

*Questions and Answers on
“For Greater Things You Were Born,”
The New Pastoral Letter
from the Most Reverend José H. Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles*

What is this new document?

“For Greater Things You Were Born” is the second pastoral letter from Archbishop José H. Gomez. It is addressed to the family of God in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the subject of the letter is what Archbishop Gomez calls “God’s beautiful plan of love for our lives and our world.”

The pastoral letter was completed on Christmas Day, December 25, 2016. It is being released in English and Spanish on March 1, 2017, which is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. March 1, 2017 is also the sixth anniversary of Archbishop Gomez assuming his duties as Archbishop of Los Angeles.

What is a pastoral letter?

A pastoral letter is an official message from a bishop, addressed to all his clergy or all the Catholic people in his diocese. Through a pastoral letter, the bishop expresses his thinking and teaching on issues and offers words of guidance and hope at a particular moment in the life of the local Church.

Pastoral letters have been an important part of the life of the Catholic Church since the beginning. Most of the books of the Bible’s New Testament are simply letters written by the Apostles, the Church’s first bishops, sent to their local churches.

Why did Archbishop Gomez write this pastoral letter?

The pastoral letter grows out of Archbishop Gomez’s sense that some of the deepest challenges we face in our personal lives and in our society are rooted in the fact that we have lost touch with God and with the meaning of our own human nature.

He writes: “[A]s the reality of God is fading away, the reality of the human person is disappearing, too. We are becoming strangers to our own selves. We no longer know who we are or what is inside us.” (no. 4)

So he is writing to remind us of what he calls “the beautiful mystery that lies at the heart of human existence.” (no. 1) The Archbishop believes that in order for us to know true happiness, we have to know who we are, why God made us, how he made us, and what he made us for. That is what the letter is about.

How did he write the letter?

The Archbishop wrote this letter as a series of reflections and he finished it at Christmas time. One way to think about it is that this is a long letter on the meaning of Christmas — why Jesus Christ was born and what it means for our lives.

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The letter is divided into many short sections — each is a reflection on some aspect of what Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church teaches about the meaning of creation and God’s plan for human life.

Some of the themes that the Archbishop reflects on:

- Why the world was created and why we were made (no. 8)
- Our responsibility for God’s creation (no. 9)
- How Jesus “saves” us and what that means for our lives (nos. 10-12)
- What it means that we are created in God's image and likeness and made to be children of God and to be “saints” (nos. 13, 23, 27)
- What is sin and how does Jesus help us to overcome it (nos. 14-15)
- What it means that we are created with bodies and souls and that we are made either a male or a female (nos. 16, 20)
- What is the meaning of marriage and family in God’s plan (nos. 17-18)
- Our responsibility for our fellow men and women in society (nos. 19)
- God’s plan for our lives and the truth that God gives every life a mission (nos. 21-22, 26)
- The meaning of love (no. 28)
- The Christian vision for justice and peace and a society that truly serves the human person (nos. 24–25)

Does the Archbishop offer any practical advice for how we should live?

The whole letter is “practical” in the sense that the Archbishop wants to help us understand why God made us and his plan for our lives. The Archbishop would say this is the essential first step to becoming our “best selves” and to finding true and lasting happiness and love.

Jesus Christ is the “way” for us to follow and to live, the Archbishop says (no. 29). And he also proposes a concrete outline for a “plan of life” that includes personal and practical guidance on how to follow Jesus more closely — through prayer, reading the Gospels, going to Mass and Confession, and serving our neighbors (nos. 30-31).

What does his letter mean for the parishes, schools and ministries of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles?

In his first pastoral letter, *Witness to the New World of Faith*, the Archbishop laid out a program for the whole Church, built on five pastoral priorities. The Archbishop says in this letter that those priorities “all remain essential to our mission of the new evangelization.” (no. 3)

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But the Archbishop’s focus is different in this letter, he is speaking more personally. He wants to speak to every Catholic in Los Angeles. He writes: “It is time for all of us in the Church — bishops, priests, deacons, seminarians, consecrated, religious and lay people — all of us should be alive with a new sense of awe at our greatness in the eyes of God.” (no. 13)

The Archbishop also issues a challenge to all of us in the Church — to really try to live the way God created us to live: “My prayer is that all of us in the Church will dedicate ourselves once again to making holiness the goal of everything we do in the Church. Let us examine our ministries and apostolates, all our efforts in our parishes and schools. Let us seek creative and bold new ways to make the call to holiness and the work of sanctification a basic aspect of all our preaching, religious education and pastoral care.” (no. 27)

Does the letter talk about the political situation in America today?

