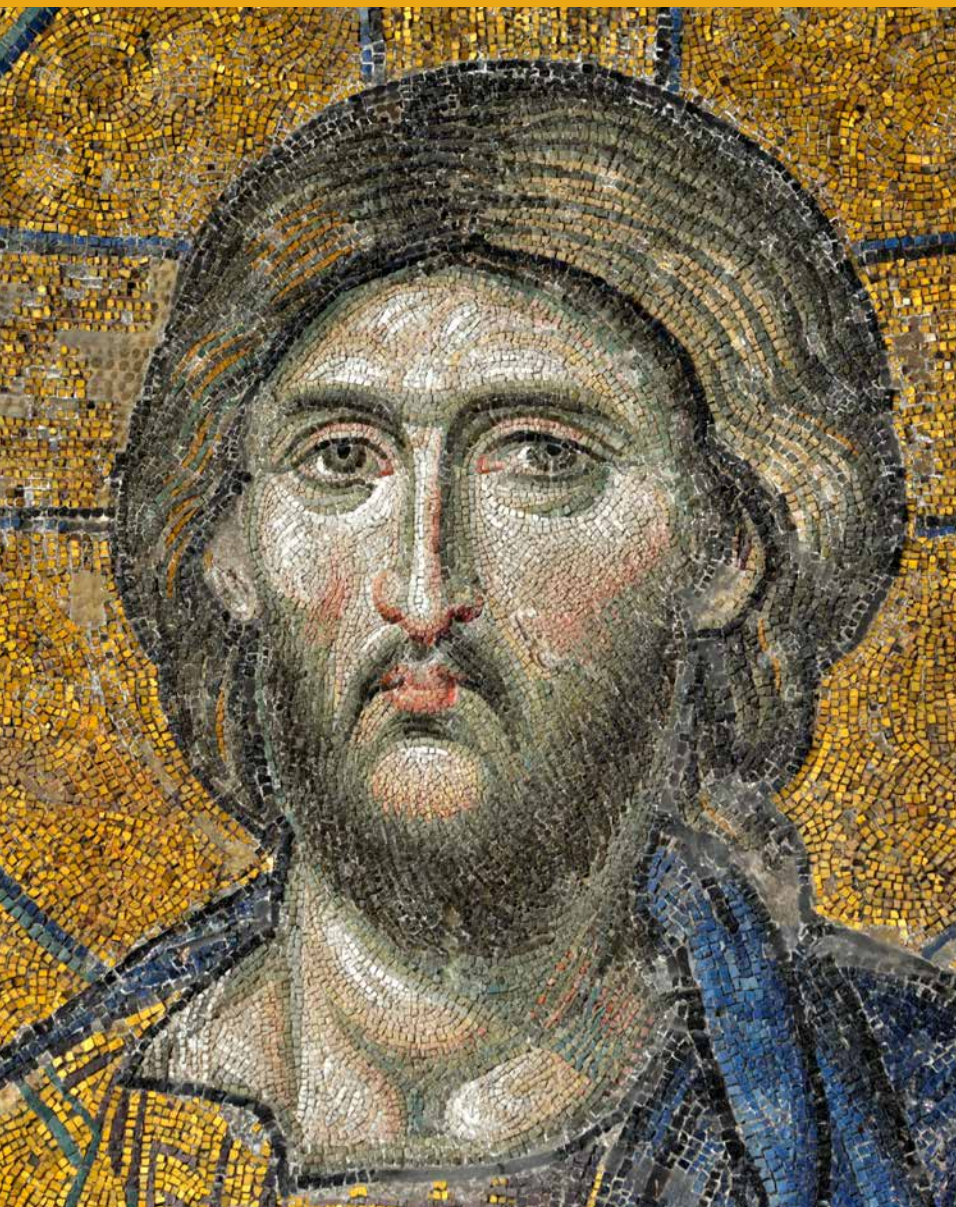




ALWAYS OUR PARISHIONERS

Renewing Our Hope in Christ

A Pastoral Letter on Caring
for the Sick and the Dying



Pope Francis
writes in his
2024 Message for
the 32nd World
Day of the Sick:

