."* (Lk 24: 44)
- f. In the church, piously visit each of the Stations of the Way of the Cross.
- g. Meditate on the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary: The Agony of Jesus, The Scourging, The Crowning with Thorns, the Crucifixion, Death on the Cross.
- h. Display the Cross of Jesus in our homes.
- i. Regularly and piously make the Sign of the Cross.
- j. Recognize that the Mass makes present the sacrifice of Jesus and his death on the Cross: *his body given up, his blood poured out*, as the words of the consecration proclaim.
- k. Throughout this reflection on the passion and death of Jesus, look at how my personal relationship with him takes on another dimension.



24- As impressive as it was, the death of Jesus would be pointless were it not for his resurrection. In fact, it is the resurrection that clearly shows the truth of his message and the final destiny offered to us. Jesus did not remain a prisoner of death but gained access to eternal life with his glorified body. The four evangelists described this extraordinary experience (Mt 28,

Mk 16, Lk 24, John 20-21) : the same Jesus that the Apostles knew, who they saw die on the Cross, is living again. However, he is in a different state. As the Catechism explains well: *"Christ is raised with his own body: "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself"; but he did not return to an earthly life.* (n. 999)

25- “Jesus links faith in the resurrection to his own person: *“I am the Resurrection and the life.”* (John 11: 25) It is Jesus himself who on the last day will raise up those who have believed in him, who have eaten his body and drunk his blood. (cfr. Jn 5, 24-25; 6, 40) Already now, in this

present life he gives a sign and pledge of this by restoring some of the dead to life (cfr. Mk 5: 21-42; Lk 7, 11-17; John 11), thereby announcing his own Resurrection, though it was to be of another order.” (Catechism n. 994)

26- Spiritual Applications

- a. Meditate on the Glorious Mysteries of the Rosary: Resurrection, Ascension of Jesus.
- b. Say again slowly and with conviction the acclamation that follows the consecration at mass: *“We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection.”*
- c. Read Chapter 15 of the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians: *“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”* (v. 20-26)
- d. Recognize how my personal relationship with Christ is marked or coloured by his resurrection. .



III – The Christian Message on Eternal Life

Until now, we have looked at human death with realism. We have especially welcomed the light offered by Christ in the certainty that *«If we have died with him, we will also live with him.»* (2 Tim 2: 11) Now we must more closely examine the essential content of the Christian message on eternal life that is proposed to us.

27- Every human person has a single existence. *“Human beings die once, and after this the judgment”,* writes the Letter to the Hebrews. (9: 27). Created in *the image and likeness* of God (Gen 1: 27), every human being has his unique consistency and is called to survive for always in his personal identity. He does not merge with God, like the drop of water that melts into the sea ... Peter remains Peter but is not Monica and vice versa. Thus, the

present life has an important determinant: in that life, eternity is already being prepared. The first Preface of the Mass for the Departed sings: *“Life is changed not ended.”* Jesus invites us not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” (Mt 10: 28)

28- The resurrection of the flesh constitutes an essential element of Christian faith.

- a. In fact, this respects the very nature of the human being, who is different from an animal by his soul and distinct from an angel by his body. *“In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus' Resurrection.”* (Catechism n. 997)
- b. As Christ is resurrected in his body, the same destiny is offered to humanity. *“All of them will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear,”* (Latran IV: DS 801) but Christ *“will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body,”* (Phil 3: 21) into a *“spiritual body”*. (1 Cor 15:44) (Catechism n. 999) To understand how it will be done, we can meditate on the story of the appearances of the Risen Christ to the Apostles. (Mt 28; Mk 16; Lk 24, John 20-21) The same person is appearing but in a different state.
- c. For his part, Saint Paul uses the comparison between the seed and the plant, similar and different at the same time: *“What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.”* (1 Cor 15: 37-39) A grain of wheat gives wheat and not a carrot. But the sheaf of wheat is different from the seed that is put into the earth. The resurrection of the flesh will happen for us at the end of time, when Christ returns in glory.

29- Particular judgment takes place at the moment of death: each person receives eternal retribution in his or her immortal soul. Depending on how, more or less, the person is conformed to Christ, there is either entrance into the blessedness of heaven – even through a purification- or everlasting damnation. (Catechism n. 1022).