Not directly. But our current political situation and cultural situation is clearly on the Archbishop’s mind.

He writes: “I am growing more concerned these days about the direction that our society and culture are taking and what that means for how we live our faith and carry out our Christian mission in our homes and communities and in our parishes, schools and ministries. I am finishing this letter to you at Christmas time. It is the end of a long and divisive year, in which our national elections exposed some of the darker inclinations in our culture and confirmed a deepening secularism and “anti-humanistic” spirit in American life.” (nos. 3-4)

Archbishop Gomez talks about some of the more serious issues facing American society — including secularism and “de-Christianization”; racism; the cruel treatment of immigrants and refugees; abortion and euthanasia; the death penalty; inequities in the criminal justice system; globalization; consumerism; and the deep divisions in American society. (nos. 4-5, 24)

But he sees these issues as rooted in a deeper spiritual crisis in American life. He writes: “As I have been praying and reflecting on these things, it seems to me that America’s divisions and dysfunctions are all pointing us back to basic questions: Who are we? What does it mean to be alive, to be a member of the human race? Where do we come from and what are we here for? What is it that we should be living for? What is the “good life” and why should I even want to be a “good person”? Do our lives make a difference? Is there meaning in the world, or is everything just random? With the loss of God, we no longer know how to find answers to these questions. And this is having damaging consequences for individuals, especially the young, and for our society.” (no. 5)

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With all the problems and turmoil we see in society, why doesn't the Archbishop write about these issues directly? How does a letter about “the human person” help us in this moment?

The Archbishop believes and says very directly that we have a moral and political duty to build a society that is worthy of the human person. The problem is that we have lost touch with the meaning of life and we no longer know the value or the dignity of the human person.

In other writings and addresses, he has observed that Christians have a duty to be peacemakers — to be bridge-builders, “unifiers” not “dividers.” In this letter, Archbishop Gomez he is laying out the foundation for bringing people together to work for the common good of society. The foundation is seeing every person as the image of God and as a child of God.

The Archbishop writes: “In a mysterious and real way, each of us is connected to every other man and woman... And that means that in every person we have an encounter with Jesus Christ. Everyone we meet reflects his presence... This is a call to conscience for all of us in the Church. The witness of Jesus and the apostles is unmistakable — we cannot claim to love the God we do not see, if we do not love the neighbor we do see.” (no. 19)

And again: “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most radical doctrine in the history of ideas. If everyone believed what Jesus proclaimed — that God is our Father and we are all brothers and sisters created in his image with God-given dignity and a transcendent destiny — I cannot help but think that every society could be transformed overnight. How different our lives would be if we truly believed that we are beloved sons and beloved daughters of our Creator! How different Los Angeles would be if we all got up every morning and looked into the mirror and said, ‘I am a child of God and everyone I will meet this day is my brother or sister, one of God’s beloved, and worthy of my attention, my care and my love.’” (no. 24).

What is the Archbishop’s basic message?

The Archbishop’s message is one of hope and joy. He writes: “Jesus comes into our lives, and there is nothing more beautiful than to know Jesus! And Jesus is calling you, as he calls his disciples in every age — to follow him, to come and see. He is calling you to find in him the meaning and destiny of your life — the way you are made to live, who you are made to be.” (no. 37)

His whole point is to get people excited about their lives, to get us to realize the happiness, the love and beauty that we can know if we follow Jesus. He says the good news is that God loves us, that he made us for a reason, and that he is involved and interested in our lives.

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For Archbishop Gomez, the Catholic faith can never be reduced to rules and regulations. Our faith is a relationship with God. And his point is that God makes each of us for a reason. He has a great plan for our lives — for every human life.

The Archbishop writes: “You are God’s daughter! Jesus is your brother. ... Like every good parent, God has a beautiful dream for your life — a Father’s dream! He knows your name, and he has great plans for your life, plans for love and plans for your glory! You are something special to God — each one of you. There is nobody like you and there is nobody who can replace you! We need to believe this and plan and live our lives accordingly.” (no. 23)

At one point, the Archbishop quotes St. Junipero Serra, the great missionary who was among the founders of Los Angeles and California... “God is life! And with him all things are possible!” (no. 37)

This is the joy and the hope that he wants to communicate in this letter.