At this time of epochal change, we Christians in particular are called to adopt the compassion-filled gaze of Jesus. Let us care for those who suffer and are alone, perhaps marginalized and cast aside. With the love for one another that Christ the Lord bestows on us in prayer, especially in the Eucharist, let us tend the wounds of solitude and isolation. In this way, we will cooperate in combating the culture of individualism, indifference and waste, and enable the growth of a culture of tenderness and compassion.

Introduction

As we enter the Jubilee Year 2025, Pope Francis reminds us that we are all “Pilgrims of Hope.”

The theme of the Jubilee Year calls on all of us to renew our hope in Christ. Despite wars, pandemics, poverty, and the confusion and fear which permeate society, Jesus offers salvation and love to all.

Yet, at times we can feel abandoned and alone, even in our own families and in our own parishes.

Always Our Parishioners, a new eparchial initiative to coincide with the Jubilee Year, invites us to renew our hope in Christ by reinvigorating our pastoral care of the isolated, the sick and the dying in each parish.

A Personal Invitation from Christ

We read in Matthew's Gospel:

The Lord said: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:35-40).

Our response to Christ's personal invitation to live out the Gospel message is known in the Church as the *corporal works of mercy*. These works of mercy address the physical needs of the sick, the poor, and the needy in our midst: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, give shelter to travellers, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.



Living Out the Works of Mercy

Always Our Parishioners is a practical way of living out the works of mercy in showing kindness and love to our parishioners who are elderly at home or in care centres as well as those who are younger and sick or have undergone surgery and are recovering.

The need is the same. Whether away from their parish for a Sunday or two or no longer able to attend at all, they are *Always Our Parishioners*. As permanent members of the Body of Christ, they cannot be forgotten or abandoned. If they are unable to come to church to be nourished by hearing the Word of God or receiving the Divine Eucharist, then the Church must go to them. It is our Christian duty to provide them with ongoing pastoral care. This is the work that Christ himself entrusts to us in carrying out his mission in the Church today.

An Example

In contemplating whether this initiative would meet the concrete needs of our faithful, I shared the proposal with a number of individuals, clergy and laity alike. Andrew was one of them.

I shared with Andrew that our pastors and parishes do a good job, as best we can, in visiting the sick and the shut-ins with some extra effort at Christmas and Easter. But I was concerned that in-between these visits our parishioners can feel neglected. I wondered whether there was a way for them to be visited even weekly by the pastor or another member of the parish whether on Sunday or another day during the week. We would bring them Holy Communion, pray with them, bring them a copy of the weekly parish bulletin, share with them the latest news and events from the parish. In a word, be a real connection for them with the local parish, be the face of the Church, be the face of Christ for them on a regular basis.

I remember Andrew's reaction. He was silent for a long time. At first I thought that the idea was not well received by him. Then he spoke, "Bishop, my dad suffers from diabetes and will probably lose his legs soon. While Dad receives professional care during the week, on weekends my mom is the primary caregiver. Neither Mom nor Dad have been in church for the last several years. What hurts most though is no one from their local parish has visited nor even called once these past several years. Bishop, it's a wonderful idea!" Then he cried. Then I cried.

But I didn't let it go at that, "Andrew, I know you live several hours from your mom and dad, but could you not see yourself committing to visiting Mom and Dad on a fairly regular basis, bringing them the Divine Eucharist with permission of the local pastor? And could you see yourself doing the same for someone in need here at your local parish on a weekly basis? Could you make that commitment for say two or three months, and then revisit the need?" Andrew, with a smile on his face, said, "Absolutely."

