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My dear friends in Christ:

The few days remaining before we celebrate the feast and mystery of Christmas afford me an opportunity to meditate in some depth on the place the birth of Christ has in our lives and in the history of the world. I would like you to set aside a few minutes to think with me about our faith in Jesus and our acceptance through faith of the truths He shared with us during His brief life on earth. But before we reflect together, let me add my own personal greetings to those you will receive from family and friends in this season of spiritual joy. As your pastor, I feel that I have many reasons to rejoice this Christmas, and many of my joys are because of your deep faith and loyalty to Jesus. I consider it a privilege to live in communion with people who are dedicated to living the Gospel—and you, the people of the Church in Maryland, are so dedicated. The dedication I find in the lives of so many strengthens me and tells me that God is indeed with His people. The more we reflect upon the mystery of divine presence which overshadows Christmas, the more we know its power to give us common peace, trust, hope and love.

I experience this hope that Christmas renews in us, even though I am aware from reading our newspapers, watching television, and personal contacts that many of our friends and neighbors are afraid and bewildered. Yet I know that we all hunger for a sign of God in our lives. We want to know God, to deal with the transcendent, even if at times we find it difficult to experience God in our lives; even when we find it difficult to believe.

Knowing this difficulty, I am reminded of a line in the poetry of William Blake. Blake says that "we are put on earth for a little space that we may learn to bear the beams of love." Blake's poetry is helpful because in it we are given a clue both about the greatness of the human condition—it is fired with divine love—and we are reminded that God's love will challenge us in our life of faith. Because we are human, we are afraid of the commitment that a life of faith will demand of us. But there is no need to fear commitment, if we understand the meaning of faith.

We have more faith than we know. When you believe in a person, even love that person, you can say of them, "I believe in you, I believe what you say, what you ask, what you promise." A similar response can be had when we think of

machine replaces our humanness and demands total efficiency from us, it makes us less than the children of God we are. In such a milieu, truth is conceived not as that which is, nor as that which has been made, but as that which can mold and change the future.

As Avery Dulles states in his work, *The Survival of Dogma*, "What has caught the imagination of our contemporaries is not man's ability to amass new information or formulate new laws, but rather his ability to transform both his environment and himself. We live in an age of vastly increased control, leading to the planned economy, the planned society, family planning, eugenics. Man's interest and attention are riveted not on the past, nor on the present, nor on the eternal, but on the future, that to all appearances depends, for weal or woe, upon the use that man makes of his new-found power." In such a technological, future-oriented society in which visions for humankind seem without limit, many become confused about the meaning of Christian faith.

Human Freedom and Faith

But it is precisely within such a society that a person experiences most poignantly the absence of meaningfulness and value. The human person is free and cannot live without purpose. The need for faith arises from the very nature of his or her freedom.

To believe in God is to recognize and acknowledge that our life on earth is contained, limited, framed with a beginning and an end, a top and a bottom. To believe in God is to acknowledge that time is not our own, that our life is not ours to take up or to put down. Belief strips us of the cloak of pride and evasion. Because we are free and responsible, we can come to grips with our future and confront the incomprehensible ground of reality, called God. As Cardinal Newman says: "The affirmation of God cannot be separated from the existence of free beings." If we are free, then, we must affirm God's presence in our lives. And freedom demands that we search for the truth about everything we experience.

One cannot possibly be free unless he or she is a person of integrity always seeking truth. Truth cannot be separated from reality, nor can truth be separated from Jesus. And why? Because Jesus said of Himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life." This shattering truth demands that we who follow Jesus be strong in our faith: strong in our convictions. We cannot

demand of us. But there is no need to fear commitment, if we understand the meaning of faith.

We have more faith than we know. When you believe in a person, even love that person, you can say of them, "I believe in you, I believe what you say, what you ask, what you promise." A similar response can be had when we think of God as a person. We say to God: I believe in you. I believe what you say—your revelation. I believe what you ask of me in prayer. I believe in the promise you made to Abraham which you fulfilled in Jesus and continue to fulfill in us. But what is the nature of our faith in God? Faith, quite simply, is a gift coming from God's self-revelation.

The act of Revelation is a mystery of love wherein the inner life of God is made manifest in His Word. The Gospel writer St. John says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory: the glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with an enduring love."

If we recognize the glory of God in the earthly presence of Jesus and are to share in this glory, we should want to respond in faith. Though the response to God's revelation and love will vary according to one's background and circumstances, the act of faith involves "total adherence...under the influence of grace to God revealing himself." Total adherence to God revealing himself includes not only the mind, but also the will and emotions; it is a response of the whole person, including belief in the content of Revelation and the Christian message.

