THE ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE OF PHOENIX

Animated by Christ

Pastoral Letter from the Most Reverend John P. Dolan
November 22, 2026, The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. As I looked out over Monroe between 3rd and 7th Street in downtown Phoenix, the scene was vibrant. Intricate ceremonial clothing in bright patterns. Long feathers, detailed masks and shoes that "clapped" with every step. Festive banners billowed in procession as the sound of drums and maracas filled the air — all in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It was 2022, and my first time experiencing the annual Honor Your Mother Mass and procession the diocese holds every December.

2. I was drawn in as I watched the *matachines*, the groups of dancers that processed through the street, honoring Our Lady and telling stories with each intentional step and sacred song. As we begin year three of TILMA, my seven-year pastoral plan on evangelization leading up to the 500th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe in December 2031, I believe the *matachines* have a lot to teach us about evangelization and living a life animated by Christ.

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3. Every year of the pastoral plan, in order to guide us along the way, we have taken up a theme and reflected on an aspect of Our Lady of Guadalupe's apparitions to St. Juan Diego on Tepeyac Hill in 1531. The first year (2025) our theme was *Year of Hope,* and we held a Synod of Young Adults which emphasized five pillars: belonging, healing, formation, safety and accompaniment. Our second year (2026) carried the theme *El Camino Real,* and we held a series of listening sessions on the sacraments. In this third year (2027), the theme is *Animated by Christ,* and we will look in a special way at Our Lady's second apparition to a discouraged Juan Diego, whose request for the bishop to build a church honoring the Blessed Mother's wishes has been denied.

4. I believe a good place to begin is by asking the basic question: What does it mean to be animated?

5. From the Latin *animare*, meaning "to give life, to enliven," and even more at the root, *anima,* meaning "breath, life, soul," we are immediately drawn to the Book of Genesis, where God breathes life into the nostrils of Adam. Adam does not become a living being by happenstance, but because he

has been intentionally breathed into, animated by God. Likewise, Adam is not simply inspired by God in a general sense as he goes about his tasks of caring for the garden and naming the animals, but in truth he now carries God's very life within himself, which animates everything.

6. This is the dimension of evangelization we are focusing on this year: to allow ourselves to recognize that we have been animated by Christ. This animation began at our conception, when we were formed in the image and likeness of God. It was enlivened when we took our first breath. At our baptism, we were incorporated into the Body of Christ, then sealed by the Holy Spirit at confirmation. As we allow Christ to renew His animation within us, we then evangelize others by authentically living out this animation in our daily lives.

7. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops speaks of "A prophetic Church, animated and formed by the Word, that is a promoter and an example of justice and mercy," in the *National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry*. A reminder that true animation is not something sourced in ourselves or in others, but in Christ the Word alone, to whom our lives bear witness.

8. As Our Lady of Guadalupe approached the discouraged Juan Diego during her second apparition, he expressed, "I'm too little. I'm too meager," begging her to choose someone else in the face of a task that seemed impossible. Maybe you see evangelization in this same way: overwhelming, frightening, seemingly impossible in this current world. But you are in good company. This year, alongside Juan Diego, we will listen to Our Lady as she renews within us our animation through her Son, enlivening us, like she did Juan Diego, to find hope and begin again.

9. As I watched those *matachines* dance through the downtown streets, "animated" was the word that came to mind. Vibrant, alive, intentional, moving forward, singing praise, on pilgrimage. *This* is the life animated by Christ that each one of us is called to.

10. The next question we ask ourselves is: How do I authentically live out my renewed animation? We must turn to the heart of Our Lady of Guadalupe for guidance.

Among the People

11. This past July, I had the opportunity to travel to Mexico City for the second time within 16 months, and by an incredible grace, I was able to celebrate Mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe directly below the miraculous tilma. It was a moment I will never forget. I prayed for each of you and the intentions of our diocese while quite literally being under her mantle.

12. In the surrounding days, we were able to take tours of the beautiful grounds, and our tour guide shared something that was incredibly striking: while Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego on the summit of Tepeyac Hill, both the earliest shrine and the current church are built not on the hill itself, but rather on lower, flatter ground.

13. But it was the *why* behind this decision that was so moving for me. Our tour guide said Our Lady requested the basilica be built there because "she wanted a church among the people, not high in the clouds." Our Lady wants to make her home within our very hearts; she wants to bring her Son to every human being.

14. It's an image that draws us back to the Nativity. Christ, the King of the Universe, could have chosen to enter the world in any time, any place and any way. But He chose a meager, messy stable — which resembles each one of our wounded hearts. He is called Emmanuel, which means "God with us" and "God *among* us."

15. This is how we are called to evangelize, to live out our animation: among the people, within the culture with the loving heart of a mother. Just as the Lord embeds Himself into our lives, our existence, our very humanity, we too — animated by Christ — are called to go forth and live authentically in the stables of society, on the margins, among all peoples.

16. When Juan Diego is discouraged, having been turned away from the bishop, Our Lady does not remain away from him. She appears once again. Desiring to be with him in this hard moment, she accompanies him and encourages him to keep going along the way.

17. This reminds me of how the *matachines* dance as a group. They are with one another, eye-to-eye, in the fullness of the story they are embodying, as they journey forward together.

Along the Way

18. Each year of TILMA, we also take up a particular virtue. This year we are focusing on the virtue of temperance, a form of moderation and self-restraint.

19. There is a certain mystery to the story of the apparitions on Tepeyac Hill. Why doesn't Our Lady simply tell Juan Diego the whole story? Why doesn't she appear to the bishop herself? She is embodying a sort of temperance. There is something deeper taking place than simply checking a box or getting a task done. Our Lady knows the basilica will be built, but she is intentionally walking with Juan Diego in a way that fosters within him an authentic *metanoia*, a sincere and deep change of heart.

20. As Catholics, it can be easy for us to see evangelization as a task. To say that it has been "successful" when we see more people in church, doing the "right things." But when we look to the example of Our Lady, we see that evangelization is not a quick solution; it's also not trying to convince someone of something. Rather, through temperance, the willingness to slow down and meet the other where they are, it's about a much deeper encounter — one that leads the other to discover animation in Christ.

21. The Cursillo Movement in the Church, which was founded in Spain, has a wonderful approach: *Make a friend. Be a friend. Bring a friend to Christ.* Bringing another to Christ though true friendship is a form of temperance — it is authentic evangelization.

22. At its very heart, evangelization is the practice of befriending another and walking together along the way. When we practice the virtue of temperance, just as Our Lady held space for the mystery of the journey, we are able to hold space for the mystery of the one who is before us. This allows us to be rooted in Christ while allowing the faith journey of the other to unfold authentically, even if this patient accompaniment seems messier or less linear than we imagined it would be.

23. As the *matachines* danced through the streets together, each group coming in their own way and with their own expression, it was clear that their focus was not only on the destination. It was about journeying together along the way.

Under Our Lady's Mantle

24. Every year my pastoral letter related to TILMA, including this one, anticipates a pastoral plan that will be released on December 12, the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which will be available at *catholicsun.org*. In the pastoral plan we will look at practical ways in which we can live out these themes on a personal, parish and diocesan level.

25. As we step into this next year of fostering a culture of evangelization together, know that you are under Our Lady's mantle. Know that you, like the *matachines*, have a unique and vibrant story to bring to the life of the Church. And know that Christ the King of the Universe, whose feast day we celebrate today, is with you along the way and animating your every step.

¡Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe! ¡Viva Cristo Rey!

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+John P. Dolan
Bishop of Phoenix