



“Vas Honorabile”
(Vessel of Honour)

A Pastoral Letter on Mary as the Patroness of our Local Church
and the key to understanding our identity.

Tuesday, November 21, 2023

The Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am writing to invite all the faithful of the Archdiocese to observe in a special way our new Archdiocesan Feast Day, which will be celebrated for the first time on December 8, 2023, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. I will also share some thoughts on the International Eucharistic Congress being held in 2024, and my hopes for how this might impact our local Church.

Vessel of Honour, is one of four titles ascribed to our Blessed Mother that was recently restored in the paintings in the apse of Saint Mary’s Cathedral Basilica. As I ponder these words that adorn our Mother Church once more, I am mindful of the need for a similar restoration in the hearts of all the clergy and laity of this archdiocese as we strive to respond to God’s call for us in our present context.

Restoring the living Church has been our focus for many years now. It was this focus that led us to restructure the archdiocese into twenty new parishes with the goal of becoming *Communities of Missionary Disciples*. It was this same focus that inspired our pastoral priorities: *Homelessness, Evangelization, Catechesis* and *Parish Identity*.

Since January of 2021, we have been working together successively on these priorities, beginning with Homelessness and our Emergency Shelter Project, which continues to expand and bear fruit. We then asked every parish to commit to a program and plan for evangelization, recognizing the need to bring the message of the Gospel out of our buildings and into the streets. And we are currently working on the priority of Catechesis, in the hopes that all the baptized will be engaged in ongoing formation, which is foundational to our commitment as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In the coming year, we will begin to dig into the priority of Parish Identity. This priority was born out of a recognition that parishes are experienced as a family, and considering our new parish structures, a new family dynamic must be discovered. This discovery depends upon the openness of all those involved, and upon the local circumstances of each new parish.

In anticipation of this work, which in many ways has already begun, I would invite us to look to our Blessed Mother, the patroness of our local Church, to discover how she serves as an exemplary model in understanding the most fundamental aspects of our identity. While each of our twenty parishes must work to discover their unique parish identity, on a broader scale, all of us who make

up the local Church, must discover our common Diocesan Identity, for the branch does not bear fruit apart from the vine (Jn. 15).

For as long as anyone can remember, our Blessed Mother has served as the Principal Patron of our local Church. This is likely rooted in her role as the Titular Saint of our Cathedral, which has stood for over two hundred years. Until now, we have been celebrating our Archdiocesan Feast in conjunction with the Titular Feast of our Cathedral, August 15, the Solemnity of the Assumption, which is also a deeply significant day for all Acadians, and has been observed as their *Fête Nationale* since 1881.

Our new Archdiocesan Feast Day will be December 8, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. This date was chosen to retain our Blessed Mother as the principal patron of the archdiocese, and to acknowledge that the unification of the former Archdiocese of Halifax and the former Diocese of Yarmouth was celebrated on December 8, 2011, making this date already one of significance. This change will allow us to bring greater focus to our common archdiocesan identity, while also giving more room on August 15 to celebrate the Cathedral Parish and the ongoing commitment of the Acadians, who have been supporting our local Church since its founding. I would like to propose, however, that December 8 is spiritually significant as well, as it relates to our identity.

As stated by Pope Pius IX, the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception acknowledges that Mary, “*was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin*” (*Ineffabilis Deus*, 1854). This belief developed over the centuries from a realization that to conceive by the Holy Spirit, and to carry in her womb, our Lord Jesus Christ, Mary needed to be a perfect vessel. Thus, by a prevenient grace, Mary was prepared from the moment of her conception to fulfill her vocation as the Vessel of Honour for the Word Made Flesh.

With this realization, we come to the first aspect of our archdiocesan identity. As Christians, who together make up the Mystical Body of Christ, we are called to share in Mary’s role of being a Vessel of Honour. We do this by spiritually opening ourselves up to the One who stands at the door of our hearts and knocks (Rev. 3:20). We also do this by tearing down the barriers which stand in the way of our Lord’s coming. The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is therefore, fittingly celebrated against the backdrop of the Advent Season, when each year we hear the Prophet Isaiah proclaim, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Is. 40:3).