There are lot of people like Andrew's dad and mom who are waiting for someone from their parish to visit them on a regular basis. Most are still waiting. We CAN do better! *Always Our Parishioners*.



We Need an Army

What we are suggesting will not be easy but is definitely possible. We will need an army of volunteers who are on a mission for Christ. And as the Church Militant we can and must form this army. Adult volunteers, under the direction of the pastor and parish pastoral council, trained in home and care centre pastoral ministry, would become an army of parish pastoral workers. And we need many of them, as many as possible. In smaller and rural settings, perhaps some four or five trained volunteers, in medium and large parishes, some ten or twenty or more.

What is required is a commitment on the part of individuals for a couple months at a time or longer. These individuals would pair up to visit two or three parishioners weekly, not necessarily on Sunday, to bring them Holy Communion if requested, and spend time in prayer and conversation. The volunteer parish pastoral workers would then take a break and renew their ministry for another period of time. We need an army, God's army!

Responsibilities

Among the main responsibilities of the parish pastoral workers are:

- Weekly visits on Sunday or another day of the week
- Weekly phone calls when a visit is not possible
- Working in pairs to help carry on a conversation and protect the vulnerable
- Spend time with the elderly and young alike who are unable to come to church regularly or at all
- Visit those recovering from an illness or surgery in their homes or hospitals
- Bring Holy Communion if requested
- Pray the rosary, Jesus Prayer, or other appropriate prayers
- Read the past Sunday Gospel or Epistle
- Share the weekly parish bulletin and parish news
- Invite family members and neighbours to join in
- Arrange for a visit by a priest when desired for a pastoral visit, confession, or anointing of the sick



Training and Resources

Parish pastoral workers will receive training in the local parish in the ministry of pastoral care for homes, care centres, and hospitals, relevant to the local situation and ministry setting. The eparchial Family and Life Ministries Office, with the help of experienced hospital chaplains and health care workers, will offer workshops and on-going support for parish pastoral workers.

There are several useful resources to begin this journey:

- *A Practical Handbook and Resource Guide for Pastoral Care Visitors* (Archeparchy of Winnipeg, 2007) is an excellent resource on what is pastoral care; the ministry of presence; ministering in particular to the elderly, those with dementia, the dying, the grieving, etc.; a prayer for pastoral care workers; and a list of tips for fruitful ministry.
- The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops provides an excellent resource on suffering and end of life in its *Horizons of Hope, A Toolkit for Catholic Parishes on Palliative Care*.

Given the nature of this ministry, parish pastoral workers will be trained in *Safe Environments and the Protection of Children, Youth, and Vulnerable Adults* to ensure their own safety and the safety of others.