30- The beatitude of heaven. The *Catechism* describes eternal happiness this way: *“Those who die in God's grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with Christ. They are like God forever, for they “see him as he is”* (1 John 3: 2), *face to face.”* (cf. 1 Co 13, 12; Ap 22, 4) (n. 1023) *“This is eternal life, that they should*

know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.”(John 17: 3) In heaven we will taste the *beatific vision* (word meaning ‘that makes happy’). When we love a person, the simple fact of seeing them makes us happy. We can imagine the happiness of seeing God, in all his splendour, who is our Creator and Our Saviour, eternal and perfect Love. We will also be able to rejoice with the communion of saints because we will be united with all those who are united to God.

31- Before gaining access to God in full light, we may need to go through a purification step called ‘purgatory’. *“All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.”* (Catechism n. 1030) In fact we are grappling with evil, with sin that leaves traces within us that we have to rid ourselves of in order to enter into perfect union with God. Here is an example to understand this: In the evening a person walked long hours in the dust and wind. Her face and clothing were soiled without her seeing them. Arriving at the destination, the person discovers in the light, the dirt that is on her and gets rid of it before going to the table. This is how it will be for our meeting with God. In the dazzling light of his love, we will become aware of the many times that selfishness has affected our lives and relationships with him and with others. We will feel the need to be purified, cleaned up, liberated. This is precisely what God does through his love. The souls in purgatory can be helped through prayer, works of penance, indulgences and especially the offering of the sacrifice of the mass.

32- The eternal damnation of hell. Often in the Gospel, Jesus spoke about hell, which is fundamentally eternal separation from God. For example, we can read the parable of the evil rich

man and of poor Lazarus (Lk 16: 19-31), where we see the separation of destinies and the impossibility of changing that after death. We can also meditate on the impressive scene of the Last Judgment (Mt 25 31-46), when Jesus separated the lambs from the goats, calling the first to bliss and sending the second far away from him. *“To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell.”* (Catechism n. 1033) In fact, the human person creates hell by refusing the love of God. In the image of the petrified bodies found in Pompeii, frozen in lava at the hour of death, the human person remains frozen forever in his refusal of God. The sight of God for him is unbearable, as the mere sight of a person we do not love weighs on us. Whereas through canonization, the Church declares someone a saint because they were found to be definitively in the presence of God, the Church has never mentioned a specific person as being in hell, for example neither Judas nor Hitler. *“The affirmations of Sacred Scripture and the teachings of the Church on the subject of hell are a call to the responsibility incumbent upon man to make use of his freedom in view of his eternal destiny. They are at the same time an urgent call to conversion: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”* (Mt 7: 13-14) (Catechism n. 1036)

33- Last Judgment. At the end of time, *“In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of each man's relationship with God will be laid bare. The Last Judgment will reveal even to its furthest consequences the good each person has done or failed to do during his earthly life.”* (Catechism n. 1039)

34- Spiritual Applications

- a. Know well the authentic teaching of the Church on our eternal destiny.
- b. Thank God who offers the human being a share in his eternal life.
- c. Thank God who preserves my personal identity for eternity.
- d. Give thanks to Christ who through his death and resurrection provides access to eternal life.
- e. Be aware of the importance of the present time that has been offered to me in order to prepare for eternity.
- f. Be aware of my personal responsibility for my salvation or my damnation.
- g. Is my current personal relationship with Christ a source of hope so that I can see God?



IV – Personal preparation for death and entry into eternal life

In the face of death, that sooner or later inevitably reaches every human being, Christ's faithful find extraordinary light and hope in their Master's message, in the experience of his death and resurrection. It is a joy that no one can take from them, that impressively shines on the faces of the martyrs and true believers. They have the certainty of going toward Someone who loves them and waits for them. "*I am not dying; I am entering life*", says Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus. (Catechism n. 1011)

35- By praying the '*Hail Mary*', the faithful are keeping in mind the '*hour of their death*', of which they know not the exact hour. In the Gospel they find a perspective that prevents them from being blinded by the beauty of the present world or wrapped up in the accumulation of goods. In this line, Jesus offers an illuminating parable: "*The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my*

crops?' Then he said, '*I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'* But God said to him, '*You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'* So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.'" (Lk 12:

16-21) The thought of death and eternity allows us to avoid giving material things the importance that they do not have since one day or another, we will have to leave them.

