

**Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie
Official Gazette**

JAN 2025



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Gazette officielle**

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Happy New Year! We hope everyone had a blessed Christmas.

In this issue of the *Gazette*, you will find Bishop Dowd's second pastoral letter for the Jubilee of 2025, "To Become Like God". As with the first, there are several reflection questions at the end.

Bonne année ! Nous espérons que vous avez tous passé un Joyeux Noël.

Dans ce numéro de la *Gazette*, vous trouverez la deuxième lettre pastorale de Mgr Dowd, intitulée « Devenir comme Dieu ». Comme pour la première lettre, vous trouverez à la fin quelques questions de réflexion.

**Laura Markiewicz
Chancellor / chancelier**

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SECOND PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE JUBILEE OF 2025

TO BECOME LIKE GOD

Dear brothers and sisters,

Merry Christmas to all of you! Every year we have the joy of celebrating the birth of Jesus, and rightly so. After all, it is no exaggeration to say that Jesus Christ is the most consequential man in all of human history. Whole cultures and even civilizations have been founded or transformed by the story of his life and his teaching. Of course, for those of us with faith, Jesus is even more.

In my first pastoral letter, called *Entering into Hope*, I mentioned that I intended to write additional letters to continue to develop the theme of hope as we enter into the Jubilee Year of 2025. Pope Francis inaugurated this jubilee on December 24, Christmas Eve night, as he opened the special “holy doors” of Saint Peter’s Basilica, which are otherwise sealed except in years of jubilee. Now, on December 29, the feast of the Holy Family, he is opening the Holy Doors of Saint John Lateran Cathedral in Rome, and he has asked all diocesan bishops to join with him by inaugurating the jubilee year in their own cathedrals. I did so at Precious Blood Cathedral in Sault Ste. Marie. Given the size of our diocese, however, and the challenges of winter travel, I know that many of our people would not be able to participate, so I am offering all of us this second pastoral letter, as a meditation on what it means to welcome Jesus and follow him in hope.

A crisis of hope, a crisis of ambition

Let me begin by asking you a question: what is your greatest ambition in life?

The question is not insignificant. In my experience, there are many people who seemingly have no ambition at all. They strive for nothing, except what they can consume. Even then, they do the least amount of effort to obtain what they desire. Whether they are consuming food, entertainment, drugs (both legal and illegal), or even sex, they are simply trying to satisfy an appetite. Whatever their reasons, whether it is to seek pleasure or to numb pain, their primary motivation for action is their hunger for the next experience. When this tendency is at its worst, this kind of person seeks that satisfaction of their hunger, not by their own effort, but by manipulating and even bullying others to satisfy it for them. The opposite of ambition is not just indifference or apathy, it is entitlement. At its extreme, this entitlement, when it is not satisfied, expresses itself in wrath, without any sincere gratitude.

We see this pattern in small children. Infants only know their own needs, particularly for food and comfort, and when those needs are unsatisfied they cry. We understand, because we know they are only infants. But as children grow, they need to be taught to be more. We teach them that, when they signal their needs to others, they should ask nicely, saying "please"; if those needs are satisfied, they should express gratitude, by at least saying "thank you"; and if they do not get their way, they should not throw a tantrum. We also want to teach our children to be able to look after themselves. They learn to brush their own teeth, to tie their own shoelaces, to make their own food, and so on. Eventually those skills become even more complex, as they prepare to participate in social and economic life. Of course, not everyone develops these skills evenly. Have you ever met an adult acting like an infant or toddler, unwilling to sincerely show gratitude, expecting others to do everything for them, or unable to accept rejection gracefully without throwing a tantrum? They can be most unpleasant.

Therefore, a bigger question behind the development of all these technical and social skills is the question of moral development. It is possible to be very proficient in making money and in getting along with others, but in a way that is still focussed on the self and the satisfaction of our own desires. But what happens when all material needs and whims are essentially met? There could still be a quest for power, but ultimately even power is meant to be a tool, not a goal. Those who seek power for itself are, it seems to me, really seeking status. This can be a never-ending goal. There is a limit to how much one can eat, and no one can enjoy more comforts than 24 hours in a day can provide. But status is measured in relative terms, by comparing ourselves to others; it therefore has no inherent limit. Status, because of its relative value, is often obtained through competition, and dominance over others. This can become quite ruthless, because the focus is on the self. But as many people wonder when they get to the top: what is it all for?

