



# ‘Testify to the Light’

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

This has been a dark time. The death of Bishop George Murry, S.J., the political strife within our country, and the ongoing pandemic has made this a very trying time. One of the questions I have been personally addressing since my appointment as the sixth Bishop of Youngstown is: How can I, as shepherd, lead the flock of this diocese from the darkness of this unprecedented time into the light?

Through this pastoral letter, I seek to acknowledge the darkness of this time, revisit the importance of our sacramental life together, highlight the value of parish life, and offer five priorities for our journey into the future together.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*+ David J. Bonnar*

Most Reverend David J. Bonnar  
Bishop of Youngstown



## Introduction

“A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:8-9). In a time of darkness, John the Baptist was sent by God to testify to the light. John was given the mission to be a voice in the wilderness of darkness pointing to the coming of the real light of the world, Jesus Christ, in whom there is no darkness.

John not only knew his calling, but he also knew his role. While some people of the day mistook John for Jesus and others sought to give him more attention, John knew his place. He never sought to usurp Jesus. For example, John said, “This was he of whom I said, ‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me’” (John 1:15).

Like any authentic minister, John struggled with unworthiness. In fact, he said, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:26-27). Even in the face of his unworthiness, John continued to be the voice pointing to the light.

John also knew very well the struggle of his humanity and the tendency to make the ego number one even before God. For he said of Jesus, “He must increase; I must decrease” (John 3:30). For John it was never about himself but rather it was always about Jesus. In a real sense, John’s mission was inextricably linked to the mission of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve others. John’s time was all about announcing the coming of the light to cast away the darkness of sin and suffering.

## The Present Situation

While a great number of years separate our present time from the time of John the Baptist, the context in which we live is very similar inasmuch as we too live every day in the shadows of sin and suffering. We know well the reality of darkness.

We know the darkness of evil on many levels and in various parts of the world that causes great destruction and wreaks havoc on many lives, as in the case of abortion and euthanasia. Sometimes this darkness is manifested by silence in the face of evil. As human beings we must always speak the truth and speak out against any injustice.

Our Church is not exempt from evil. We know the painful darkness of hurt and betrayal that engenders mistrust. With anger and deep sadness we continue, as a Church, to walk through the darkness of clergy sexual abuse, praying for the healing of all victims and taking every measure possible to ensure that this scourge never happens again.

We know the paralyzing darkness of political differences made all the more real by the recent election. This great political divide has polarized not only our country but also our families, friendships and faith communities. Wherever we are on the political spectrum, there is value in all of us stepping back and respecting others who think differently. The word “respect” comes from the Latin word which means “to look at again.” We know from our individual relationships that even though we might see things differently and passionately discuss issues with one another, we can still be one.

We know the shameful and repressive darkness of racial injustice that has adversely affected our communities. More importantly, racism has greatly undermined the dignity of the human person. Regardless of skin color, God has created all of us in his image and likeness to be people of love. There is no room for hatred, prejudice, or systemic injustice in our world.

We know the despicable darkness of poverty and economic injustice. My predecessor, the late Bishop George Murry, S.J., reminded us of this plight nine years ago when he wrote “Who Is My Neighbor?” a pastoral letter on the occasion of National Poverty Awareness Month. The good bishop reflected on the Good Samaritan passage and reminded us that when many people in the region and beyond are living in poverty, “We must all

care for our neighbors.” Such care should never be selective but must encompass all those in need. Sadly, the darkness of poverty remains.

We know the debilitating darkness of addiction, be it to drugs, alcohol, pornography, gambling, shopping, or work. This diocese seeks to accompany anyone suffering from addiction and to support loved ones affected by it.

We know the grief-rendering darkness of loss. Whether it is the death of a loved one, the termination from a job, a relationship that has abruptly ended, or the losing of one’s heart as a result of disappointment, the challenge of life is to learn how

to live with these losses even when they become a heavy burden. In this local Church of Youngstown, we continue to mourn the loss of our beloved Bishop George Murry, S.J., who left us too soon.

We know the unnerving and riveting darkness of change. As human beings we can become so comfortable and complacent in our ways that we miss the moment and the possibilities therein. Change is seldom easy but inside every change is a wealth of opportunities. Unless we change, we fail to grow. Poet and novelist Hermann Hesse once said, “Some of us think holding on makes us strong, but sometimes it is letting go.” Admittedly, it is hard to let go of our routine ways. Jesus’s prayer in the garden is one we should pray every day, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Mark 14:36). Our lives as Christians have so much more meaning when we live not according to our own plan or agenda but God’s.

More recently, we all have been living in the deep darkness of the pandemic. Has there ever been such an extended time of darkness that has impacted so many people? While we have had to learn to embrace a new lifestyle of social distancing, facemasks and in some cases, quarantining, we know that our inconvenience and pain pale in comparison to the millions who have been afflicted with the virus and the hundreds of thousands who have lost their lives. The darkness is even deeper for those family members who never had the opportunity to say good-bye to their dear loved one. We pray for the eternal rest of those who have tragically died and for the comfort and consolation of those left behind.