36- In the *Imitation of Christ* (I, 23, 1), a book that formed generations of Christians, we find this inspiring reflection: *“Every action of yours, every thought, should be those of one who expects to die before the day is out. Death would have no great terrors for you if you had a quiet conscience ... Then why not keep clear of sin instead of running away from death? If you aren't fit to face death today, it's very unlikely you will be tomorrow ...”* (cited in the Catechism n. 1014)

37- Death can strike unexpectedly (sudden illness, accident, natural disaster ...) We can also see it coming in the more or less short term: serious illness, advanced age. When it is foreseeable, we can prepare for it more consciously. In *Salvifici Doloris*, the Apostolic Letter of February 11, 1984, Saint John Paul II offered some profound reflections on the mystery of suffering that remain very relevant.

38- When illness strikes, we can obviously receive medical attention. When it becomes more intense and terminal, we can access palliative care, thanks to which the person is accompanied on the medical, psychological, emotional, spiritual levels.

39- However, we cannot have recourse to assisted suicide or medical assistance in dying. I recalled this in my Fall 2017 Pastoral Letter (n. 24): *“Assisted suicide contains a moral malice greater than ‘ordinary’ suicide. In fact, as the word ‘assisted’ indicates, to become effective it implies assistance, the help of other people: doctors, pharmacists, nurses must collaborate in*

the act. Members of the sick person’s immediate family can even be invited to attend the death or at least approve of it. The media are exercising a growing influence to make the thing acceptable and even desirable: some reports show the person seeming to be asleep, surrounded by his loved ones in a more or less festive atmosphere. It is certain, however, that no member of the families concerned would accept to be present if the one who desires death did it by hanging or by firearm. No one would accept to go and buy the indispensable rope. Recourse to medications injected intravenously conceals, camouflages, the extreme violence that is at work. The result, even sterilized, is identical: the person dies. To make suffering disappear, we make the person disappear. We must clearly demonstrate that we cannot approve such an action nor collaborate in it ... we cannot kill a person directly, even through ‘compassion’. We must constantly recall the sacred character of human life and accompany our brothers and sisters who are ill by offering them palliative care. We must especially offer them the light of faith: our God is the God of life. In the mystery of his death and resurrection, Christ offers an extraordinary illumination of the human condition and suffering and he accompanies us in times of hardship. We must present the Christian meaning of suffering and death, from the perspective of the Cross of Christ. In an immediate way, we must help sick people to be open to the presence of the Lord and to allow themselves to encounter him at the heart of their ordeal.”

40- We speak of *“dying with dignity”*: It is in the dignity of a child of God that we must die. In fact, we must promote **spiritual assistance in dying with Christ**, that is to say, to die with Christ in order to be resurrected with him. Some ways to do that are:

- a. Deepen the personal relationship with Christ, particularly through prayer, reading the Gospel, Eucharistic life.

