

Psalm 114:5



Easter 2021

"We always mention you in our prayers and thank God for you all, and constantly remember before God our Father how you have shown your faith in action, worked for love and persevered through hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Th 1:2-3).

*To you all,
brothers and sisters
of the diocesan Church ...*

Dear friends,

*I address this letter to you
loving you as Christ Jesus loves you*

1. "We wish you the grace and peace of God our Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God whenever I think of you ; and every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy [...] You have a permanent place in my heart [...] and God knows how much I miss you all, *loving you as Christ Jesus loves you*. My prayer is that your love for each other may increase more and more and never stop improving your knowledge and deepening your perception, *so that you can always recognise what is best*" (Ph 1:2-10). That is how I feel as I join you now : like Paul did to the Christians of Philippi, I address this letter to you "loving you as Christ Jesus loves you" (Ph 1:8).

2. **When I arrived a year ago, someone asked me what was "my" programme. Nothing other than to be *together*, listening to the Spirit so as to receive his messages of today *together*.** I remember having said on the day that you welcomed me : "I would like that patience, the patience of discernment, that you have had for three years, allowing us to continue to live together, helping us to listen to what Jesus, the first to be present here among us, is waiting to live through us so as to be even more present through prayer and in serving the Algerian world of today. That is what we are going to try to receive from God."

3. **We have been engaged together for a year in this work of "perceptiveness in discerning what is important" (Ph 1:9-10).** In the midst of unexpected circumstances we trust in he who said : "I am going to teach you, to show you the road to follow, advise you watch over you" (Ps 31:8). We have been stimulated by being one small, living family. Let us thank God that since last summer we have been able to have all the diocesan meetings that we had planned. Among them are : priests and religious in September, Algerian Catholics in October, the diocesan assembly and the students' meeting in November, in January for those who are consecrated, the new Pastoral Council in February...

4. Listening to the Word and to the realities of the country, we have undertaken a review our lives, identifying our needs, aspirations and priorities.

Little by little the light shines, lines become clearer, priorities emerge, a project takes form. "An enlarged council ensures consistency" (Prov 15:22) in faithfulness to our past and open to the calls of the Spirit. This letter is the fruit of the Spirit's work speaking through us all. It aims to bring together his inspirations, welcomed and matured in our diocesan family, not so much as a programme as a point of reference : what priorities ? what to do ? how to do it ? Like Mary "pondering all these things in her heart" (cf. Lk 2:19), I have carried all these meetings in my prayer. A light has emerged. I humbly share that with you through these pages.



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Apostles of tenderness

5. "What must we do ?" That is the question that the crowd asked the apostles on Pentecost day, just after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:37). It is also that which the people asked John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan (cf. Lk 3:10). And it is the same question that we have shared in our meetings, addressed to the Spirit with a confidence similar to that which Paul talks about : "The Spirit is our life ; we should let him control our lives" (cf. Gal 5:25).

6. As he did with the Apostles, Jesus chooses us for two things : "to be with him" and "to proclaim the Good News" (cf. Mk 3:14). By following him (cf. Mk 1:17), by listening to him (cf. Jn 8:47), by imitating him (cf. Ep 5:1), by living the Gospel. To proclaim the Gospel – literally "the Good News" – is to radiate the joy of living with Jesus. Above all, this happens through a way of being which expresses that joy and makes it desirable. Christianity is not a "religion of the book", but rather an invitation to live in relationship with the God of love revealed by Jesus

Christ. To proclaim the Gospel is to welcome that joy, to live it, to share it. Many people will never read a gospel, other than the gospel that is incarnated in our lives. So long as we live it, truly and joyfully.

7. The "Good News" is often reduced to *kerigma*, the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Of course, that is the central mystery of our faith. Christ died for you, for me, for the Algerian people, for everyone, without distinction (cf. 2 Co 5:15). But the Good News didn't begin there : "Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring villages, so as to proclaim the Good News there as well ; it is for that that I have come" (Mk 1:38), as he said at the very outset of his public ministry. And just a bit further : "And he chose twelve whom he called apostles to be with him and to send them out to proclaim the Good News with the authority to expel demons" (Mk 3:14-15). And all that was before his death and resurrection.

8. What is that Good News proclaimed by Jesus before his Resurrection ? It is that of the Kingdom. That came up in his first sermon at Nazareth when he quoted part of the Prophet Isaiah : "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to give sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Lk 4:18-19 ; cf. Is 61:1-2). And he adds : "This passage of Scripture has come true today, as you heard it read" (Lk 4:21), "travelling all over Galilee, announcing the Good News about the Kingdom, healing the sick and curing all diseases" (cf. Mt 4:23).

9. Even before the *kerygma* was achieved, the Good News is that God, in Jesus, wants to be with us, to come close to each one of us, and to say to everyone, without any distinction : "You are precious in my eyes, honoured in my sight, and I love you" (cf. Is 43:4). God, who creates in his own image and likeness (cf. Gn 1:26), who blesses (cf. Ep 1:3), who abases himself (cf. Ph 2:8), who approaches (cf. Jn 21:13), who embraces (cf. Mk 10:16) and who touches (cf. Mk 1:41), who raises and who saves (cf. Lk 17:19), who heals and who pardons (cf. Mk 2:10-11) : "Our God is tenderness" (Ps 114:5), and "crowns each one of us with love and tenderness" (cf. Ps 102:4).

10. The biblical word used here to designate tenderness suggests gentleness, delicacy, goodness, mercy, goodwill, compassion and, in a deeper sense, a mother's womb : *Rahem* in Hebrew – the root is the same in Arabic – *splankna* in Greek, the language of the Gospel. When the Bible tells us that God is tenderness (cf. Ex 34:6 ; Ps 85:15 ; Ps 102:8 ; Ps 110,4 ; Ps 114:5...) it shows us "a God who is moved and softens towards us like a mother when she takes her child in her arms, wanting only to love, protect, help, be ready to give everything, even herself [...] a love that we can thus define, in the best sense of the word, as visceral" (Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 13th January 2016).

