



Christmas Message 2023

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Great will be his authority, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.” (Isaiah 9:5-6)

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

For the early Christians, hope marked everything. In the readings on Christmas Day, one can almost feel the relief that the long-awaited Messiah is finally here. It is an affirmation that what they had believed and hoped for all those years is indeed true. Emmanuel – God with us – is born!

Christian hope is not an ancient or fleeting moment, but one which repeats itself many times throughout our lives. It is the belief that Jesus is who he says he is, and “the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1817). Jesus has come into our broken world and entered our wounded humanity – true God and true man – as an infant totally dependent on human love. And he continues to do so even today – especially in the Eucharist, under the form of bread to be received in love into our human flesh – frail, fragile, vulnerable. He comes as complete gift. Through this, hope is constantly born anew.

It is not always easy to hope, especially when we are confronted with the many challenges facing our world today. Yet the Holy Father tells us, “Take courage, do not lose confidence, do not lose hope, do not think that to love is a waste of time! Tonight, love has conquered fear, new hope has arrived, God’s kindly light has overcome the darkness of human arrogance. Mankind, God loves you; for your sake he became man. You are no longer alone!” (Pope Francis, Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, December 24, 2019) This is the hope the world desperately needs, the hope that changes everything! The answer to the confusion that plagues our world, manifesting itself in anxiety, depression, fear, unrest, and uncertainty about the most fundamental truths about human dignity – is Jesus.

Over the past year we have seen many signs of hope throughout our diocese, as people continue to encounter Jesus in powerful ways. We are experiencing a new and deepening desire for mission at our mother church, the Cathedral, and throughout the parishes of the diocese. Growing numbers of people, including young families, students, newcomers and those who are making their way back to the Church are filling the pews. Outreach ministries continue to grow, serving the poor and the marginalized. Lay apostolates are flourishing, and leaders are coming forward to contribute to the spiritual vitality of the Church. Eucharistic Adoration is offered throughout the diocese and even daily in some parishes. Our Saint John Regional Mission on November 27-29 at the Cathedral and livestreamed for those outside of the Saint John region was a powerful experience of the Lord’s

presence through the Sacraments and prayer. Our parish and diocesan administrative staff and leadership teams have been investing in more meaningful relationships, gathering to support one another in work and prayer and seeking the Lord's vision. Giving thanks for these encounters with the living God, I encourage you to continue offering even more opportunities for him to move in power.

To hope is to spread fresh straw in the mangers of our hearts, preparing and opening our hearts to be ready to welcome the infant Jesus with the expectant and certain faith that he will come. He finds in our humble offering the perfect place to lay his head. And by his very presence, he transforms, elevates and makes new even the most cold and barren hearts. Jesus longs to be born in our lives, to be cradled, embraced and welcomed. When we say yes to all he has to offer, our lives will never be the same.

This Christmas take a step towards Jesus. Open your heart to the hope he promises. Come as you are, with whatever burdens the trials of life have inflicted upon you, and "receive the grace of the hope that does not disappoint." (Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi, April 4, 2021).

May the message of Christmas fill your heart with eternal hope, as we celebrate the birth of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christian Riesbeck".

✠ Christian Riesbeck, CC
Bishop of Saint John

December 18, 2023