For this reason, I encourage all the clergy and the faithful to regularly avail themselves of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, especially in the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, as a means of preparation to be Vessels of Honour for Jesus Christ.

However, once our Blessed Mother fulfilled her vocation as Vessel of Honour, she poured herself out as a libation, sharing the Blessed Fruit of her womb with all the world (Phil. 2:17). We are similarly called to share That which we have received, namely, Jesus Christ, with all the world. This brings us to the gift of the Eucharist.

In the 13th Century, Saint Thomas Aquinas was tasked with writing the liturgical texts for *Corpus Christi*, which was then a new feast. Among these texts we encounter the *Panis Angelicus*, in which we hear the profound words, “Oh what wonder! That humans, poor and humble servants, should chew on their Lord.” These words reveal the truth of the Real Presence of the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ contained in the Blessed Sacrament, and the acknowledgment that as recipients of this most sacred gift, we called to be poor and humble servants.

Sadly, statistics reveal that more and more people are losing faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. And our lived experience has shown that fewer and fewer people are hearing and responding positively to the call to serve Jesus as active members of the Church in our parishes. In this way, we need to hear and respond once more to the call to be a Eucharistic People; a people that are made one in Holy Communion, and subsequently broken and shared for the life of the world.

The Second Vatican Council taught that “*the [Eucharist] is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows*” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1963). This important teaching is often misunderstood, whereby the focus is placed on the celebration of the Eucharist without an accompanying effort to flow out into the other areas that make up the whole activity of the Church, namely, the universal call of the baptized to mission (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964). Pope Francis echoed this teaching of Vatican II in his very first Apostolic Exhortation:

The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19). Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy (Evangelii Gaudium, 2013).

Only when we rediscover the missionary impulse of our Eucharistic Identity, are we able to see our pastoral priorities of Catechesis, Homelessness and Evangelization in their rightful context.

The 53rd International Eucharistic Congress will be held in Ecuador in September of 2024. A Eucharistic Congress is an event that brings together the faithful from a wide area, to strengthen devotion in the Real Presence. Similar events will take place on a smaller scale in other parts of the world, and I feel called to host one such event here in our archdiocese. Preparations are already underway, and from our discussions to date, we are hopeful that a local Eucharistic Congress would include excellent speakers to offer us talks and reflections on the Eucharist, beautiful celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Eucharistic Adoration and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and a Eucharistic Procession. More information will be forthcoming, however, I want to call us all to engage from now in a period of spiritual preparation, so that our Eucharistic Congress will be a culmination of a journey, rather than a stand-alone event.

Our Blessed Mother is our best example of a disciple who lived a Eucharistic life. Having received Our Lord in her womb, she then shared Him with the world. First, she went to Elizabeth to share her Good News, making her the first evangelist. Secondly, she was attentive to those in need and did what she could to assist them. We see this in the care and concern she showed the newly

married couple at the Wedding of Cana. Finally, we can consider her life as a whole. Of her, Saint John Paul II wrote, “*There are good grounds for the statements made in the synod hall that Mary is a living catechism and the mother and model of catechists*” (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 1979). In these ways, our Blessed Mother inspires us to live out the priorities of Evangelization, Homelessness and Catechesis, rooted in our identity as a Eucharistic People.


Returning to the celebration of our new Archdiocesan Feast Day, I would like to invite all the faithful to come to Saint Mary’s Cathedral Basilica on **Friday, December 8, 2023 at 7:00 P.M.** for a Solemn Celebration of Eucharist, and to join me in praying the **Immaculate Conception Novena, November 30 – December 7** for our local Church. It is my hope that this prayer will unite us throughout the archdiocese and bear much fruit as we strive toward missionary discipleship, so perfectly modelled for us by our Blessed Mother, the Vessel of Honour.

I will conclude this letter with the Collect for the Memorial of the Presentation of Mary, which speaks to our desire to *receive* our Lord:

As we venerate the glorious memory of the most holy Virgin Mary, grant, we pray, O Lord, through her intercession, that we, too, may merit to receive from the fullness of your grace.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "† Brian J. Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive style.

†Brian Joseph Dunn
Archbishop of Halifax-Yarmouth