

SUMMARY OF PASTORAL LETTERS

Archbishop-Designate Donald W. Wuerl

Archbishop-designate Donald W. Wuerl was ordained a bishop in Rome by Pope John Paul II on the Feast of the Epiphany, 1986 and was installed as the 11th bishop of Pittsburgh on February 12, 1988.

It is one of the principal duties of a bishop to teach in a positive, effective, consistent and forthright manner the eternal truths of the faith in a specific place and at a particular time in the life of God's people. He discharges that duty for one reason – that all women and men of good will can respond to God's invitation to a relationship of love and friendship. Towards this end, a summary of his pastoral letters is below.

New Beginnings in a Long Walk Together

The first pastoral letter of Bishop Wuerl to the clergy, religious and lay people of the Church of Pittsburgh was issued on September 28, 1988. In this critical pastoral in shaping the future of the Catholic Church of Pittsburgh, Bishop Wuerl addressed the economic difficulties the diocese faced in its parishes and schools, the looming shortage of personnel and the impact of a declining and aging area population. He called for a diocesan-wide consultation process to determine future directions that would focus on evaluation of the data and statistics on the diocese, a course of action, and implementation. “If we keep faith, if we work together, if we trust in God's provident plan for us and the unfolding of God's Kingdom in our midst,” Bishop Wuerl wrote, “then we have every reason to face the future with confidence and joy.”

Renew the Face of the Earth

Issued in September 1989, in *Renew the Face of the Earth*, Bishop Wuerl called for a diocesan-wide focus on spiritual renewal and revitalization: “to live each day more closely united to Christ in his death and resurrection.” He wrote of renewal based on the sacraments, Christian social action, prayer, Scripture and active participation in the Sacred Liturgy. The Bishop called for a renewal that will touch every parish and every person in the diocese. The Bishop also announced the formation of a Parish Self-Study Task Force to continue the process of renewal and revitalization outlined in *New Beginnings*. “We live our daily lives in the old familiar trials, weaknesses and crosses,” Bishop Wuerl wrote. “But in Christ we also know that we can find the power of the Spirit to ‘renew the face of the earth’ beginning with our own heart.”

Respect for Life

Issued on September 27, 1989, in *Respect for Life*, Bishop Wuerl taught that belief in the sanctity and dignity of human life is rooted in the word of God and the teachings of Christ. That belief, the most fundamental of human rights, covers a whole range of issues in our day, from care for the poor to how we treat the elderly. Yet, the focus must always turn to the question of abortion, which he described as the “social and moral issue of our age.” While rejecting any resort to violence to protest the legalization of abortion, and acknowledging the prejudice Catholics may face in being a voice for life, the “right of the state to protect that innocent life by law must be established and defended.” There cannot be a truly human society “that would attempt to separate morality from law, or God from the collective expression of our most cherished values.”

Love and Sexuality

In the May 1992 pastoral letter addressed specifically to the young people of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Bishop Wuerl wrote of the moral life as Jesus' way of life. He called for an understanding of Christian love that is “vibrant, strong and able to change everything,” the kind of love “meant to endure a lifetime.” Stressing that sexuality is expressed in that enduring love that is always open to new life, the bishop warned against the clichés of modernity that tell young people that they cannot live moral lives. Promising the compassion of the Church to HIV/AIDS victims, he warned the young against reducing moral choices to “safe sex” practices that are not safe and to a lifestyle that can lead to tragedy. “We are able to live chaste lives because the love of God is always available to us,” the Bishop wrote, “a free and forgiving love.”

Future Directions

In the September 1993 pastoral letter *Future Directions*, Bishop Wuerl provided a detailed review of what had been accomplished since his inaugural pastoral and an outline for true spiritual renewal in the years ahead. "Because a parish must be a vital, loving, caring faith community," he wrote, "we have devoted much time, energy, talent and love in reorganizing and revitalizing the parishes of this diocese." After reviewing the state of the diocese as reported to the Holy Father in the five-year ad limina report, Bishop Wuerl provided a charter for the future of the Church of Pittsburgh. Concluding with a call for unity, Bishop Wuerl wrote "when all else is said and done, this unity will proclaim before God and ourselves our true and abiding success in establishing the beginning of the Kingdom of God unfolding in our world."

The Great Jubilee

In February 1995, Bishop Wuerl issued a pastoral letter on *The Great Jubilee* and the preparation of the Diocese of Pittsburgh for the celebration of the new millennium in the year 2000. Bishop Wuerl placed that celebration within the context of the diocesan-wide call for spiritual renewal and revitalization: "Six years ago we initiated reorganization involving all parishes throughout this local Church. The ultimate goal of this challenging process was to put our house in order so that we could focus with enthusiasm on the primary task of growing closer to Christ." Pointing to the need for healing and the forgiveness of sins, Bishop Wuerl announced that for the year 1995, "we will make an effort as an entire diocesan family to concentrate on reconciliation and sacramental confession that brings about true, enduring spiritual renewal."

