



**Chrism Mass Homily**  
**Most Reverend George Leo Thomas**  
**Bishop of Helena**  
**April 10, 2014**

In May 2007, as the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean gathered in the city of Aparecida, Brazil for an important two-week assembly, the Church of Latin America was at a critical crossroads, facing urgent problems both from within and outside her walls. Church leaders were witnessing significant numbers of Catholics departing for Pentecostal Churches. Drug trafficking was effecting nearly every family. There was an ever-growing chasm between rich and poor, and atheism and secularism were on the rise across the whole continent.

“As pastors of the Church,” the Bishops wrote, “we wish to walk alongside our people at this challenging time, so as to inspire them always with hope and comfort.”

The Aparecida Document was largely the work of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina—the future Pope Francis. It contains a vision born of his *in vivo* pastoral experience as shepherd and bishop, as priest and religious superior, and as missionary among the poor.

Aparecida drew its force from the power of the Gospel, from the teachings of Vatican II, and from the real life experiences of a diocesan bishop. It was a powerful prescription for treating the spiritual malaise coursing through the body of the Latin America Church.

In recent months, it has become increasingly clear that Aparecida is the source document and framework for the Pope’s first Pastoral Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*—the Joy of the Gospel.

Taken together, these companion documents give us a glimpse into the future of the wider Church, a foretaste of things to come, and a vehicle for local Churches like our own to forge a path into the future, a path that will aid us in living out our commitment as joyful, faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

On this Chrism Day, 2014, it is accurate to say that the Church of Helena is also at a critical crossroads. We are facing perhaps the most serious crisis in our century-old history, a crisis that stems from broken trust, public scandal, ill-advised decisions, shattered lives, and wounded hearts.

During the past 32 months, I have been personally consoled by the words of the famous Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, when she wrote: “If we could see that everything, even tragedy, is a gift in disguise, we would then find the best way to nourish our soul.” A blessing in disguise is indeed hard to come by when the waves of a tempestuous sea are buffeting the ship. Still, I believe that her observations are sage and accurate.

Chrism Day, 2014, is the time and the moment to recall, reclaim, and renew our deepest identity as

disciples of Jesus Christ, the Divine Physician and Healer of souls.

The late Archbishop Oscar Romero once counseled his people, “It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view, for the kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.”

Chrism Day 2014 is just such a time: time to step back, to take a deep breath, and to take the long view.

To the entire community gathered at Chrism Liturgy, lay, ordained, religious, I say this to you: We have been washed in the waters of Baptism, and anointed in the Chrism of Salvation. Our Baptism gives us a shared spiritual DNA, a common purpose, a common love, and a common destiny.

Chrism Day helps us to remember our most fundamental identity as beloved sons and daughters of God, a people commissioned to be heralds of that Good News of Salvation. Aparecida and *Evangelii Gaudium* speak clearly and loudly to our diocesan Church.

First and foremost, and in spite of our travails, we are to be a missionary Church, the bearer of Good News for others, a Church whose very heart is open wide to new generations of Catholics. We are to feed others copiously on Word, Sacrament, and lavish them with words of encouragement, compassion and hope.

A Church which becomes self-enclosed, self-referential, soon becomes a Church that is diseased and eventually immobilized. In the words of Pope Francis, “A Church that merely protects its small flock, or gives all or most of its attention to its faithful clientele, is a Church that soon becomes sick.”

In the face of our travails, we cannot afford to wallow in self-pity, or become immobilized by financial hardships or limitations. We are already that poor Church that Pope Francis describes with so much affection, and we have gotten there with little effort!

Following the vision of Pope Francis, we must stand in the ready to dispense the medicine of mercy with careless abandon, and be agents of healing and reconciliation. As we continue to address the pressing issues of our day, I hold that the values of mercy, reconciliation, transparency, and humility will serve us far better than prolonged litigation and pugnacity. Healing and reconciliation are the Church’s strong suit.

Nor are we to forsake our special solidarity with the poor and suffering, at home in mission lands. Suffering can harden the heart and make it cynical, or through the light of the Gospel, it can make us more compassionate and attentive to the needs of the poor. We must opt for the latter for the Diocese of Helena.