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11. Tenderness is that love which keeps in touch and opens paths by gentle self-giving.

Like the path that opens for a child in its mother's womb. When God reveals his "tenderness" to Moses (cf. Ex 34:6), he also tells him that he is going to open a path : "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you" (Ex

34:10). And when Jesus is born, the divine love that is in himself (cf. 1 Jn 4:8) enters into a relationship with the human race and opens the path that leads to the Father, in the mildness of a baby's face.

12. "Our God is tenderness" (Ps 114:5) because he is relationship, he enters into relationship and establishes relationships by opening these paths in the life of each one of us. Every human being is the object of God's infinite tenderness, and he himself is present in their lives. Jesus offered his precious blood on the cross for that person. (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* n° 274). Tenderness is that love which enters into a relationship for the joy of being with the other person : to receive, to give, to grow together, without calculation or lustful desire. Tenderness is both welcome and gift, the soul of every true relationship, a place of confidence for mutual trust, a promise of growth achieved by following the same path hand in hand.

13. Tenderness is therefore neither weakness nor naivety, but rather a gentle and humble engagement in the love that Jesus shows us. It goes with gentleness and humility, the two qualities of the heart of Jesus (cf. Mt 11:29) which is the personification of God's power and God's wisdom (1 Cor 1:24). Tenderness expresses this power and this wisdom through gentleness and humility : the power of love that saves by persevering "right to the end" (cf. Jn 13:1) ; and wisdom, "but one and who can do all things" (cf. Wis 7:27) and "orders the universe well" (Wis 8:1).

14. Tenderness is the trait of Jesus that we should imitate and which, through the Holy Spirit, at the same time puts us in a relationship with the Father and with each other ; at the heart of the world and at the heart of God. "Jesus himself is the model of this method of evangelization which brings us to the very heart of his people [...] Jesus's sacrifice on the cross is nothing else than the culmination of the way he lived his entire life. Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep ; arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world. But we do so not from a sense of obligation, not as a burdensome duty, but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives" (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* n° 269).

15. We are apostles of tenderness. That is our identity and our mission.

"God is love" (1 Jn 4:8) : a Father "full of tenderness" (2 Cor 3:2), whom the person of the Son reveals in perfection (cf. Heb 1:3). This love is poured into our hearts by the gift of the Spirit who makes us sons (cf. Rom 5:5), heirs to a Kingdom which *is* the Good News. Such is the joy that we are called upon to live and to proclaim. Living tenderly in the intimacy of one-to-one with Jesus is "becoming his disciple" (Mt 11:29), "being with him" (Mk 3:14). Living tenderly in the face-to-face meeting with others is being missionary, "proclaiming the Good News" (Mk 3:14).

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16. Tenderness cannot be separated from encounter. It is in meeting that tenderness draws its strength, lives and gives of itself. In North Africa we have long liked to describe ourselves as the "Church of encounter" : the tenderness that we live in our relationship with Jesus allows us to enter with him into relationships with others with that same tenderness. It lets us share with others, lets us grow by finding his face in the face of our neighbour : "Appearances notwithstanding, every person is *immensely holy and deserves our love*. Consequently, if I can help at least one person to have a better life, that already justifies the offering of my life. It is a wonderful thing to be God's faithful people. We achieve fulfilment when we break down walls and our heart is filled with faces and names !" (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* n° 274).

17 In us, all around us, in our communities and our society, there is a great thirst. A thirst for tenderness.

I do not have much perspective. I continue to learn and to discover everything anew. But that strikes me and challenges me. During our meetings, if I recall correctly, we have only used the word "tenderness" once. And yet everything points to it. Our God is tenderness and calls on us to live it by encounter : *in* intimacy with Jesus, *by* our communion with each other, *towards* brotherhood with all. Our orientations and priorities, no matter how we identify them and express them, lead us to tenderness in these three directions.

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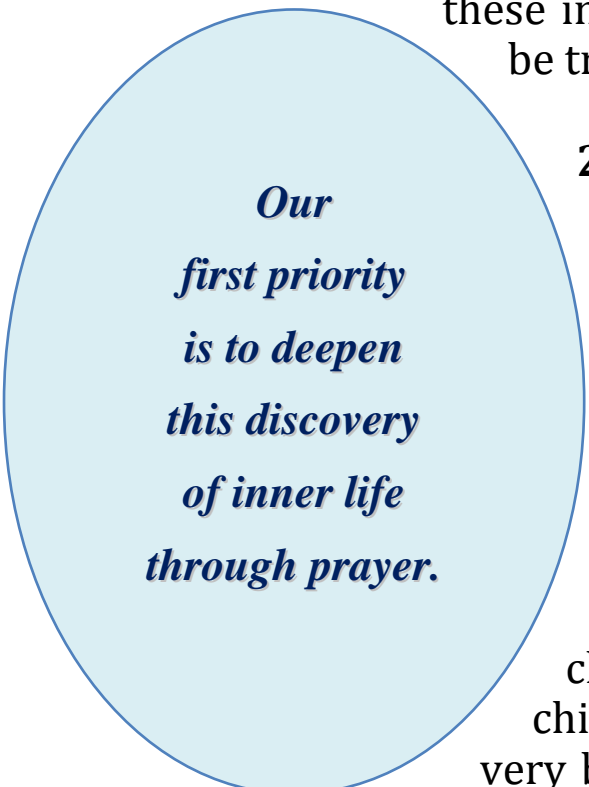
***I* n intimacy with Jesus**

18. Tenderness is the power by which God loves us, makes us live and grow in the intimacy which it places between himself and us. Through the mouth of the prophet Hosea, God says to his people : "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms ; I led them with

cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them" (Hos 11:3-4). God's love lets us become our living selves : "Let your tenderness come to me and I will live" (Ps 118:77). It "widens our vision", to use one of the expressions we used in these past months, allowing first of all our intimate relationship with God to grow.

