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'God puts His trust in people'

Dear Friends in Christ of the Archdiocese of Baltimore,

The Christmas message is not only a celebration of the Birth of Christ, it is also a sign of hope in our history and in our lives. The recurring mystery of this message is the never-ending love of God as dramatically revealed in the person of Jesus.

The biblical passage on the Birth of Jesus tells us that the shepherds were "living in the fields," and keeping "night watch" over the flocks. The message is clear. The shepherds were watching, waiting, living in darkness, without a solution to their problems, without salvation for their lives.

Today, we also live in a troubled, often turbulent, and anxious time. Hunger, conflict, insecurity, and violence dominate our darkness, and we, too, watch and wait as did the shepherds with their flocks.

And out of this continuing darkness still comes the Lord's angel saying, "You have nothing to fear. I come to proclaim joy," tidings to be "shared by the whole people."

In this Christmas proclamation, God puts His trust in people. He speaks first to the shepherds in the fields, and then He focuses on Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. It is through human beings that God gave His message, and that is why, as people, we have reason to hope. By appearing to the shepherds, God tells us that He accepts all people, the whole human race. By using people to reveal His special lesson of hope, He puts His trust in us.

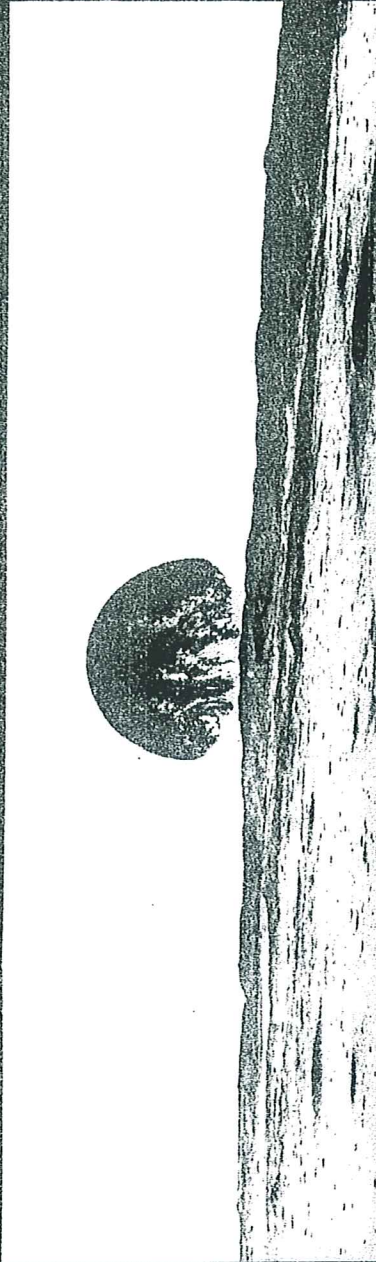
This hope that we reach for and offer to each other is Jesus Christ: it is His life—healing the lame, multiplying the loaves and fishes to feed the hungry, giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf; it is in His words, "I am the light of the world; no follower of mine shall ever walk in darkness."

Hope is a mystery. It does not easily lend itself to logic. It is not a conviction based on clear data, nor the belief that everything is all right. The hope that we receive and share in this Christmas mystery is a belief that Jesus is alive in us, and this belief enables us to bring light where there is darkness.

The hope of which we speak exists not solely in us as individuals. It is a communal gift, more in our midst as the family of man. We must think of sharing this hope. The biblical passage speaks of a message "to be shared by the whole people." Interdependence, the mutuality of our lives, expresses a perhaps more critical and larger meaning of Christmas at this stage in our history.

For it is only through greater understanding of how we each affect the other—as individuals, as religious institutions, as nations—that we can bring to reality the message of Christ as the light of hope in the modern world. Without the hope which Christmas brings to us each year, we might not have the courage to confront our dilemmas; and without the wisdom to understand our mutual dependence on the other, we human beings cannot devise solutions to those dilemmas.

Nowhere is this interdependence more clearly illustrated than the



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juxtaposition on the world scene of issues such as hunger, energy, and inflation; issues which relate one to another, illustrating the needs of both rich and poor, developed and developing nations. How can we solve these worldwide crises without a basic acknowledgement that our food and our natural resources and our intellectual capacities must be shared "by the whole people"? In the darkness which these crises represent, we have need for light; we continue to hope, and we must grasp the interdependence of our needs and our solutions.

If we are to create and sustain the belief in our interdependence upon one another, we must recognize that it will not "just happen." It needs a climate and a medium which foster and support the very possibility. It needs an atmosphere of hope. It needs the conviction that in our own time we might be men and women who hope, and men and women who are hope-filled.

In the time that I have been your archbishop, I have been encouraged in my hope by an awareness of the depth of resources in the Church of Baltimore, especially among the men and women religious and exceptional lay leaders. Cardinal Shehan during his years of leadership has created a warm open atmosphere wherein the talents of all can contribute to the work of Christ. The Church of Baltimore ought to be especially qualified, then, to be a sign of hope, a beacon of light.

On Christmas Eve, Pope Paul will officially open the Holy Year, proclaimed as a time of reconciliation among the whole people. The hope which is ours because of the Christmas Feast calls all of us to be healed, to be at peace despite our diversity and our differences.

In the work of reconciliation, we must realize that we live in a mutually

dependent world and time. It is crucial for us to reach out to our brothers and sisters in other Christian churches, and in the Jewish community, as well as to reiterate our common origins, our common geography, and the common threads that bind all mankind together in the fatherhood of God. All this is the harmony within and without and with God that Christmas once again begins and that the Holy Year symbolizes.

This Christmas season, I thank you for giving me a renewed sense of hope. I remember especially your generous responses to the world crises which we have experienced in the past months. I also remember the work of the Pastoral Council—representative of the whole People of God—and all collegial bodies in the Archdiocese. I am hopeful because I see many committed people planning and working for the mission of the Church.

It is this feeling of hopefulness that I will bring to the Christmas Liturgy which I shall celebrate with the elderly guests at Stella Maris Hospice on Christmas Eve, with the people who will worship in the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen at midnight, and on Christmas morning with the prisoners of the Baltimore City Jail.

Let me then conclude with the words of St. Paul by saying to you and to all members of our community, "I long to see you and share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you. What I wish is that we may be mutually encouraged by our common faith."

William D. Barber

Archbishop of Baltimore