Confronting Racism Today

On the feast of Pentecost, May 26, 1996, Bishop Wuerl issued the pastoral letter, *Confronting Racism Today*. The pastoral letter was meant to "be a word of encouragement in our effort to work together against the evil of racism that has long diminished our society, and continues to do so." Bishop Wuerl taught that "each person should be seen in his or her uniqueness" and that, among Christians, the call to unity and solidarity means that "racism merits even stronger condemnation." Citing local ecumenical, interfaith and diocesan efforts addressing racism, Bishop Wuerl wrote that "we can do no better this Pentecost season than to open our hearts to the grace of God's Spirit to help us remove any traces of racism and allow the love of God to work in each of us in a way that manifests our new life together in Christ."

Speaking the Truth in Love: Christian Discourse Within the Church

Issued on September 14, 1997, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Christian Discourse Within the Church* was Bishop Wuerl's clear statement on how decisions are made within the Church and how each must take parting that discourse. Christian discourse, Bishop Wuerl wrote, is rooted in truth and trust. "Christians must not only speak the truth but must also do so in love (Ephesians 4:15). It is not enough that we know or believe something to be true. We must express that truth in charity, with respect for others so that the bonds between us can be strengthened in building up the Church of Christ." Reflecting on what we communicate and how we communicate within the Church, Bishop Wuerl stated that "we accept decisions for the good of the whole Church, even if at times individuals are saddened by these very difficult choices."

Right and Wrong

In a pastoral letter dated September 14, 1998, Bishop Wuerl wrote directly to the youth of Pittsburgh on personal moral conduct, Bishop Wuerl reminded them that despite what they might hear on television or be told by popular culture, "moral conduct is determined by God's law, not public opinion polls." Concerned that the publicity surrounding the scandal involving President William Clinton might impact on young people's attitudes, Bishop Wuerl reviewed the basic principles of Catholic moral teaching and that morality "is another word for life a good, full, decent life according to right choices." Bishop Wuerl told the young that when "you look into your heart ask God to help you see all that is truly good there. Open your heart to God's word and Jesus' love so that you might always walk before God and others as a

moral, truthful person.”

To Walk In The Footsteps of Jesus

In September 1998, Bishop Wuerl issued *To Walk in the Footsteps of Jesus*. The purpose of this pastoral letter was vocations to the priesthood, “the call from God that must not go unheard or unheeded.” All baptized are called to build up the Church of Christ Bishop Wuerl explained, yet, the sacrament of Holy Orders, “allows one to participate in Christ’s mission in a unique way.” Bishop Wuerl wrote: “In the Church, and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd, authoritatively proclaiming his word, repeating his acts of forgiveness and his offer of salvation, particularly in baptism, penance and the Eucharist.” Requesting that every parish establish a vocation council, Bishop Wuerl explained that the encouragement of vocations “is the work of the whole ecclesial community.”

Reconciliation and The Sacrament of Penance

In preparation for the Great Jubilee 2000, Bishop Wuerl wrote in January 1999 of the need for sacramental reconciliation, how it can be found, and introduced a yearlong, diocesan-wide program to instruct and encourage the faithful in the sacrament of penance. “In the sacrament of penance,” Bishop Wuerl taught, “the sinner comes before Christ in his Church in the person of the priest who hears the sin, imposes a penance and absolves the sinner in the name and power of Christ.” Combining catechesis, Lenten homilies, review of schedules for reception of the sacrament of penance, deanery wide reconciliation services with “reconciliation cross,” and a personal invitation from pastors, Bishop Wuerl reminded the faithful “the deepest spiritual joy each of us can sense is the freedom from whatever would separate us from God.”

God’s Good Gift of Life

On September 14, 1999, Bishop Wuerl issued a pastoral letter on the Gift of Life teaching that “whatever else we attempt to do to make this world a better place must start with a profound respect for human life.” Reviewing the growing disregard for human life and the culture of death they have engendered, Bishop Wuerl also wrote of today’s signs of an “improving respect for life”: that more are defining themselves as pro-life, while young people “are speaking out for life without hesitation or apology.” Outlining the teaching of the Church on abortion, assisted suicide and euthanasia, end of life decisions, human cloning and genetic technology, and capital punishment, Bishop Wuerl asked “that we join together in a renewed commitment to work and pray more fervently for the building up of a civilization of love in our midst.”