19. During these months of the pandemic we have crossed a desert. It is in the desert that God calls for tenderness in a special way : "[...] I will betroth you to me forever ; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness and tenderness, and you will acknowledge the LORD" (Hos 2:16, 21-22). The pandemic has reminded us of our fragility. It has also aided a deepening of our inner path with God.

20. The desert has recentered us on interior life as a reality and a powerful calling. In one of our meetings someone said that during these months God has called us to "welcome ourselves anew interiorly". Over and above the desert's harshness, we have found there a new taste for the value of silence, for prayer, for the inner life. It is because we have had less to do than normal that our attention has been turned that way. And we feel challenged : to constantly and principally cultivate these interior feelings so that whatever we do may be truly righteous.



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21. Our first priority is to deepen this discovery of inner life through prayer. "We are here to pray," someone said at the pastoral council. The monks of Tibhirine liked to present themselves as "men of prayer among others who pray". We are all called on to be people who pray. Praying is giving God the joy of holding us in his arms to show us his tenderness : "I have calmed and quieted myself, my soul is like a little child on its mother's breast ; like a weaned child I am content" (Ps 130:2). Prayer is the very breath of our lives in the tenderness of God.

Let us learn to pray. Take the time to pray. Encourage ourselves to pray. Let us do what is needed each day to offer to God the joy of prayer. "The more we are alone with Jesus, the more we taste him, love likes the face to face [...]" (Charles de Foucauld, *Meditation on Mark 6:30-32*).

22. Do we know how to pray ? How to progress ? I

invite us to ask that question, each one of us

and in our parish communities, asking what

might be useful and what we could start doing

straight away for that. Do not let us be afraid of

the question, the same that the disciples asked

Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). A

question that is never fully answered. What

can we do to joyfully deepen our prayer

experience ? Among the suggestions which

came from our meetings I have noted : the

creation of prayer-groups, something that has

already become a reality in some of our

communities ; a school of prayer and of

spiritual life in the light of Saint Augustine and

of the "interior light"; founding a house of

contemplation which would be an oasis of

prayer and resources for all... In order to grow

as men and women of prayer, let us, little by little,

set in motion that and all that the Holy Spirit will

suggest in this way.

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23. There exists no real prayer that is not nourished by the Word of God. Prayer is a conversation with God who initiates it through his Word.

During the pandemic we have had the experience of "a liturgy of

the Word with plenty of time". Many of us have discovered a stronger

intimacy with the Word of God, meditated and shared. "You are truly my

disciples if you remain faithful to my word" (Jn 8:31). In the IVth century

Saint Jerome said : "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ"

(*Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue). And two centuries later Saint Gregory

the Great added : "The sacred Scriptures grow with whoever reads

them" (*Homilies on Ezekiel*, I.VII.8). "The more we frequent them, the less

we get tired of them ; the more we meditate on them, the more we love them" (*Morals on the Book of Job*, XX.I.1).

24. And we can also ask the question : what needs do we have today to increase our knowledge of the Bible and what means should we take to do that ? Bible groups already exist. They are an excellent way, among others, to progress. It would be good for each parish community to reflect on how to deepen and cultivate for each and every one a closeness to the Word of God by identifying whatever it needs, by already launching whatever can be done and by proposing, if possible, tools which could help us all on a diocesan level.



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25. In a broader way, as we have expressed during the meetings, we must gradually advance in the direction of a common course of training, both initial and ongoing, which in no way removes either creativity or local specificity, but which supports unity, growth in faith, the permanent reflection of our diocesan family as a whole. In their small way, the biblical commentaries that I have sent out by audio during the lockdown period have played their part in this common formation effort.

26. I invite each parish community to identify the needs it feels and the contribution it can make to the benefit of all in the question of formation : human, biblical, spiritual, catechetical, missionary and even secular, in such a way that we can, in response to these needs, see together how best to achieve concretely these objectives on a diocesan level. Among our priorities must certainly be the elaboration of a better structured common pastoral plan of preparation for the sacraments of initiation, confirmation in particular. Added to this is the pastoral of vocation and engagement for the Kingdom in all aspects of Church life (marriage, diaconate, priesthood and religious or consecrated life).

27. In terms of its full place in the history of the country, our Church has a very rich history. Let us together remind ourselves of this inherited wealth. Just mentioning the time of antiquity, the region has numerous first-class archeological sites which witness to its history : Tiddis, Djemila, Hippo, Timgad... In the north-east many saints have also made their mark on the history of Algeria and the Church of the earliest centuries of Christianity : James and Marianus, Crispina, Maximilian, Optatus, Augustine, Fulgentius... and many others. In several of our meetings, the idea arose of learning to know better this wealth, to give it its rightful place, to expand pilgrimages, to look back to our roots, not from nostalgia for the past but for the good of our spiritual life and our commitment of today. This is an important field for us to explore and develop.

28. May prayer and formation, by which our intimacy with God can grow, be the two pillars of our renewed engagement in the service of the Kingdom in today's Algeria : "May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ep 3.17-19).

***T*hrough communion with each other**

29. Tenderness is the climate in which we are called by Jesus to live in brotherly communion with each other : to "be with him" (Mk 3:14) who asks us to love one another as he himself has loved us (cf. Jn 13:34 ; 15:12) ; and to "proclaim the Good News (Mk 3:14) for "by this will everyone know that you are my disciples : if you love one another" (Jn 13:35). Saint Paul never ceases to remind the first Christian communities : "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and

patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful" (Col 3: 12-15).



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[...]

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30. Yes, let us live with thanks that we are one family ! That is the greatest cause of joy expressed in our meetings.