Conclusion

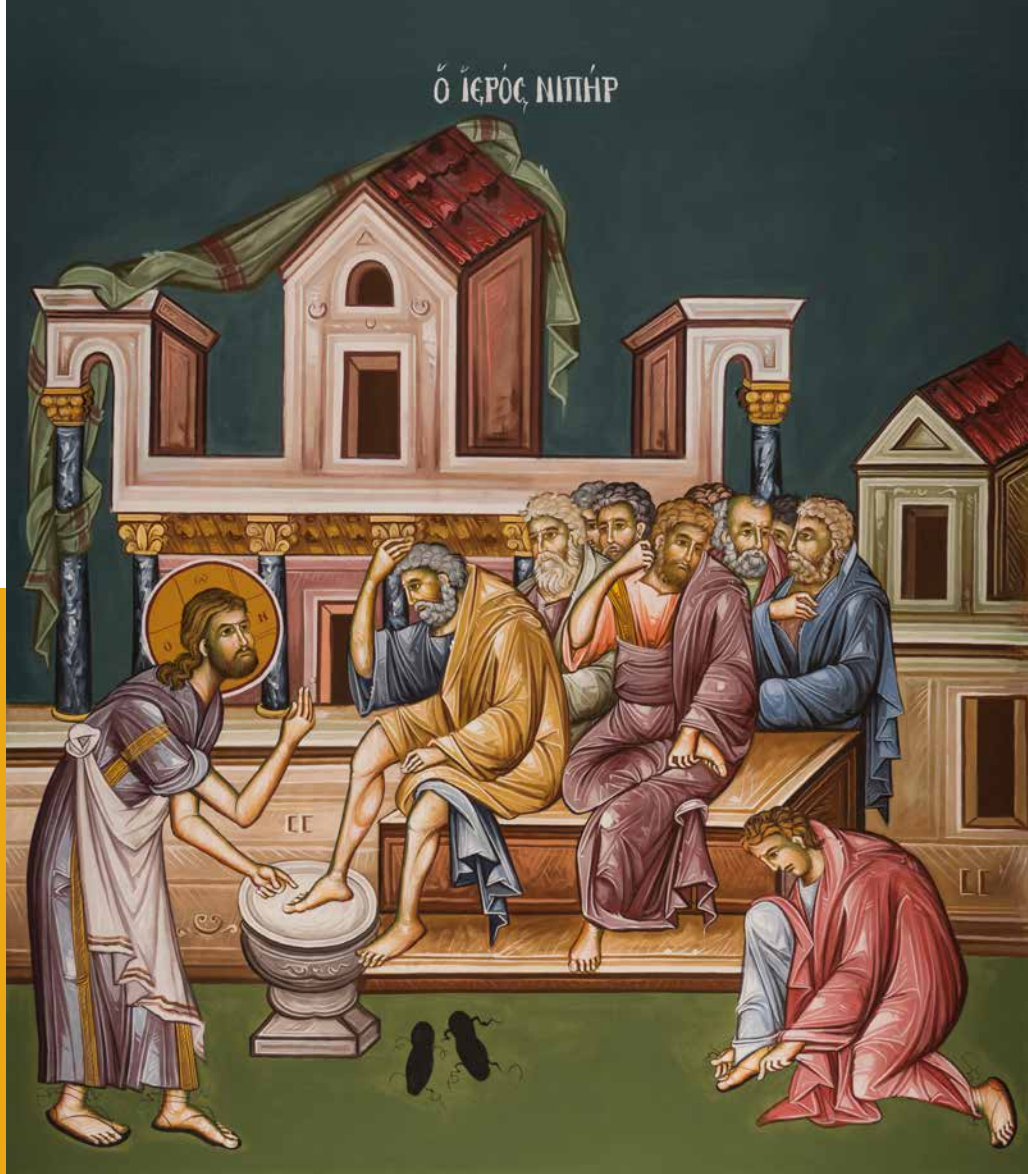
The Jubilee Year's logo features four stylized figures that represent humanity from the four corners of the earth. The figures embrace each other to symbolize the solidarity and fraternity that should unite all peoples. The figure at the front holds onto a cross, which is a sign of faith and hope.

The 2025 Jubilee Year, Pilgrims of Hope, has provided us with a unique opportunity to renew our commitment and ministry to those in our parishes who are not able to come to church on a regular basis or at all. Yet, they are *Always Our Parishioners*.

Let us minister to them in new ways, being the Face of Christ and the Face of the Church, allowing God's grace to flow in holiness of heart.

Always Our Parishioners!





A Prayer of Pope Francis for the Sick and the Dying

The sick, the vulnerable and the poor are at the heart of the Church; they must also be at the heart of our human concern and pastoral attention. May we never forget this! And let us commend ourselves to Mary Most Holy, Health of the Sick, that she may intercede for us and help us to be artisans of closeness and fraternal relationships.

(2024 Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 32nd World Day of the Sick)



Always Our Parishioners: Renewing Our Hope in Christ, Pastoral Letter on Caring for the Sick and the Dying, Bishop David Motiuk, February 2, 2025, Feast of the Encounter of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ © Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton 2025. All rights reserved. www.eeparchy.com