- b. Count on the intercession of the saints, especially the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph, patron of a good death. Recite the invocations: *"Jesus, Mary, Joseph, help me in my final agony. Jesus, Mary, Joseph, let me die in peace, in your company."*
- c. Live the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Christ on the cross meets every person in their sin: *"Father, forgive them."* As he said to the good repentant thief: *"Today you will be with me in Paradise."* A general confession can be useful ... looking at the whole of one's life in the light of Christ. In continuity with her Master, the Church does everything so that the faithful receive the forgiveness of God as Canon 976 specifies: *"Even though a priest lacks the faculty to hear confessions, he absolves validly and licitly any penitents whatsoever in danger of death from any censures and sins, even if an approved priest is present."* When the danger of death threatens a group of people, (for example at the time of a disaster or an attack), the priest gives general absolution. He can also grant the apostolic blessing that accompanies the dying.
- d. Celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Only the priest can administer it, by anointing the sick person with holy oil on the forehead and on the hands. He anoints on the forehead: Christ comes to illuminate our intelligence. It helps to understand the meaning of life, of illness, of suffering, of death in order to experience them in union with Christ. He comes to free us from sin which affects our spiritual understanding. Anointing is done on the hands that are the instruments of our work, of our relationships with others (open hands or closed fists). Christ comes to free the person from the sin of egotism: hands that bring everything back to oneself and not to God and others. Through this anointing, the priest is the instrument of the presence of Christ who comes to relieve the suffering first of all on the spiritual level, but, if such is his will, on the physical level also. *"Any member of the faithful can receive this sacrament as soon as he or she begins to be in danger of death because of sickness or old age. The faithful who receive this sacrament can receive it several times if their illness becomes worse or another serious sickness afflicts them. The celebration of this sacrament should, if possible, be preceded by individual confession on the part of the sick person."* (Compendium n. 316) *"The Anointing of the Sick completes our conformity to the death and Resurrection of Christ, just as Baptism began it. It completes the holy anointings that mark the whole Christian life: that of Baptism which sealed the new life in us, and that of Confirmation which strengthened us for the combat of this life. This last anointing fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father's house."* (Catechism n. 1523)
- e. Receive Viaticum: this is the last communion. *"Viaticum is the Holy Eucharist received by those who are about to leave this earthly life and are preparing for the journey to eternal life. Communion in the body and blood of Christ who died and rose from the dead, received at the moment of passing from this world to the Father, is the seed of eternal life and the power of the resurrection"* (Compendium n. 320) *"It is the seed of eternal life and the power of resurrection, according to the words of the Lord: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.' The sacrament of Christ once dead and now risen, the Eucharist is here the sacrament of passing over from death to life, from this world to the Father."* (cf. Jn 13, 1) (Catechism n. 1524)

41- The faithful should ask for a Catholic funeral.

- a. *“Funerals express the paschal character of Christian death in hope of the resurrection. They also manifest the meaning of communion with the departed particularly through prayer for the purification of their souls.” (Compendium n. 355)*
- b. *“Usually, funeral rites consist of four principal parts: welcoming the body of the deceased by the community with words of comfort and hope, the liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and the farewell in which the soul of the departed is entrusted to God, the Source of eternal life, while the body is buried in the hope of the resurrection.” (Compendium n. 356)*

42- Spiritual Applications:

- a. Look at how my ever more intimate relationship with Christ gives me the taste for the face to face encounter with God.
- b. Make an act of faith in God who offers eternal life, an act of hope that he accompanies us in waiting for eternal life and the observance of the sacraments, an act of charity to express our love toward him.
- c. Pray to obtain a Christian death.
- d. Express our last wishes, namely to receive spiritual help to die in union with Christ. Take advantage of the presence of a priest to celebrate the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick. Receive Viaticum.
- e. Indicate the desire to be buried or cremated.
- f. Ask that a religious object, a crucifix or rosary, be left in the coffin or urn.
- g. Indicate the wish to have a Catholic funeral.
- h. Do not forget the offering of masses for the repose of someone’s soul.



V - Accompanying our ill and dying brothers and sisters

43- In the face of suffering and death, Christian faith offers a light that the faithful are invited to share with people touched by sickness and those who are at the end of their earthly existence.

Samaritan who took care of the wounded and abandoned person on the road. *“The Church desires to become more and more the “inn” of the Good Samaritan who is Christ (cf. Lk 10:34), that is, a home where you can encounter his grace, which finds expression in closeness, acceptance and relief.”* (n. 3)

44- In his Message for World Day of the Sick on February 11, 2020, Pope Francis proposes that we be inspired by the Good

- a. In this sense the Pope highlights the extremely invaluable service of people who accompany the sick: families and friends, staff of hospitals and residences. *“A key role in this effort to offer rest and renewal to our sick brothers and sisters is played by healthcare workers: physicians, nurses, medical and administrative professionals, assistants and volunteers. Thanks to their expertise, they can make patients feel the presence of Christ who consoles and cares for the sick, and heals every hurt.”* (n. 3)
- b. The Holy Father invites us to recognize the sick person in his human dignity and as a child of God. *“Diagnostic, preventive and therapeutic treatments, research, care and rehabilitation are always in the service of the sick person; indeed, the noun “person” takes priority over the adjective “sick”. In your work, may you always strive to promote the dignity and life of each person, and reject any compromise in the direction of euthanasia, assisted suicide or suppression of life, even in the case of terminal illness.”*(n. 4)

45- How to behave towards people who seek medical aid in dying?

