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ADVENT PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
To be READ at all Masses in the Diocese and, if desired also copied for distribution

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write to you on this Third Sunday of Advent when the theme of JOY is central to the Liturgy: Gaudete!, Rejoice! Today we are encouraged to be joyful at the coming of the Lord! We are to welcome his presence and to share that closeness of the Lord with others. But who are the 'others' we are speaking about?

First of all, of course, we think of our families and the sacred duty they have to pass on their faith in Jesus Christ. Alongside our children and teenagers, we think also of our young people, our young married couples and our elderly relatives. Then further afield there are also our extended families and neighbours, and especially those who have ceased walking along the Road of Faith with us, for all sorts of reasons. Further, our diocesan family now has fellow Catholics from many different cultures. They also enrich and complement our Diocese. How do we reach out especially to them?

Our parishes and families and Catholic schools do so much to pass on the Faith; yet, we are still a very lapsed family. A good number still go to Mass regularly, but these active Catholics represent less than a fifth of our total Catholic population in the diocese. Further, though going to Mass isn't the only way of demonstrating and witnessing to our Catholic Faith, it is the minimum we can do to show our love for the Lord! So such a statistic does matter, and we need to ask ourselves very seriously what has gone wrong? Why is the Gospel no longer Good News for so many?

Perhaps the reasons for this are many and we can speculate about a few of them. But one big reason why our people lapse could be due to the fact that we, as a Catholic People, have lost, or are losing, our sense of mission. If we really believe in our Catholic Faith, and really seek to love the Lord above all things, then what is stopping us from telling others about Jesus, our Lord?

Rather than agonising for ever as to the reasons why, I am writing to invite you today, on this day dedicated to Joy in the Lord, to join me in an initiative to strengthen and confirm us all in the way we share our Faith.

As you know, I deeply value the commitment and devotion to be found everywhere in our Diocese. But since becoming your Bishop I have been thinking about more effective ways we can build on our existing strengths and respond to the challenges of our busy and confusing world. And if we are to be authentic teachers of faith we must renew and deepen our understanding of what it means for us to be disciples – and even apostles - of Jesus.

It seems to me that one effective and practical way to do this is to establish a School of Catechists where some among us can be properly trained to become persuasive and authentic 'echoes' of Our Lord who commands us to "Go Out and Make Disciples".

Our goal would be to have, in every parish of the diocese, a team of properly trained catechists who would be able to animate others to spread and live the Faith more fully. Our journey of Faith, after all, never comes to an end!

We live in challenging times and in these days our communities and parishes need kind, loving and generous witnesses to Faith. First, we need to treasure our Catholic Schools and build upon their strengths, but we also need to develop and enthuse not only our fellow active parishioners, but also reach out to the people who have lost confidence in the Church and bring them back to the full embrace of our Community. We all have friends and family members who have drifted from practice of their Faith and who may simply be in need of encouragement, welcome or healing, in order to 'Come Home' to the Church.

The Recent *Ad Limina* visit of the Scottish Bishops to Rome, to the 'threshold of the Apostles', was an opportunity to consider and converse with Pope Francis and others about how best to nurture, encourage and respond to the challenges that face our Catholic faithful in Scotland. Pope Francis is passionate about having Missionary Disciples in every parish and in fact he calls all Catholics to take seriously the promises of their baptism and confirmation.

As a beginning, after prayer and reflection, in collaboration with my brother priests and lay people I have decided to convene a Conference on Catechesis on Saturday, 12th January 2019, where we can gather to pray, discern and plan how to renew and grow in our Christian life together. I ask you to support this endeavour, for it is only by all working together - lay people, sisters, priests, deacons and Bishop - that we can grow in service of The Kingdom of God.

This Conference, held at our Diocesan Centre, will involve existing Catechists in our parishes and those who might aspire to become trained as Catechists. It is my hope that each Parish will nominate at least two attendees and that all of us will gather in openness and generosity of spirit. Further, we pray that this Conference will be a springboard to developing more consistent faith formation opportunities that will support a lived and lively approach to Christian life, an ongoing faithful support for families and young people negotiating and responding to the challenges of modern living, and also an approach to welcome and outreach to our families and friends who for a variety of reasons may have become distanced, hurt or disillusioned with an active commitment to our diocesan family. Let us begin this new work with a spirit of hope and optimism, welcome and forgiveness, trusting that God will bless our efforts and intentions.

Finally, next year will be a Year of Re-Evangelisation in our local Church. Two special events will form bookends, as it were, to the Year. In Eastertide there will be a mini three-day Eucharistic Congress centred on the Cathedral in Dundee, but with celebrations and adoration of the Blessed Eucharist around the diocese. In the Month of October we shall celebrate a special Month of Mission. This month will be marked by a visit to our Diocese of the Holy Relics of St Therese of Lisieux, the 'Little Flower' and Patroness of the Missions, over several days. We pray that the month of October next year will be a great time of renewal and Mission.

There will be much more news about all these initiatives in the months to come. In the meantime may the remainder of Advent be for you a time of anticipation and joy and may you all have a most Blessed Christmas.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephen Robson".

+ Stephen Robson
Bishop of Dunkeld