"The Church is one family" [...] She brings well-being, a sense of integration [...] The sense of belonging is strong, we belong to something that is bigger than ourselves", to quote just some of what was said. We in the north-east of Algeria are a part of the great family of the Universal Church. A family that is, for sure, small and fragile, but beautiful, radiant, rich in diversity, reflecting the universality of the Church where, as Saint Paul said to the Galatians, "you are all now one in Jesus Christ" (Ga 3:28). Our Church is already Algerian because she is the Universal Church present in Algeria. Of course, there is work ahead of us, a lot of work, for the joy of the Gospel to be expressed in the culture and become more a part of the culture. But let us not forget : no local


Church can move forward on the path of inculturation without above all knowing itself to be, through its members and each of its faces, the Universal Church sent to a people and carried by that people.

31. Our family needs to be reinforced, to welcome newcomers, to grow. We are few, too few. That is worrying. In some places age is a problem, some priests are responsible for several parishes... As I have said several times in these past months, "being small is not a weakness, but rather a promise". It is an expression which touches us and which

should encourage us to work with confidence to reinforce our communities and "widen the space of our tents" (cf. Is 54:2). If the Spirit is willing, we could also launch new points of presence there where we were before and where we will be tomorrow. For that we rely on prayer, for the healthy inheritance of relationships and friendships woven over the years, listening to the people and listening to God who calls us through them. The aim is not to be numerous. We should remain small. Discretion and humility are the state of mind in which we want to share the life of the people and be in their service. But to be numerous enough to live serenely and look to the future. We have started inviting and we are happy with the positive way in which our requests have been received. We should pray for those who are preparing to come from afar to join our family here in the country... God is the master of time and knows our needs.

32. My hope is that we might grow in our diversity of origins, of charismas and states of life in order to better live as Church and favour our reflection, especially that of the mission.

In our little Church, the Holy Spirit quickly leads us to understand that no one charisma ever has an absolute value. That is an essential experience, albeit sometimes difficult to put into practice. One cannot fully live the particular grace of one's own life with its unique identity and with what is indispensable for the Body's growth not while others are trying to do the same, using forms and ways that are often very different. The only absolutely worthwhile way is in a communion in the same charity which feeds on each one's commitment according their own situation in life, in that communion of which charity is the basis and foundation. Let us thank the Lord that we are called to live it and to deepen it together.



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33. In our sharing I have felt that there is a need to live a certain decompartmentalization. Of course, it is quite legitimate for us to opt for affinities based on nationality, language, age, charismas, styles and states of life, as students, as consecrated persons, Algerian Catholics, youth, priests, laity... All that is useful and very necessary. So long as it doesn't confine us only there. To welcome, to know, appreciate, accept each other in the name of Jesus Christ, beyond our leanings and natural habits. To have the courage to simply meet each other, to break down distances, even walls where they exist, to avoid loneliness, to grow in the joy of being together, making a community of everyone. We must be able to say in all truth and sincerity about each of our brothers and sisters : it is basically good that we are called to live in the heart of one same family. That begins with simple things such as, for example, at the end of Mass or during our meetings taking the time to be together, heading especially to those that we know least. A parish, any community, must be for all its members a place of freedom, of encounter, of flourishing in faith. A place of communion where people can know each other, pray together, share, serve and learn. Where they can also confront difficulties together in confidence, in transparency and in truth. In our parish communities, what can we do to encourage this brew of our rich diversity in which the Lord always invites us to advance ?



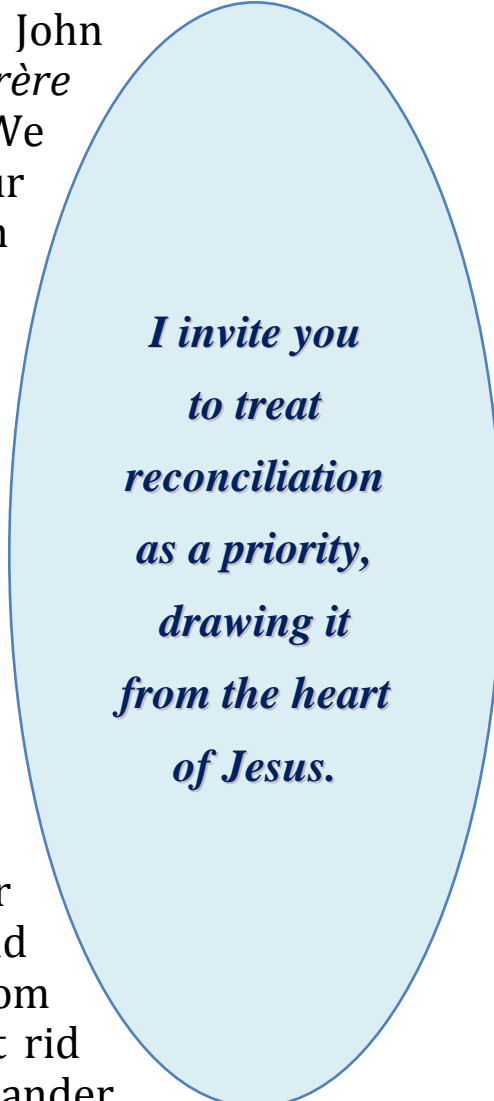
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34. We are going to see how to revitalize our regional sectors as soon as possible.