The potential ruthlessness of the striving for status has led some to believe that any striving is necessarily problematic. They believe that children should not be taught any greater ambition at all, and that any manner in which an individual stands out from a group is suspect. We see this when a child has a birthday party but all the kids who attend must get a present, or how athletics competitions refuse to grant prizes to children who excel, declaring everyone a winner. I have some sympathy with this approach, as I have seen children being mistreated by others who use bullying (whether physical or social) as a way to attain and maintain their status in a group. I certainly don't want to see power being misused in this way, and I can see how some people would come to suspect any use of power as necessarily corrupting. But often the end result of this approach is to discourage any kind of striving or ambition at all.

Two ideological camps therefore emerge around the meaning of the word "equality". On the one hand, there are those who believe in an "equality of opportunity", meaning that all should have a chance to strive for something better in their own lives without unfair obstacles being put in their path, such that the end result would largely be a measure of their own efforts. Such people believe there can be a healthy, even necessary, form of striving, because without it we never grow out of infantile entitlement. Of course, such a model can fail through a lack of compassion for others, particularly for those who, due to intellectual or other handicaps, will have a much harder time in a society built around competitive striving.

On the other hand, there are those who believe in an "equality of outcome", meaning that no one should ever be able to truly rise above another when it comes to end results, so as to prevent the ruthlessness of striving and the power imbalances such striving produces. The only legitimate striving is for personal autonomy and empowerment. But this model, while seemingly more compassionate, can leave us feeling stalled. After all, we can have more autonomy, but to what end, once all our basic needs are satisfied? And this model is still, ultimately, focussed on the self. What happens when the ideal of personal autonomy is challenged? Imagine a couple getting a prenatal diagnosis that their child will have a handicap, or an elderly person experiencing the kind of dependence that can come with old age: if personal autonomy is the only legitimate kind of ambition, then dependence is the ultimate failure, and abortion and euthanasia can become seen as part of a continuum of so-called "compassion". For some, even just having children can be seen as a threat to personal autonomy, because after all, kids are demanding.

Jesus, the third way

Against both of these competing ways of understanding ambition, we have the person and example of Jesus, who shows us a third way.

By coming to us as Jesus, the eternal Son of God changes the manner of measuring our growth as a person. The flaw with using status as a tool of comparison is that it can only be measured by comparison with others. But what if, instead, we looked at our personal growth in comparison to Jesus himself? He then becomes the standard by which we measure our success. In other words, our greatest ambition becomes to be like Jesus himself.

Obviously, for those who only look at Jesus as a historical figure, there is not much to be impressed about if one is striving for status. He was mocked for being from a small town. He did not accumulate great possessions. In terms of earthly power, he rejected an earthly throne. In other words, if we are seeking worldly status, there is not much there to imitate.

For those who, on the other hand, reject the striving for status, Jesus is often seen more favourably. The historical record shows us that Jesus often rebuked the twin quests for wealth and power. It is no wonder, then, that even some Communists looked upon Jesus with admiration, and some Christians wondered if socialism and Christianity could be compatible. The problem with such approaches, however, is that it is too easy to reduce Jesus to being a mere moral example.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus is, in fact, the eternal Son of God. He is "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father"¹. However, He assumed human nature and so entered into our history: "For us men (*propter nos homines*) and for our salvation He came down from Heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man (*homo factus est*)."²

In doing this the Son of God showed us that our human nature is compatible with the divine nature. In other words, simply by being conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and born in a stable in Bethlehem, he shows that we are *capax Dei*, i.e. that we are capable, in our human frailty, of nonetheless becoming like God.

Now that is an ambition!

All of the life and ministry of Jesus was oriented to this goal. Jesus possessed his infinite divine nature by virtue of being the eternal Son of God, something that we as created beings

¹ From the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople (also known as the Nicene Creed).

² Ibid. The Latin word for "man" in this passage (*homo, homines*) refers to Christ's humanity, not to the fact that he was specifically of the male sex (the word for which is *vir*, not *homo*).

cannot simply have from the outset. But while we cannot be infinitely *divine*, we can be infinitely *divinized*. We can grow, day by day, into the infinite potential for which our human nature is capable. If a divine person was able to take on a human nature, then it means there is no fundamental incompatibility between our limited human nature and the infinite greatness and goodness which is God.