How does the Archbishop’s letter relate to what Pope Francis is teaching and doing?

Archbishop Gomez quotes and reflects at many points in his letter on the teachings of Pope Francis, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope St. John Paul II, our three most recent popes.

In relation to Pope Francis, he reflects on the Holy Father’s teachings about nature and the environment (nos. 8-9), about the human body (no. 16) and on the Pope’s emphasis on mercy as the heart of our relationship with God (no. 15).

In [an address to the Polish bishops this past July](#), Pope Francis said: “The problem is worldwide. The exploitation of creation, and the exploitation of persons. *We are experiencing a moment of the annihilation of man as the image of God.*”

In a way, this whole letter from Archbishop Gomez is a response to this “annihilation of man” — to the loss of the truth and meaning about human life that is spreading throughout our country and continent, and through all countries of the West.

In this letter, the Archbishop also draws from the teachings of nearly 40 different saints, blesseds and venerables from every era in the Church, from the first to the 20th centuries. And of course, the heart of his letter is drawn from his reflections on the Bible. He writes: “From beginning to end, the sacred Scriptures testify that the human person is God’s ‘masterpiece,’ his greatest work.” (no. 10)

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Do we learn anything personally about the Archbishop from this letter?

The letter shows the heart of the Archbishop as a pastor who cares and is actively involved in the lives of his people.

In his first five years as Archbishop, he has spent much of his time on the road, visiting the parishes and schools and ministries across the nearly 9,000 mile territory of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. In these past five years, he has visited more than 180 of the 288 parishes in the Archdiocese.

He has celebrated baptisms and weddings and funerals and more than 100 confirmations. In many ways, he says, the letter grows out of his experience with the people. He writes: “I see the images of your faces in my mind as I have been writing these pages. I am thinking about the stories you shared with me, your joys and sorrows, your worries and hopes.” (no. 6)

Throughout the letter, the Archbishop expresses his concern about people’s spiritual and material well-being. He writes about the problems of suffering, injustice and loneliness in society (no. 22).

He worries: “So many of our neighbors seem to be not really living but only existing. Many are just getting by and seem uncertain about the meaning of their lives and afraid, not hopeful, for the future. So many do not seem to know the love of God, do not hear his voice, do not seem to feel his tenderness and care in their lives.” (no. 5)

At different points in the letter, he refers to his own experiences and his personal experiences of the faith. (no. 30) And the letter ends with a series of very personal prayers to Our Lady of Guadalupe. (no. 39)

The whole letter is informed by his passionate belief that Jesus Christ is the answer to every question. We hear this throughout the letter: “I think all of us are looking for joy and for love, for a sense of wholeness and integrity, for friendships and loves that endure. We all want to know that we belong, that we are wanted; we want some assurance that our lives really do matter. Even though we cannot always put our hopes and dreams into words this way, that is what we are all looking for. ... This is why Jesus came into the world. He is the answer to every question, the desire of every heart.” (no. 2)

But always there is a sense that Archbishop Gomez wants to talk less about himself and more about Jesus. He writes: “I pray that this letter might in some small way help all of us to find God, to know and love him more, and to spread his love to every corner of the earth.” (no. 7)

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What does he hope to accomplish with this pastoral letter?

The Archbishop concludes his letter with a series of prayers that express his hope that everyone who reads the letter will come to a new awareness of God’s love and purpose for his or her life. (nos. 38-40)

He writes: “And this is my prayer for every one of you, for the whole family of God in Los Angeles. I pray that we all come to a new awareness of our vocation to be holy, to be saints! May we all desire to do God’s will, to love as Jesus loves, and to live for the praise of his glory! Let every one of us in Los Angeles strive to become saints and strive to lead others to become saints, too! May we raise up a new race of saints who bear witness that the human person is the center of God’s plan of love for creation. May we be renewed in wonder, in sincere amazement at God’s love for us, a love that knows no limit. Then, renewed in this wonder, may we go out into the world to share our amazement with others, speaking heart to heart and bringing everyone to that encounter with God’s saving love that is the destiny of every human life.” (no. 38)