The beginnings of this Christian message — the narrative of Jesus' birth — found in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke offered a foundation of Christian tradition upon which centuries of Christians have responded to the human dimensions of God's love. Like the shepherds, this can be the hope and encouragement of the poor; like the Magi, this can be the challenge to the learned of the world.

Various Forms of Faith

Down through the centuries, the response to faith has taken various forms: the fidelity of the Jewish people to the God of the covenant; the response of the early Christians to the Risen Jesus as Savior; the more intellectual approach during the period of the Middle Ages; a strong ecclesiastical emphasis during the period of the Counter-Reformation; and more recently a more personalistic, less optimistic dimension of social scientists who fear an encounter with the absolute, with the transcendental, which cannot be measured.

Today, a new kind of society is developing based on scientific knowledge and on technology; it is future-oriented. As new resources develop, the significance of the past and even the present diminishes. Many Christians experience an uneasiness in identifying with the time-conditioned and past forms of their faith. These Christians say that it is not that God is dead, but that the traditional language about God is dead, and has little meaning in their lives.

This crisis of faith has become acute with each advance of technology. By this I don't mean the pervasiveness of machines in modern life. Machines can be a boon to us when they relieve us of some of the burdens of life. But when the

is a person of integrity always seeking truth. Truth cannot be separated from reality, nor can truth be separated from Jesus. And why? Because Jesus said of Himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life." This shattering truth demands that we who follow Jesus be strong in our faith; strong in our convictions. We cannot be complacent. Complacent believers, whose faith often rests on accepted structures and on a comfortable culture, almost present a caricature of true Christian faith. They are afraid to place their trust in God; unable to cope with a society that does not accept the reality of God's relationship to people. But those who accept Christ as the way, the truth and the life offer a challenge to a society that does not immediately recognize the source of their faith commitment. They become witnesses that faith can be vital and meaningful. In an existential society, a witness given without coercion is the most telling proof of faith to doubters and non-believers. When doubters see the strength and virtue of a person's commitment to God, they wonder if faith is possible for them, too. They recognize that the faith of their friends goes beyond words or formulations, just as do the beautiful natural happenings like birth, friendship and love. Birth, friendship and love are deep personal relationships, and deep personal relationships require trust. This trust is hard for people to give. People hesitate to develop deep friendships which are founded on trust because they fear to run the risks involved. Psychologically, however, we must realize that a similar fear of risk is also true of faith in God. In today's world many of us are not comfortable in taking such risks. Because we live in the 20th century we seem to need absolute, tangible assurance that our risk is worthwhile, that our trust is being reciprocated. That kind of assurance is difficult to have.

So, how will we bridge the gap between risk and trust in faith? The bridge between risk and trust, in my experience, is the acceptance of the relationship of dependence on God that we recognize as humility. But it is so easy to say "be humble," and so difficult to be humble. The great Christian writers tell us that the way to humility is through prayer. The philosopher and author Gabriel Marcel has written that we must understand how it is that "to pray to God is without any doubt the only way to think of God." But how will we pray, how can we think about God without humility?

Some will say, "I don't believe humility is the answer; in fact the problem with faith is that it doesn't let me think." When we pray we deepen our life of faith. A transformation begins to take place, and we begin to grow in understanding of life beyond the tangible, the measurable. "We believe," as St. Anselm says, "in order to understand." St. Anselm's judgment should reassure those who have the impression that faith must exist without understanding and live in the cold embrace of a command to believe without insight. The truths of faith are given to be developed by those who receive them and to shed light upon the way we live.

The believer is not someone who trusts that God takes care of every human detail. He is, instead, a person who understands that faith

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of Flemish origin, circa 1460.

makes it possible for us to realize better that "...here on earth, God's work must truly be our own."

Our faith has to be a thinking faith today if it is to make a difference for us in life. Such a thinking faith, however, cannot avoid doubt. Doubts can disturb people who regard those doubts as a loss of faith. Naturally, a systematic doubting can plunge us into a sterile agnosticism or skepticism. But, there is a creative kind of doubt, too, which actually serves to mature our faith. Creative doubt demands that we renounce easy explanations, come to terms with the truth wherever we find it, and still remain loyal to the Word of God. We are not doubters because we wonder how God created our world. Science has helped us to understand creation better. But a scientific explanation of creation will never surpass the Christian's belief in God's Word revealing to us that He is the creator. When we are confronted with modern evidence, it is important that we remain open to hard questions, not ruling them out defensively, but trying instead to make sense out of faith in the face of new human discoveries of truth which history gives us. It is only by facing up to the trials of hard questions that we will continue to inform faith and prove its significance. Once we can question and be questioned about our faith, we can begin to enjoy the full transformation of intelligence that such questioning brings.