Millennium Reflection: What It Means To Be A Catholic

Issued on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception at the eve of the new millennium, in this pastoral letter Bishop Wuerl taught that membership in the Church is membership in Christ, drawing life and truth from him. Additionally, of all the things that identify a Catholic, “one of the most significant is the role of the magisterium or teaching office of the Church and the spiritual power of the Church in the person of the pope and the bishops who teach with Christ’s authority to bind conscience.” In a panoramic presentation of fundamental Catholic ecclesiology, Bishop Wuerl outlined the basic teachings of Christ as reflected in the teachings of the Church, and called Catholics to “recognize that Christ lives in his new Body, the Church,” and to “a deep personal faith that Jesus is the living Lord of history and our Savior.”

Post-Abortion Reconciliation and Healing

On April 23, 2000, Bishop Wuerl issued a statement calling the Church of Pittsburgh to an awareness of the reconciliation and healing needed for those who have undergone abortions. “We must never forget the child whose life is lost to abortion,” Bishop Wuerl wrote, but at “the same time we must recognize and address the very real need of women to find healing after an abortion experience.” Endorsing in particular the outreach of Project Rachel and Rachel’s Vineyard, Bishop Wuerl stated that this outreach is required from “every Christian responding with compassion and prayer for all people hurting from abortion.” The Bishop wrote that it “is important to let those suffering in silence know that they are not alone and that

there is compassionate help available” so that they may begin on the road to reconciliation and healing.

God’s House and His People

In this November 2000 letter, Bishop Wuerl reminded the clergy, religious and laity of the Diocese of Pittsburgh that in regard to our church structures, “what needs to be preserved is not a building, no matter how beautiful or historical it might be, but rather the living faith, past, present and future.” Addressing the specific case of St. Nicholas church building, part of the Croatian parish of St. Nicholas, Bishop Wuerl outlined the consultation process involved. Urging unity particularly in hard times, Bishop Wuerl wrote that such unity “bears witness to our ability to make difficult but necessary decisions and, above all, to our commitment to work quietly, calmly, peacefully and lovingly together in building and extending the Church of God. That Church is not built with stones and mortar, but in the love and faith of its people.”

To Heal, Restore and Renew

Immediately after the meeting in Dallas in June 2002 of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to address the tragedy of clergy sexual misconduct Bishop Wuerl issued a pastoral letter to the Church of Pittsburgh. Bishop Wuerl noted that “some who were called to serve as an icon of Christ and who were ordained to be his presence in the midst of the community have failed their ordination promises.” Calling on the Church of Pittsburgh to “work to heal what is wounded,” Bishop Wuerl outlined how the bishops had responded to the clergy sexual misconduct crisis, and what will take place in the future so that “we can move into the future fully committed to our task to live Christ.” Bishop Wuerl explained that, “belief sees beyond the failure of a few men and holds fast to the mystery of God’s goodness at work in this world.”

The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church

To begin the International Year of the Eucharist (October 2004-October 2005) in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, Bishop Wuerl issued a pastoral letter on September 3, 2004, the same day as *Envisioning Ministry for the Future*. Reminding the faithful that participation in the Sunday Eucharist “is not incidental to the life of the Church,” Bishop Wuerl wrote that “we should be attentive to our own devout participation” at Mass and use see this year as a time of “a renewal of our own personal fervor in devotion to the Eucharist.” Bishop Wuerl wrote that the International Year of the Eucharist should not only be a time of increased devotion, but lead us to “let the energizing spirit of the Eucharist so fill us that we become evangelists as were the first disciples of Jesus – people intent on sharing the Good News with others.”

Envisioning Ministry for the Future

Launching a diocesan wide consultation of how effective ministry can be maintained in an age of declining number of priests, on September 3, 2004, Bishop Wuerl issued the pastoral letter, *Envisioning Ministry for the Future*. Emphasizing the different roles within the Church, and the vital importance of the priest who is “*in persona Christi*,” Bishop Wuerl wrote that “what is needed now is a recommitment by lay faithful, religious and ordained ministers to work together in order that qualified and effective ministry is guaranteed.” Bishop Wuerl stated that “less priests does not mean there has to be less ministry,” and that the consultation recognizes that “the building up of God’s kingdom on earth, promoting effective and qualified ministry, sustaining healthy and vibrant parishes is the work of the entire People of God.”

***Evangelium Vitae*: A 10th Anniversary Reflection on Stem Cell Research**

In February 2002, Bishop Wuerl issued a pastoral letter addressing the growing public issue of embryonic stem cell research. Decrying what Pope John Paul II had called a “culture of death” that “professes that human life, in its most vulnerable forms, can be killed for the benefit of the more powerful,” Bishop Wuerl explained embryonic stem cell research and the moral issues at stake. Differentiating between that and legitimate adult stem cell research, Bishop Wuerl wrote, “when we put on sterilized gloves and work with technologically advanced equipment we do not take on the mantle of arbiter of human life.” Reflecting on the papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Bishop Wuerl concluded that “we are not free to stand by and watch others formulate a whole new culture in which human life is viewed basically as a commodity.”