

Advent Message 2017

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

I invite you to begin the Advent season with the words of Psalm 85: 10-11: "Near indeed is salvation for the loyal; prosperity will fill our land. Love and truth will meet. Justice and peace will kiss."

On different occasions we pray this psalm, but during the preparation of Christmas, it always takes a new meaning: expressing a desire that becomes reality in our personal life and for all humanity.

A year of Jubilee

With the first Sunday of Advent we begin a new liturgical season that we wish to celebrate at the same time as the Jubilee Year of our Diocese commemorating 60 years of its existence. We want to spend this year as a time of grace with the motto: *Encounter with Christ, encounter with each other*; an encounter, as the Gospel says, that always generates positive fruits of conversion and good works.

Pope Francis says so: "An encounter with Jesus gives us joy and new hope, it leads us, even in times of trial and difficulties to a deeper encounter ... unfortunately we are used to a culture of indifference... but we have to work and ask for the grace to build a 'culture of encounter'... that returns to each person their dignity as a children of God".

"Jesus shows us the way: not just by seeing, but looking, not just hearing, but listening, not just passing by, but stopping, not just saying" what a shame, poor person" but reaching out to him, letting compassion fill your heart" (Pope Francis, *Homily*, 13-9-2016).

In this year of Jubilee, let us foster the 'culture of encounter'. To achieve this we have to leave our comfort zones and reach out to our brothers and sisters in their concrete situations. Pope Francis says: "In the Gospel we read that Jesus invites his disciples to go forth. It is not a useless walk of the Lord, while he walks, he encounters, when he encounters, he draws nearer and when he draws nearer, he speaks, when he speaks, he touches with his power and when he touches, he heals and saves.

Go forth into an encounter, staying a while with affection with the person and without fear. (cf. Francisco, *Apostolic Visit in Colombia, 7-10 Sept. 2017*)

Let us reach out to our brothers and sisters who live in the "existential peripheries" of the different social situations. In each of the six islands of our Diocese, we can identify some conditions of loneliness, material and spiritual poverty, indifference, individualism and even discrimination. Our task as disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ is to be able to go forth, creating a visit and an encounter with each other especially with those in need. Let us encourage each other in our parishes and pastoral groups, especially in these seasons of Christmas, Lent and Easter, promoting the beautiful custom of blessing family homes.

A Jubilee year to promote unity among priests, religious and laity.

In our clergy conference, as a pastoral goal for the Jubilee year we wish to promote unity among priests, religious and laity. But in order to achieve unity, we must prepare the ground and sow the seed of dialogue and trust, approaching each other in the spirit of brotherhood.

It is necessary to create activities that foster sharing and celebrating our faith as a family, our friendship as a group and our unity as a parish community.

As a priority to promote unity, we wish to render the laity the place they deserve as having the biggest membership in the Church, and because they have an important mission to fulfill for the sanctification of the world, through the testimony of their lives (see *Lumen Gentium 31*). Pope Francis tells us that "hope in Latin America and the Caribbean passes through the hearts, minds and arms of the laity!"

In a particular way, let us promote the *Family Apostolate and Youth Ministry* with formation programs for parents like a school for parents, encouraging attendance in the Sunday Eucharistic celebrations with their families and organizing visits to the families living in the parishes.

The year 2018 will be a year dedicated to the youth due to the coming Synod of Bishops with the theme: *Youth, faith and vocational discernment*; It will be a year of preparation for the World Youth Day that will take place in Panama, in January 2019.

The Diocesan Commission on Youth Ministry has initiated a formation program for our youth, taking into account the concrete realities of the family and youth in each island. To achieve this, I suggest that every priest of the parish and all catechists must encourage the children and young people who have been confirmed and those still preparing to be confirmed, to continue and persevere in coming together to the Sunday Eucharistic celebrations.

I hope that in each parish will emerge youth groups that can share the Word of God and organize cultural and sports activities.

A Jubilee year for pastoral conversion and permanent mission

One of the important points for us to cultivate the seed of unity and harvest its fruits is called "pastoral conversion", which is a grace of the Holy Spirit to renew our way of evangelizing. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* explains what pastoral conversion means: "make sure that all our structures become more missionary, so that pastoral work in all its aspects and instances becomes more open in such a way as to make all the pastoral workers in a constant attitude of going forth, reaching out and evokes positive reactions from those whom Jesus gathers in his name"(EG27).

Among the goals in our Diocesan Pastoral Plan says: "Let the Word of God encourage and motivate all our pastoral activities and parish life: meetings, preaching, catechesis, enthronement of the Bible at schools and family homes."

I request the School Board, teachers and students of our Catholic Schools in a particular way, to take this goal into account because it is a very important aspect for the young people of the Church.

I conclude this message by praying to our mother Mary to be with us during this Jubilee year and bring us to our encounter with her Son Jesus and with each other:

"Mother Mary, Immaculate Conception,
humble servant of the Lord and Mother of the Church,
intercede for our bishop, our priests and religious
and all the faithful, so that we may always remain united to your Son Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Your servant in Jesus and Mary,

+ Luis A. Secco, SDB
Bishop of Willemstad