The idea is for several parishes to get together, to meet in hospitality, prayer, sharing and reflection. These sectors now only exist virtually. We need that as intermediaries between the local level and the diocesan one. Geographic consideration, styles, aims, composition – it involves redefining all that so as to revive this dynamic as soon as possible. None of us should feel alone. No community should feel that it is an 'island'. Family support, hospitality, fraternal meeting and mutually following

example are all essential elements for our balance and for the quality of our ongoing insertion in Algerian society

35. Some distances are easy to cover, others more arduous, when they come from what damages relationships. Enmity, judging, harsh words, anger, outbursts, tension between people, refusal to pardon or to be pardoned, to go towards others or to withdraw when necessary... It is normal to feel hurt in the face of such obstacles. We have all been attracted by Christ's gentleness and it is that which we hope to live ourselves. Let us lean on that to overcome them. "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles" (Heb 12:1). Tenderness is not softness but rather strength in true and open love, opening ways there where they are obstructed : "Sometimes we have to be firm, even forceful, with our brothers. Often we need to be humble, to admit our part of responsibility for the divisions and disputes. Occasionally we need to offer both our hands to two other brothers to bring them together [...]" (Bp John MacWilliam, "*Nel deserto sulle orme di Frère Charles*", Mondo e Missione, dicembre 2020). We should cultivate kindness, accepting our differences and the offer of others' help. Then where there is stubbornness, refusal or distancing, let us bring gentleness, trust and joyful coming together. May Saint Paul's advice to the first Christians of Ephesus help us : "Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body. In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry [...] Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander,

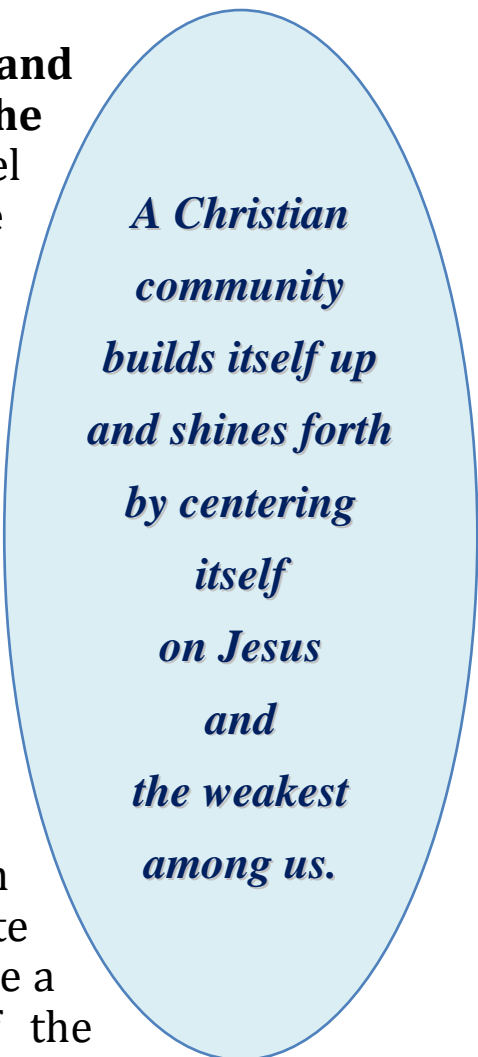


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along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ep 4:23-26, 29-32).

36. Following this path, I invite you to treat reconciliation as a priority, drawing it from the heart of Jesus. It is not always easy, bearing in mind distances and the shortage of priests, to be able to receive the sacrament of forgiveness. Nevertheless, it is a central element for our growth and our blossoming, both personal and community. Seek the means to live it joyfully and regularly. It strikes me as essential that we have a more active pastoral of reconciliation. As has been proposed, do not hesitate to call also on priests from outside the diocese to accompany us, especially at times of special liturgical significance. Reconciliation is the Lord's invitation to personal and fraternal conversion. But it is also a mission (cf. 2 Cor 5:18) that he entrusts to us all, that of being peacemakers (Mt 5:9), something that is only really possible if we ourselves live in that way.

37. A Christian community builds itself up and shines forth by centering itself on Jesus and the weakest among us. That is what the Gospel teaches us over and over again. Take the example of that crowd that came to listen to Jesus' teaching in chapter 5 of Saint Luke's gospel (Lk 5:17-26). Among those there were people of many origins and no doubt many opinions, "pharisees and doctors of the Law, coming from all the villages of Galilee and Judea as well as from Jerusalem" (Lk 5:17). Some people arrived carrying a paralytic man on a stretcher ; they lowered him from the roof to be close to Jesus, who forgave him his sins and told him to get up and walk. The whole crowd was seized with amazement and started praising God. "All", says the text, "were in awe and they said 'we have seen extraordinary things today'" (cf. Lk 5:26). Despite the crowd being so disparate initially, they became a community of praise and witness because of the

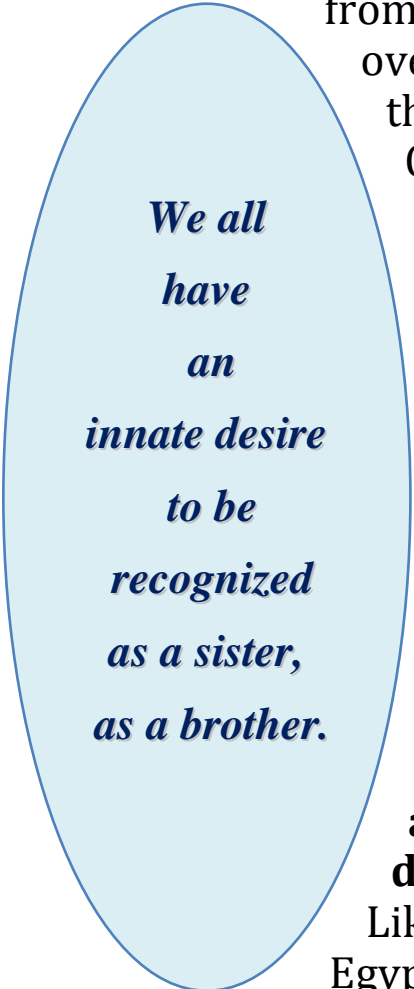


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presence in their midst of Jesus and of the paralytic. Let us take that as a model for each of our parishes and communities : that Jesus himself be at the centre, in his Word and in the Eucharist, but also in the face of the least among us with whom he wants to be identified. "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40). Those who are on the peripheries of this world are right in the centre with Jesus according to the logic of the Kingdom. The more that the Church enters into that logic, the more we will be servants of the Kingdom – centred on Jesus in his Word and the eucharist and in the little ones. I encourage you to see how, in each of your communities, you can best live this conversion that the Gospel invites us to adopt. It is never acquired once and for all. Who among those around us are those "little ones" that God wants us to put with him at the centre of our lives today ? Migrants, prisoners, people who are fragile or alone, and certainly many others that we should seek, welcome and serve... Let us go to meet them, to welcome them to the "centre" with Jesus Eucharist : in such a way we will grow very quickly as a community of praise and witness, putting our priorities where the Kingdom demands.