Let us also not forget the many health care workers, support staff, emergency service personnel, food supply workers, teachers, our clergy, and all others who every day have been walking and leading us through this impenetrable darkness to serve others.

## Our Sacramental Life

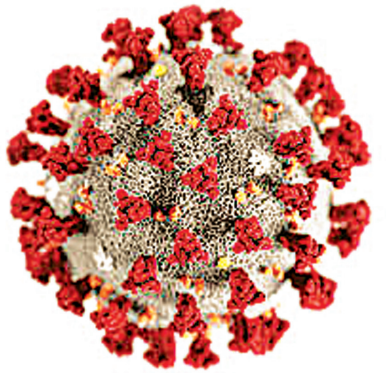
Indeed, we live in a time of pervasive darkness. What are we to do in the midst of this long night? How do we help one another to come out of the darkness? We do as John the Baptist did; we point to the light in Jesus.

We are first introduced to this light on the day of our Christian baptism when we are named and claimed for Christ. Born with the darkness of original sin, we are washed clean and become recipients of the light. At our infant baptism the priest or deacon lights a candle from the Paschal Candle and gives it to our parents with the words, “Receive the light of Christ.” Parents are given the charge to keep this light burning brightly. This divine light is to illumine our way and be a source of strength and grace in times of darkness. In this luminous and celebratory moment, we begin our journey toward discipleship.

Through our reception of the Holy Eucharist we grow more intimately in our relationship with Jesus and become strengthened to grow as his disciples. We accept responsibility, in the words of Saint Augustine, “to become what we receive” and to love one another as Jesus loves us. Although the Sunday Mass obligation has been temporarily lifted in this time of pandemic, the responsibility to be Christ to others is still urgent and essential. There is nothing temporary to our relationship with Jesus and His Church. Furthermore, we still need to be led and fed by Jesus in order to assume the dutiful ownership of our faith life.

The Sunday liturgy remains “the source and summit” of all of our activity. It is a sacred time when, through the power of God’s Word and Sacrament, we encounter in an intimate way the Real Presence of the true light. Even though we return to the same dark world, we take with us the light and the mission to be “salt of the earth and light of the world.” Jesus reflects more on this imagery when he says, “A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand where it gives light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father” (Matthew 5:14-16).

The Collect prayer from Christmas Mass at Dawn speaks of how the light of





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Christ must shine in our actions. “Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word, the light of faith, which illumines our minds, may also shine through in our deeds.”

The oil for the light of our faith given in baptism comes from the Holy Eucharist. During the pandemic we experienced first-hand what it was like to be without the Holy Eucharist. When public Masses resumed, many of our faithful were moved to tears when they received Jesus after a long absence of Sunday worship.

Eucharistic Adoration allows us to bask in the glow of the divine light. Before the Blessed Sacrament we can find light in our darkness and hope in our despair. I am told that many blessings flow to the Church from developing a culture of reverence and adoration of the Holy Eucharist. Some parishes have even experienced a spike in religious vocations. The 2020 CARA Priestly Ordination Study revealed that 7 out of 10 respondents, or 72 percent, participated in Eucharistic Adoration before entering the seminary. Spending quality time with the light of the world can bring peace and direction to our restless pondering hearts.

When we plunge into the darkness of sin, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a clear way to return to the light. God’s mercy and grace wipes away our sin and puts us on a new path. Nowhere else in life can we find such a new beginning and, more importantly, such overwhelming love. We all want to be loved but often we look for that love in all of the wrong places. Confession is the perfect rest stop for a disciple’s soul. We need to pause to acknowledge the darkness of sin but also to recognize the light of God’s mercy and forgiveness. This wonderful sacrament is another way for us to find the light of our faith and overcome the darkness.

Before Jesus left the world, he promised the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: “I have told you this while I am with you. The Advocate, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name—will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you” (John 14:26).

In the Sacrament of Confirmation, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. We become fully initiated into the life of the Church and assume a particular responsibility for our relationship with Jesus and His Church. Of our own volition we accept the call to become disciples.

The Spirit can break through the door of our frightened hearts and impel us to move from our comfort zone as it happened to the first disciples in the upper room long ago.

Saint Paul reminds us that the Spirit can be a real source of assistance. He writes, “In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26-27).

As we aspire to become disciples, it is vital that we surrender our life to the Holy Spirit. In the instruction read by the Bishop at the Rite of Confirmation, the candidates hear these or similar words, “The gift of the Holy Spirit which you are to receive will be a spiritual sign and seal to make you more like Christ and more perfect members of his church. At his Baptism by John, Christ himself was anointed by the Spirit and sent out on his public ministry to set the world on fire.