- a. As Catholics we have to clearly affirm that we cannot approve of such an action nor collaborate in it. It is not allowed to kill a person directly, even through compassion.
- b. We have to constantly remember the sacred character of human life and accompany our sick brothers and sisters, offer them access to palliative care and the light of faith. Our God is the God of life. In the mystery of his death and resurrection, Christ offers an extraordinary perspective on the human condition and suffering and he accompanies us in times of hardship.
- c. We especially pray for people tempted by assisted suicide and we accompany them to help them reflect on the gravity of their act and on the meaning and resources offered to them by their Christian faith.
- d. We pray even more for those who take their life, that God wrap them in his mercy. We offer our spiritual support to the families concerned.
- e. Assisted suicide, medical assistance in dying, are evil acts. However, we cannot presume eternal damnation for those who take their life. God alone knows the factors that brought them to that decision, their degree of freedom and their moral conscience. They might be afflicted with

suffering that they consider unbearable; they might feel subtle pressure from those around them; they might think that since it is legal, that it is acceptable and even desirable. God alone knows all the motivations involved in their decision and the nature of their relationship with God. They could be aware at the psychological level but not at the moral level. In fact, the psychological conscience (doing something lucidly, not under the influence of drugs or alcohol) is distinct from the moral conscience (conscience that such action is good or bad, in line with God or opposed to him). Thus, we keep them in our prayers, entrusting them to the mercy of God.

46- We can offer spiritual help to die in Christ in order to live in him.

- a. In the case of imminent death (for example, a highway accident, a heart attack), hospitals have emergency services, well-organized, with rapid intervention. The Church also uses a spiritual emergency service. When a person is close to dying, a priest must be called immediately so that he comes as soon as possible to administer the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum. The staff in our hospitals is well trained in this regard and contact priests when people ask for it. For their part, priests respond generously to these calls because they know well that they are ministers of Christ who is welcoming at the last moment, just as he did for the Good Thief. In the case of a baptized child, the priest can also administer the Sacrament of Confirmation.
- b. Just like the caring staff accompany the sick, so the faithful accompany spiritually those dying by praying for them each day.
- c. They humanly and spiritually accompany the sick and those close to them by taking inspiration from what Jesus himself would do.

The Gospel of the Disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35). In the face of the death of the one whom they had followed with enthusiasm and hope, two disciples are deeply affected, *their faces downcast* says verse 17. Jesus draws near them, walks with them. The three stand still. (v. 17) Jesus listens to them. By travelling with Moses and the prophets, he helps them to understand the meaning of the events they had just experienced. (v. 27) Jesus reveals the meaning of the suffering and death of the Messiah. He stays with them and they recognize him in a gesture that he alone made: *"He took bread and ... broke it."* (v. 30 and 31) They leave to proclaim the Gospel of salvation with their hearts burning. (v. 32)

As disciples of Jesus, as his instruments, we are invited to visit our sick brothers and sisters, to listen to their suffering, by giving them quality time. We propose the light and comfort of the Word of God to them. In Holy Communion Jesus himself comes to meet them and give them the courage that they need in their hardships.

Another Gospel passage can inspire: the one of the raising of Lazarus (John 11: 1-45) (illustrated on the cover page of this Letter). Jesus goes to meet Martha and Mary, two women, grieving and saddened by the death of their brother Lazarus. He welcomes their suffering and even their reproaches: *"If you had been here, my brother would not have died."* (v. 32), similar to those people for whom, if God existed, there would be no death. Jesus suffers with Martha and Mary. Verse 35 allows only two words: *"Jesus wept."* At the heart of this suffering in which he truly participates, Jesus announces in clear fashion the good news of life and resurrection: *"Your brother will rise"* (v. 23) because *"I am the resurrection and the life."* (v. 25)