Towards brotherhood with all

38. Tenderness is the way by which brotherhood with everyone is built up, insofar as it concerns the thirst that we all have to love and to be loved. Brotherhood is a horizon that grows. "All brothers, we are that already and also called to become that. It's a question of passing from brotherhood received to brotherhood chosen. A brotherhood which doesn't ignore our human limits but which overcomes them" (Bp Jean-Paul Vesco, *Billet de l'évêque*, Site Internet de l'Eglise Catholique d'Algérie, January 2021). Through tenderness we can be aware that we can act together, open paths together, love together, be witnesses to a joyful, expected and fruitful harmony. "When man feels truly loved, he feels inclined to love. Besides, if God is infinite tenderness, then man too, created in His image, is capable of tenderness. Tenderness, then, far



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from being reduced to sentimentalism, is the first step to overcome the withdrawal into oneself, to leave behind the self-centeredness that disfigures human freedom. God's tenderness leads us to understand that love is the meaning of life. Thus we understand that the root of our freedom is never self-referential. And we feel called to pour into the world the love received from the Lord, to channel it into the Church, in the family, in society, to interpret it in serving and giving ourselves" (Pope Francis, *Address to participants at the Conference on the theme 'The Theology of Tenderness of Pope Francis'*, 13th September 2018).

39. Over and above the timidity, sometimes even the fear, that comes with owning up or admitting it to others, we all have an innate desire to be recognized as a sister, as a brother.

Like the patriarch Joseph receiving his brothers in Egypt when there was famine in the Land of Canaan. His brothers who had betrayed him, sold him, abandoned him to be taken away by foreign traders, Midianites or Ishmaelites and later Pharaoh himself, before becoming the steward of all the wealth of Egypt. His brothers didn't know who he was when they arrived at the palace. They offered their diplomatic gifts as if addressing his function rather than his person. When Joseph saw Benjamin, like him the son of Rachel who had died giving birth to Benjamin, he could not withhold his tears : "Deeply moved in his heart at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there" (Gen 43:30). "Moved in his heart" (in his womb), the centre of tenderness in the sense of the word used in the Bible for both men and women. He is very emotional and suffers greatly from not being recognized initially for who he is, but only for what he does. There was an evening, then a dinner and a morning followed by a half-confession by his brothers... Joseph "could no longer contain himself before all his staff and shouts : 'Everybody go away !' When they are all alone, he lets his brothers know who he is. He weeps so loudly that it can be heard by the Egyptians and even in Pharaoh's house" (Gen 45:1-2). "There exists

in us also an ardent desire to be recognized as a brother. The Word of God who reveals his love for us and our call to be sons can make our hearts burn like a glowing lava which has been contained for too long and wants only to expand. But it must first of all spread its warmth through shared gestures. That, it would seem, is what happened one evening at Emmaus" (Marius Garau, *La rose de l'imam*, 8, Paris 1983). That is also what I tried to say on the day of my arrival : "Please, look on me first of all as a brother, and let us live together as brothers and sisters". Thank you for having listened to that. I learn to be a father by being a brother first of all. To take a slightly adapted but famous word of our patron saint : "For you I am a father, with you I am a brother. What I am for you makes me giddy, what I am with you reassures me" (cf. Saint Augustine Sermon 340:1).

40. We are called to build this brotherhood with everyone, and in a special way with our Moslem brothers and sisters. The Episcopal Conference of the North Africa Region recalled that in its pastoral letter *Servants of Hope* : "The primary concern of our churches : meeting with Muslims. Legitimate pastoral needs, more oriented towards the Christian world, cannot permit our churches to deviate from this vocation. Indeed, the characteristic feature of our vocation within the universal Church is that aspect of being 'Churches of Encounter'. This encounter is experienced as sacramental, as a sign of the presence of Christ in his Body which is the Church, a sign of the presence of the love of the father for all his children. Our churches make their own this saying of St. Augustine : "For us, to live is to love". Our churches, as 'leaven in the dough' (cf. Mt 13:33) and 'salt of the Earth' (cf. Mt 5:13), cannot turn inwards, but must live lovingly and freely this vocation to encounter and to dialogue with Muslims, which is a call to become brothers to all" (CERNA, *Servants of Hope*, 2.1, 1st December 2014) .

41. Tenderness is the attitude which allows the reciprocal hospitality that we must exercise in order to build up brotherhood : "For every disciple of Jesus in our country, before anything else, before any pastoral, humanitarian, caritative, cultural or other activity, we must live a fundamental attitude that we can call reciprocal hospitality. That is a mutual openness in which we welcome the one who welcomes us, in which we learn to treat each other as benevolent brothers" (Bp Paul

Desfarges, *Une Eglise dans la mangeoire*, Christmas 2012). Tenderness which is exactly that, a place of confidence for mutual trust and a promise of growth advancing hand in hand, can make all that possible. Let us nurture that tenderness by gentleness listening, respect, kindness and that humility that lets us "recognize others as better than ourselves" (Ph 2:3). Accepting to be welcomed, commitment without offence, immediate appreciation, living encounter with a freedom that neither imposes nor wounds. Giving of ourselves and helping others to do likewise. Learning, too, from others so as to taste the joy of sharing together for each other. Brotherhood draws its strength from that tenderness which comes to each of us with the thirst to give of ourselves

to others. One of the little *fioretti* of our sisters of Tebessa says that in a lovely simple way. It happened at Souk Ahras in the days when the sisters had a house there :

"One day a very poor woman comes to the door of the community. A sister opens the door and the woman offers her a pancake, with a big smile, saying : 'It's for you !' The sister replies : 'Keep it for your children, that would be better'. But the woman answers : 'Take it, so that just for once I can hear someone say to me 'Thank you' ".