Beyond this, faith calls for commitment. This commitment demands that we move from insight to personal choice. Choice is always free, but is sustained by the redemptive love of God we call grace. "Man redeemed by Christ the Savior and through Jesus Christ called to be God's adopted son, cannot give his adherence to God revealing himself unless the Father draws him to offer to God the reasonable and free submission of faith." When our faith is mature, as it will be matured under questioning, then we can more easily respond to grace. We are willing to risk behaving in a new way and seek concrete opportunities to translate our beliefs into action. Faith is a lever which turns us away from ideas and thoughts to action in the world on behalf of Christ. A Dorothy Day, a Mother Teresa, an Archbishop Camara, are people who live in faith and put their faith into action. After all, it is the will of the Father and not merely calling on his name that brings salvation. Jesus tells us: "...not all who say Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

Prayer and Community

All that we have said about faith up to now, is incomplete unless we see the crucial importance of prayer and communal life. One cannot main-

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tain a lively faith without the gracious dialogue which God's nearness to us opens up. Prayer, in this context, means more than the recitation of words. It stands for the personal communion that a believer experiences with God, whether in words or in silence, in rest or in movement. Prayer is a living encounter with the living God. We listen to Him, respond to His presence and love Him. In this manner, the believer releases himself or herself to the encompassing mystery of God.

Prayer transforms us most deeply since it is the highest form of trust. To entrust ourselves to a silence without evidence and to a presence without proof calls for the greatest kind of trust. It breaks the spell of a thoughtless life or a mental existence totally absorbed with itself. It dissolves the shell of selfishness and sin which alienates us from our neighbor and God.

In the atmosphere of prayer, when I hear Jesus speak to us of kingdom, then I become aware again that communal experience in the name of God is what distinguishes faith from a philosophy of life. That faith that we share today as Christians and as Catholics has been nurtured by others and passed on to us in the Church. When others share faith with us, they educate our faith. In this way we can say that the Church is the home of faith.

But just as the Church is the home of faith, there would be no place to come home to if people of faith were not influencing the community at large by their individual faith. All of us develop the gift of faith by way of instruction and counsel from the Church. Then the individual enriches the community with his or her unique contribution in the spirit.

The Blessing of Faith

Even though faith flourishes in community, faith remains a gift of the Spirit of God. That Spirit enables us to listen to the Word, to hold it with trust, to comprehend it deeply, and to put it into practice. This "hearing the Word" is the basic blessing of faith. Beyond that, we can enumerate several other blessings which should make us grateful for the gift of faith.

First, faith can endow our life with new purpose and strength, and can overcome the worst obstacles that come between us and God. When we have faith, we can even overcome despair.

Secondly, faith is a blessing for others when it leads us to works of love in the name of Jesus. When we reach out and fill the lives of the poor and disenfranchised with concern because we believe, we show the love of the new born Savior.

Thirdly, faith blesses us by showing that very little worthwhile happens without risking ourselves to God. To undertake to follow Jesus is, after all, to undertake a dangerous journey. Nothing is more perilous than trying to live fully for God when this brings one in conflict with economic and political forces.

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The Savior whose birth we celebrate at Christmas was also the man of the cross. But the Jesus of Bethlehem who died at Golgotha is living today. When we say "yes" to this mystery, this mystery of a newly born, and yet truly risen Savior, we say "yes" to God and say again, "I believe."

But we do not stand alone.

Each Christian of every generation from Apostolic times to the present day recognizes that they are linked with all history and are in communion with all persons. The history of salvation is being accomplished in the midst of the history of our world.

St. Augustine spoke about faith in his period of history and said, "...unless you believe, you shall not understand." St. Augustine was saying in his own way a translation of the prophet Isaiah.

The Jerusalem Bible translates the same section from Isaiah: "But if you do not stand by me, you will not stand at all." Such a translation, closer to the original meaning, includes and encompasses such concepts as truth, firmness, solid ground, loyalty, trust, taking one's stand on something, believing in something. This faith is never static, but when accepted and nurtured grows throughout life. It is in this light that I prefer the more modern translation of Isaiah's phrase.

I know that a pastoral letter cannot solve your problems of faith. I realize that it can easily be laid aside as being just another document. But I hope that these minutes we have spent together reflecting about faith will deepen your knowledge of faith and increase your concern about that faith. Hopefully, the faith we share in common will be a vital faith, so that we can move confidently through our lives relating to our peers in the confidence of faith, and with them continue the search for the God who is with us—Emmanuel.

Jesus is born. We believe that. The mystery of His birth in our world is a blessing on all of us, and the faith to believe that mystery is a blessing too.

My Christmas wish for all of you is that you may experience faith and know the peace of Jesus throughout your life.

William D. Borders

Archbishop of Baltimore

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