At the school of Jesus, his disciples encounter the suffering of others, their questions, their doubts. They witness the certainty that dwells within their hearts ... eternal life exists and is given to us by Christ. The long corridor of death leads to divine light.



d. Brothers and sisters who are ill are invited to receive the sacraments that I presented in n. #39: The Sacrament of Reconciliation (that can also be a general confession of life), Anointing of the Sick, Communion (that family members and parish ministers regularly bring) and Viaticum (when the moment of death is drawing near).

e. We can also propose to the sick and dying some special prayers, like those of the *Ritual*:

i. Affirmations of faith to proclaim slowly.

Everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life. (cf. Jn 6: 40)

What will separate us from the love of Christ? (Rm 8: 35)

Whether we live or die, we are to the Lord. (Rm 14: 8)

We have a building from the Lord. (2 Cor 5: 1)

We shall always be with the Lord. (1 Th 4: 17)

We shall see Him as he is. (1 John 3: 2)

We have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. (1 John 3: 14)

God gave us eternal life and his life is his Son. Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son does not have life. (1 John 5: 11-12)

ii. Words of Christ :

« Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. » (Mt 25: 34)

« Today you will be with me in Paradise. » (Lk 23: 34)

« In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. » (John 14: 2)

« If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself. » (John 14: 3)

« Father, those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am. » (John 17: 24)

iii. Psalm Prayers:

« *To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.* » (Ps 25: 1)

« *The LORD is my light and my salvation.* » (Ps 27: 1)

« *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.* » (Ps 27: 12)

« *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.* » (Ps 42: 2)

« *Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil.* » (Ps 23: 4)

iv. Recitation of the Litanies of the Saints.

v. Reading of Bible passages, for example, texts from daily mass or preceding Sunday, the Passion of Christ.

f. At the moment of death, we can also recite the following prayer:

*“Go Forth, Christian soul, from this world,
In the name of God, the almighty Father
Who created you,
In the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God,
Who suffered for you,
In the name of the Holy Spirit,
Who was poured out upon you,
Go forth, faithful Christian.*

*May you live in peace this day,
May your home be with God in Zion,
With Mary, the virgin Mother of God
With Joseph, and the angels and saints.” AMEN*

*I commend you, my dear brother or sister
To almighty God,
And entrust you to your Creator.
May you return to him
Who formed you from the dust of the earth.
May holy Mary, the angels and all the saints
Come to meet you as you go forth from this life.
May Christ who was crucified for you
Bring you freedom and peace.
May Christ who died for you
Admit you into his garden of paradise.
May Christ, the true Shepherd.
Acknowledge you as one of his flock.
May he forgive all your sins
And set you among those he has chosen.
May you see your Redeemer face to face
And enjoy the vision of God for ever. AMEN*

47- Spiritual Applications

- a. Encourage the faithful (relatives or friends) who humanly and spiritually support those close to them who are sick or dying through their visits, their prayers, communion.
- b. Thank and support those who ensure palliative care.
- c. Support conscience rights for hospital staff who refuse to give medical assistance to die or assisted suicide.



Horizon – Palliative Care-Timmins

VI - Attitudes towards deceased persons

48- Death is not the dissolution of the person. We must take care of the body of the departed that becomes his mortal remains. We must take care of his soul that continues to survive in expectation of the resurrection. It is important to know the intentions of the person concerning two aspects of their being: what to do with the body? How to accompany the soul?

49- The body of a human person should be treated with respect. The Church prefers burial, placing in the ground. Just as we place a seed in the soil from which fruit will spring up, in the same way, the body placed in the ground will bring forth the resurrection. However, cremation is accepted and common. The same respect is shown to these two types of mortal rest in the liturgy and in the cemetery. It would be good to

leave a religious symbol (cross or rosary) in the coffin or urn. On the epitaph it is important to find a cross, in addition to the name of the departed person and the dates of his life in this world.

50- The faithful should clearly specify their last wishes: burial or cremation, religious funeral, masses for the eternal repose of their soul.

51- After the death of a person, the Church organizes three steps of respect: the first took place at the home of the deceased person or at the funeral home with a moment of prayer; the second comprises the funeral liturgy; the third involves bringing the mortal remains to the cemetery.