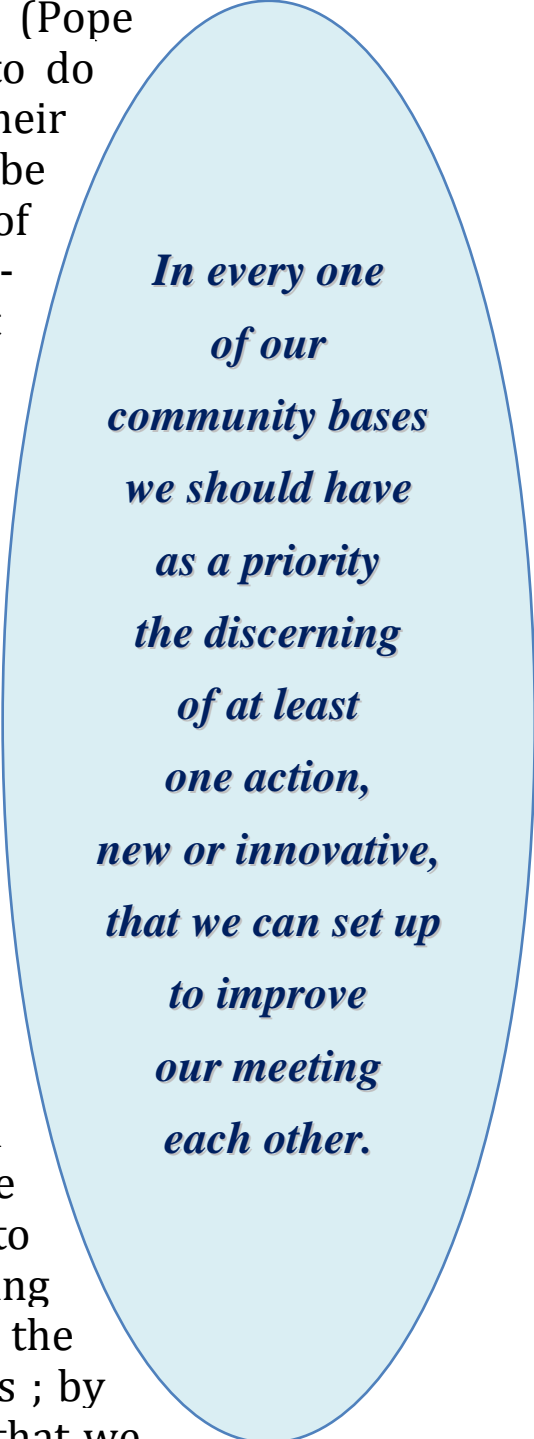
***Tenderness
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42. Tenderness enhances. Enhancing is both growing and helping to grow. Listening to someone else, accepting them fully, appreciating the best of what they bring, humanly and spiritually. That is often less a question of 'doing' than simply being willing. This form of presence is sometimes misunderstood. We need to be 'doing something' – that is

obvious. But let us be clear – the people do not expect us to be 'doing' so much as to be 'being there', available ; listening. People often tell us that, and we should listen to them. That means welcome, trust, closeness, immersion, prayer, humility, benevolence, availability. But also strength of spirit to always serve what is right or what should be, what is just and good for every human, in the spirit of the Kingdom and of the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:1-12). We can borrow the following words of Cardinal Duval who was the bishop of our diocese from 1947 to 1954 : "We must be upright, just and good, and always in that order".

43. The fact that people expect us to be first of all what we are does not mean giving up on further developing our activities. Tenderness leads to action : "What is tenderness ? It is love that draws near and becomes real. A movement that starts from our heart and reaches the eyes, the ears and the hands" (Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* n° 194). We are called to do great things. Not so much by their size as by their 'impact' in the sense that actions can usefully be measured but rather by the quality of spontaneous long-lasting and faithful face-to-face togetherness. The fruits of this will most often be humble, discreet and small, but of unique value in the spirit of the Kingdom. We are invited in our activities to encounter others in life-giving fruitfulness more than in quantitative effectiveness.

44. To this end, I invite you to discern how to best use our places of residence and our houses : to live encounter, to be of service, to live tenderly through shared concrete actions. Poverty, handicap, youth, children, feminine promotion, sewing, sport, environment, culture in all its forms... There is no shortage of ideas for us to reinforce that which already exists or even to open new paths. In every one of our community bases we should have as a priority the discerning of at least one action, new or innovative, that we can set up to improve our meeting each other. By listening prayerfully to what God asks of us and to the expectations of those we meet in our daily lives ; by making to most of friendships that we inherit, that we nurture and stimulate ; by looking for local partners with whom we can act long-term and in solidarity ; by being specific about ways of turning ideas into action. All that presupposes that we go to meet others, not with predefined programmes but with an openness to listening. "Go out to be more at home", as was said in one of our meetings. There is no



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need to rush, but with a desire to serve, to respond to God's calling which can be seen in the needs of the people, their means, their concrete engagement. "And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds" (Heb 10.24).