There is a catch, however. We, being limited, cannot achieve the infinite without assistance from the Infinite One. We cannot be divinized by our own efforts. Only God can make that happen, by sharing his divine life with us. But that is exactly why Jesus came among us. As Saint Athanasius put it, "God became man so that man might become god."³

The meaning of divinization

When we consider what it means to be divinized, we must avoid falling into cartoonish portrayals of divine power. Yes, Jesus did lots of impressive miracles, but those are not the divine nature: they are merely expressions of it. But for most of Jesus' life, he, the eternal Son of God, lived as an ordinary person in a small town. So what is the ultimate expression of the divine life?

In a word, it is love. As Saint Paul said, "Strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."⁴

As Christians, we believe that God is love⁵. This does not simply mean that God is loving, but that "God's very being is love"⁶. And Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, is the infinite expression of this love flowing from the heart of our Heavenly Father. In short, Jesus is a person of infinite, perfect love.

It is no wonder then, that at his Last Supper, he gave this commandment to his disciples: "Love one another, as I have loved you."⁷ The commandment to love God and our neighbour already existed within the Old Testament, but in this new version Jesus is offering himself as a

³ *On the Incarnation*, 54: 3

⁴ 1 Cor 12: 31-13: 1-3

⁵ 1 John 4: 8

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 221.

⁷ John 13: 34

standard by which our own expressions of love can be measured. Love one another, as I have loved you.

This commandment is not just a call to a particular kind of action. In fact, it is a call to becoming a particular kind of person. A person growing into infinite, perfect love. A person becoming like Jesus.

Jesus, however, did not just come to give us a model to imitate. With the gift of the Holy Spirit, he gave us the means to accomplish that imitation. Saint Augustine of Hippo taught us that the Holy Spirit is the love between God the Father and his eternal Son.⁸ And because we are *capax Dei*, this love, eternally present in the Trinity, can be shared with us. Again at the Last Supper, he promised this to his disciples: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you."⁹

Again, our eternal hope is all about eternal love. If we cleave to Jesus, especially in following the new commandment to love one another as He has loved us, then our hearts expand and he can pour the Holy Spirit into us. That presence of the Holy Spirit guides us into even greater love. A virtuous cycle is established, with love upon love increasing, growing into infinity.

The fullness of salvation

This growing into infinite love is the real meaning of salvation. Imagine a time when you felt 100% loved, and totally secure in that love. Or, better still, imagine a time when you loved someone else so totally that it even took you by surprise with how powerful it was. You were willing to give everything of yourself to that person, or that person was willing to give everything of himself or herself to you. Now multiply that love by a billion, and you can just begin to get a sense of what salvation is all about.

That, my friends, is the meaning of Heaven. Heaven is not a garden of delights where all our desires are satisfied. That would get boring quickly. It is even less a place where people vie for power or status. Indeed, that would probably be Hell. No, heaven is an experience of eternally growing love, both received and given. And because God's very nature is love, Heaven is ultimately a sharing in the divine life itself, offered to us by God.

⁸ *De Trinitate*, especially book VIII.

⁹ John 14: 15-17

The meaning of our striving

In this Jubilee Year, we are being invited by Pope Francis to embark on a "pilgrimage of hope". But every pilgrimage needs a destination! Ours has been shown to us by the coming of the Son of God in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth. It is, in short, the sharing of the divine life itself, which is infinite love. Every ambition we might have can be measured against this. Everything we might achieve should be compatible with this end.

To journey on a pilgrimage takes effort, of course, and so does a spiritual journey. Love cannot be forced: for it to be authentic, it must be freely chosen and freely given. That is the conversion we require: to go from being focussed on ourselves, like infants, to giving of ourselves, in as total a manner as possible. There is no greater love than this. I do not want to enter into a discussion at this point how our free will and the free will of God interact—that will be for a future pastoral letter. That question is serious, as the quality of the habit of love in our life now will determine the quality of our eternal life. But for now, to help us along this journey, I would like to offer some more reflection questions, for use in groups, classrooms, or just for personal reflection.

With that, I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year filled with grace and love!

+Thomas Dowd

+Thomas Dowd
Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie

December 29, 2024
Feast of the Holy Family





QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND GROUP SHARING

- What is your greatest ambition? Why is that your greatest ambition, and not something else?
- If you could have a greater ambition, what would it be? And if you could have one greater than that, what would it be? Keep repeating the question for as long as you find an answer.
- Think of a time when you felt greatly loved by someone else. Think of a time when you loved someone else so totally it even took you by surprise. How have those times had an impact in your life?
- How can you grow as a person of greater love? Who in your life is in need of greater love right now?
- How deep is my love for God? How have I felt God's love for me?