52- Christian funerals are not only the celebration of the earthly life of the departed person, a simple collection of memories. Rather, they are the celebration of Life that comes from God, a thanksgiving for the good done by this person in union with God and an intercession to ask for forgiveness of the wrongs that he or she committed.

53- We know that Christ offered his life in sacrifice for the salvation of the world. In the funeral mass or at a mass for a departed person, we ask the Lord to welcome this person as he did for the Good Thief. This is like a personalization of salvation. All the funeral prayers mention often the name of the person for whom we are praying.

54- Funerals can be celebrated with or without a mass. The most meaningful form is obviously a funeral with a mass, since we come to unite with the death and resurrection of Christ, the life and death of the departed in expectation of his resurrection. When, for different reasons, the funeral mass is not possible, we must plan for a memorial mass for the departed at another time.

55- Funerals without mass consist of a celebration of the Word of God, accompanied by prayers and certain rites, for example, holy water. For this purpose, funerals can happen in a church or a chapel.

56- The funeral rites of the Church are expressive: attention to the family, welcoming of the coffin or urn containing the remains of the person, bringing the remains to the front of the assembly, cross and paschal candle near the coffin, sprinkling with holy water in remembrance of baptism, incense (that shows respect and symbolizes rising towards God). The presence of the Christian community (relatives, friends, ministers of the Church) is also a great support and comfort for the family in mourning. Prayers, songs, the homily also contribute to communicating the Christian meaning of life, of death, of eternity.

57- Catholic faithful are invited to preserve the memory of their deceased, in the certainty that they are living with God (saints) or that they need purification (purgatory). Offering masses for their intention is a beautiful expression of faith. The prayers of the Church on this subject are eloquent.

- a. Roman Canon: *Remember also, Lord, your servants N. and N., who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace. Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace.*
- b. Eucharistic Prayer II: *Remember your servant N, whom you have called today from this world to yourself. Grant that he (she) who was united with your Son in a death like his, may also be one with him in his Resurrection. Remember also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in your mercy: welcome them into the light of your face.*
- c. Eucharistic Prayer III: *Remember your servant N. whom you called today from this world to yourself. Grant that he (she) who was united with your Son in a death like his, may also be one with him in his Resurrection, when from the earth he will raise up in the flesh those who have died, and transform our lowly body after the pattern of his own glorious body. To our departed brothers and sisters, too, and all who were pleasing to you at their passing of this life, give kind admittance to your Kingdom. There we hope to enjoy forever the fullness of your glory, when you will wipe away every tear from our eyes; for seeing you, our God, as you are, we will be like you for all the ages and praise you without end.*

58- In relation to the mass, the faithful can recite the rosary for the intentions of their departed by concluding with the invocation: *"May the souls of the faithful departed rest in peace through the mercy of God. Amen."*

59- It is important to look after our cemeteries well, to go regularly (at least once a year) to gather at the grave of our deceased. It is also an opportunity to remember our mortal condition and to revive our faith in eternal life. The month of November is particularly consecrated to that.

60- Spiritual Applications

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Appreciate the work of funeral homes and cemeteries that take care of deceased persons.b. Thank the pastoral teams that accompany families in mourning: welcome, liturgy, meetings.c. Encourage prayer for the faithful departed. |
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The body of a human person should be treated with respect

Over the course of this Pastoral Letter, we have been invited to look realistically at death ... thanks to faith, we know that death leads to the eternal life that God offers. Every person should prepare themselves for this definitive encounter, by making themselves, like the Good Thief, open to Christ and not like the other thief who was closed to him.

In this encounter with God, as Christ's faithful, we accompany our brothers and sisters who are sick, elderly, injured.

In a special way, we preserve the memory of our departed relatives and friends by keeping them in our prayers, in a privileged way, during the celebration of the mass.

May the words of Saint Paul inspire us: *"We await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."* (Phil 3: 20-21)

Serge Poitras

✠ Serge Poitras
Bishop of Timmins



Preserve the memory of their deceased

February 11, 2020,
Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes



Father, Son and the Holy Spirit