45. To go out, to meet, to serve, requires us to communicate as much as possible in the everyday language. No matter what our level - beginner, advanced, expert - I sincerely encourage those who need it to make an effort and to progress in the local dialect. It is the point that we have underlined the most in our sharing. One suggestion was made that we have a teacher of spoken Arabic for the diocese. That is a possibility, but not necessarily very practicable in view of the distances and the different lives we live. I invite each community to ask yourselves : how can we start and then progress in the language in our particular place and situation ? What means does it require ? What help might we need ? Depending on the situation in each place, we will see what can be put in place on a diocesan level. We should not forget that Arabic is not the only need. For many of us, the French language is one too. Our diversity is also linguistic. Other than the African languages which are by far the ones most spoken by the members of our community, we have the five principal ones of Arabic, French, English, Tamazight, and Portugese. Let us try to bear that in mind in our communication, both daily and diocesan, as well as in the patience that every encounter demands.

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46. Languages are an essential part of culture, and we should be attentive to culture in general. "Everything that is human concerns us" (Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, n. 101). It is in listening and being at the heart of the culture that we must discern the terrain of our meetings and the lines of action of our engagement. We should never imagine that we know it all : "Culture is a dynamic reality which a people constantly

recreates ; each generation passes on a whole series of ways of approaching different existential situations to the next generation, which must in turn reformulate it as it confronts its own challenges. Being human means 'being at the same time son and father of the culture to which one belongs' (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, n° 122). Those who join us for the first time must take the time for a real initiation in the culture of the country, in its most day to day aspects as well as Islam and everything that concerns religion in all its plurality. I ask that each one of you choose at least one aspect of the culture or the patrimony in which you can delve more deeply. Not necessarily to become an expert, but rather as a means of wonder, recognition, sharing and meeting. Are included : cuisine, handicraft, folklore, languages, history, religions, literature, music, paintings, cinema, fauna, flora, archeology architecture... There is no shortage of choice and all of it rich. Finally, I encourage you to optimize those occasions for meeting and reflection among several people on the 'collective realities' of the country and its society. This is a means of dialogue and mutual emulation. "Culture is above all agreeing to be present for each other and to welcome others despite our differences [...] in a process of incarnation. [...] Joining the culture of someone else is, like Christ in a way, becoming incarnate there where we are, sharing his humanity. [...] This dimension also works in another way, that of cultural sharing : in a brotherly exchange, helping the other to better understand his own culture and his history and also to be open to other cultures" (Bp Claude Rault, *L'Eglise diocésaine du Sahara algérien*, September 2011).



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47. This "work of incarnation" will also help us to better understand the questions we are asked, and to better see how to respond, "prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks, to give the reason for the hope that you have. With gentleness and respect" (cf. 1 P 3:15-16), equally to sense on what inculturation paths the Lord is calling on us to advance on. It is something that concerns more than just our diocese, that we must approach in an inter-diocesan way, remembering that "the Church, welcoming the richness of different

cultures, becomes 'like a bride who adorns herself with her jewels' (cf. Is 61:10)" (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* n° 116 ; cf. John-Paul II *Ecclesia in Africa* n° 61). Another thing to think about is the ecumenical level. Because the quality of the brotherhood that we are trying to build with everyone depends to an extent on our relationships with our Christian brothers and sisters of other confessions. We should work to enlarge our brotherhood between all the disciples of Jesus, as a response to his prayer (cf. Jn 17:21), as a sign of his tenderness : "Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind" (Ph 2,1-2).



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48. "Our God is tenderness" (Ps 114:5), because he is in relationship, because he enters into relationship and because he puts us in relationship. As disciples of Jesus, we are called upon to "be with him" and to "proclaim the Good News" of the Kingdom (cf. Mk 3:14). So, let us be "apostles of tenderness", that is to say of the love that becomes relationship and opens ways through gentle self-giving. In the intimacy that Jesus asks us to share with him ; by the communion with each other that he asks us to live in him ; towards a brotherhood with everyone, may we build, step by step with him.

49. Tenderness is the power by which God loves us, gives us life and helps us grow, in the intimacy that it establishes between himself and us; the climate in which we are called to live that communion in which "everyone will know that we are his disciples" (cf. Jn 13:35) ; the way in

which brotherhood is built up, by the area of trust that it grants and that it throws open. Tenderness is Jesus's characteristic that we should imitate and which, in the Holy Spirit, puts us in relationship both with the Father and with others. It reaches the deep thirst that every one has to love and to be loved.

50. In us, all around us, in our communities and our society there is a great thirst for tenderness. As one family called to serve and to grow, let us strive to quench that thirst : by prayer and by our interior life, by formation, by a happy family-life, by community dynamics which put the person of Jesus, with his Word, the eucharist and the face of the least of our brothers, at the "centre". By the constant wish to recognize others as our brothers and sisters and by the humility which allows us to recognize our own need of that. By language, culture, listening, wonder, hospitality, face to face meeting, joint reflection, hand-in-hand commitment to the service of the Kingdom.

51. On the way, I have invited us to reflect in a practical manner on some very concrete points. May each community do its best for the good of the whole family. This letter is one stage. The path continues, refining through, the Spirit who guides us, the project inspired little by little by God himself.

52. In this year which is dedicated in particular to Saint Joseph, let us put our trust in him in whom "Jesus saw the tender love of God" (cf. Pope Francis, *With a Father's Heart*, n° 2, 8th December 2020), and let us entrust our lives, Algeria and our Church to the gentle, motherly heart of the Virgin Mary. By the example of that tenderness that Joseph and Mary had together, may we learn to progress each day (cf. Mt 2:14,21) and to confidently do "all that the Lord tells us" (cf. Jn 2:5, Mt 1:24) for the good of the Kingdom.

53. With tenderness and affection for Algeria and all the inhabitants of our region, for our diocesan family, for each and every one of you,

Your brother + Nicolas
4th April 2021

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COVER ILLUSTRATION :

A cloud of words taken from the reports of sharing
during the diocesan meetings between September 2020 and February 2021.