April, 2014

For the laity gathered here, Chrism Mass is a time to recall your commission to be the leaven of God's love in society, or in the words of Pope Francis, "to create and to sow hope, to proclaim the faith, not from a pulpit, but from your everyday life."

Pope Pius XII once wrote, "You, the laity, are 'on the front lines,'" and charged to carry the Gospel into culture and community. I challenge you to learn and to make your own the values of Catholic Social Teaching.

I also ask you to never underestimate your power to evangelize others by the force of your example and through personal invitations to "come and see." You are essential to the life and mission of the Church.

To our Deacon Community, the foundation of your ministry is to be servant of all, with a preferential option for the poor. Your ministry of Word and service at the Altar are to result in "applied compassion," both in the parish and beyond the parish boundaries and your personal comfort zone. You are to be the "eyes, ears of the bishop," always asking, "Who is not at the table?" and "How can we include them in mission and ministry?" Please know how deeply valued your diaconal ministry is in this local Church.

Religious women and men, you offer depth, color, and texture to the Diocesan Church through your prayerful presence and by living out the great evangelical counsels. You serve this Church through a wide variety of ministries, including chaplaincy and pastoral work, administration, archives management, liturgy, nursing and teaching, just to name a few. Your communities are directly responsible for establishing the social infrastructure in most Dioceses, including our own, especially through the founding of schools, hospitals, and social services. You continue to serve in season and out of season, and in ways that are often unsung and acknowledged. We cannot find words to adequately convey our gratitude.

To my brother priests, please know how deeply loved you are by me and by our people. You are essential to the life of the Church, and you bless this Diocese with an astounding array of gifts and talents. You are my beloved brothers and closest collaborators, indispensable to my ministry as pastor and shepherd.

At the same time, you have suffered greatly in recent months under the lens of public scrutiny, cynicism, and suspicion.

Yes, we have been chastened and brought low. But we also share by virtue of our vocation in the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and we labor under the weight of the Cross. This is part of gospel living, and the cost of discipleship.

In the words of St. Paul, "*We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not despairing, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying about in the body of the dying Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.*" (2Cor. 4:9)

The present moment gives us cause to rededicate ourselves to integrity of life, clarity of purpose, and purity

of heart, and to proclaim with our lives our sincere sorrow for those whose lives and very souls have been damaged by the failings of our brothers.

None of this will be possible, of course, without being a spiritually rich and prayerful presbyterate—the kind our people both desire and deserve.

I ask you to renew your commitment to prayer, and develop a strong sense of "downward mobility," rooting deeply in your respective communities. Have not only the heart of the Shepherd, but also "the smell of the sheep."

Pope Francis insists on a priestly ministry that takes us beyond the confines of the office and the security of the sacristy, into the company of our people, especially those on the margins of life.

*Evangelii Gaudium* and *Aparecida* envision local Churches where the Gospel of Joy is awakened in the hearts of every believer, regardless of their state in life. They inspire us to be renewed in Spirit, and to plan for a future full of hope! Working together, we envision:

- Good preaching and prayerfully prepared liturgy in all our parishes;
- Lively parishes that are faithful and credible, nourished daily on the Word of God and the Eucharist;
- Discipleship lived with joy and conviction, so every person is a missionary of Jesus Christ;
- The promotion of a mature laity in their mission of making visible the Kingdom of God;
- A Church that impels the active participation of women in society and in the Church;
- Accompanying the youth in their formation and search for identity, vocation and mission;
- Interfaith and ecumenical dialogue in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect;
- The diocese as a model of reconciliation, justice and peace;
- A community that embraces the poor and vulnerable and welcomes them at the Table of the Lord.

Let this Chrism Day be a time of renewal, rededication, replenishment, rejoicing, and holy remembering—remembering that we have been Baptized in the Spirit and anointed with the Chrism of Salvation.

We move into the future confidently and unafraid. For we walk in the presence of the Risen Lord, commissioned to preach and teach in the Name of the One who is ever in our midst "as one who serves."

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My prayers for you this Easter Season,



+ Bishop Leo Roman