



A REASON TO
HOPE

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP SHELTON J. FABRE



November 1, 2016 (All Saints Day)

To the people of God of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux:

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 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shelton J. Fabre".

Most Rev. Shelton J. Fabre

Bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux



A PASTORAL LETTER: WHY AND WHY NOW?

October 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 of 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 importantly, *it has given me a reason to hope*.



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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 importantly 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.