You have already been baptized into Christ and now you will receive the power of his Spirit and the sign of the cross on your forehead. You must be witnesses before all the world to his suffering, death, and resurrection; your way of life should at all times reflect the goodness of Christ. Christ gives varied gifts to his Church, and the Spirit distributes them among the members of Christ’s Body to build up the holy people of God in unity and love.

Be active members of the Church, alive in Christ Jesus. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit give your lives completely in the service of all, as did Christ, who came not to be served but to serve” (The Roman Pontifical).

On our journey of discipleship, we cannot be reminded enough of these words. We have a responsibility to take the gifts distributed to us and use them entirely at the service of others to “build up” the Body of Christ. Like Christ we are to be people who bring unity and love. Our lives rooted in Christ must also reflect our response to the Spirit. What is the Spirit asking of you? In what way does the Spirit want you to share your gifts with this local Church and the world? How can you “build up” the Body of Christ and bring forth light from darkness?

I invite you to reflect upon the words of Saint Phillip Neri who said, “Cast yourself into the arms of God and be very sure that if He wants anything of you, He will fit you for the work and give you strength.”

## Family Life

In his goodness, God not only gives us the Sacraments of Baptism, Reconciliation, Holy Eucharist, and Confirmation to encounter the true light to confront the darkness of this world; He also gives us our family. As human beings we have many choices. We do not choose our family; God in his infinite wisdom chooses our family for us. It is His gift. And yet, none of us comes from a “perfect family.” Amid the hurt and scars that are part of every family, God’s fingerprints are imprinted on every family. Even with all the imperfections, it is no fluke that anyone of us are in the family we are in.

The family is usually the sacred place where we are introduced to Jesus, the light of the world. Our parents bring us to the baptismal font to be baptized and formed in faith. The family is “the first Church,” a classroom and a place of love and acceptance. The family can also be a safe haven that provides a light in the darkness. The pandemic has made us appreciate the beautiful gift of our family. While the work of the Church continued through the pandemic thanks to the efforts of parish staffs and volunteers, the home became the place of worship through virtual reality. As we anticipate a post-pandemic time, we need to behold our family. At the same time, we need to rely upon our faith and do everything we can to reconnect with our faith community. Family and faith are foundational keys to free us from the darkness of this



time and bring us into the light.

## Priority # 1 - Prayer

As we move forward from this darkness into the light there are five priorities worthy of our efforts. The first priority that I invite you to work with me on is PRAYER. Everything that we are and aspire to be as a Church has to begin in the context of prayer, both private and public.

The disciples witnessed firsthand the power of prayer in Jesus’s life so much so that one of them asked, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). Jesus gave them not only a formula but also a relationship with the Father.

For centuries the Church has lived and breathed from the discipline of prayer. Prayer gives meaning to our lives and all that we are. It remains just as important today to the mission of the Church. Pope Francis in “The Joy of the Gospel” states, “Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervor dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer...” (#262).



## The Importance of Silence

I believe a key piece to growing in our relationship with Jesus in prayer is listening. In order to listen attentively, distractions need to be removed. In most cases, we need to slow down. And there needs to be silence.

I ask you to pray with me and for me for a listening heart. We live in a noisy world increasingly uncomfortable with silence. Together we need to root our lives in prayer and recapture the amazing power of silence so that we can listen. I find it revealing that in creating the human body God gave us two ears and two eyes but only one mouth. I think that was his way of emphasizing listening over talking. If only we could talk less and listen more especially in our prayer.

This attentive act of listening is critical when it comes to prayer so that we can listen and behold the Holy One. To that end, I invite all Catholics in this diocese to commit to developing a more fervent prayer life with silence, and if possible, in the presence of the Holy Eucharist where we can be still and let God be God. If not before the Eucharist, then pray in your home or at a place where there can be silence.

## The Value of Faith Sharing

As we anticipate the return of meetings and gatherings, I encourage us to listen more to each other through the sharing of our faith. I suggest, when possible, that all meetings begin with prayer centered in faith sharing. This would involve Lectio Divina with God’s Word and time for faith sharing. This is precisely how faith grows. In groups, people prayed and shared their experience of Jesus Christ. They listened attentively and supported one another and as a result their faith flourished. The more comfortable we are sharing our faith, the more at ease we will become in preaching the Good News in our secular world.

If we are to grow the Church and bring more sheep back to the flock, we cannot afford to be silent about our faith. Although there is a time and place for silence, we can never be silent about passing on the faith and sharing our relationship with Jesus.



## The Sacredness of Parish Life

The parish is a key place where we live and grow in faith. In his Apostolic Exhortation, “The Joy of the Gospel,” Pope Francis writes, “The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship, and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to renew and review our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented” (#28).

## The Formation of Small Groups

It is my dream that parishes will form small groups for people to share their faith and support one another as they become disciples. These small groups can be tailored to accommodate people’s schedules and be made up of men, women, married couples, and single individuals. By coming together in a small venue, individuals can share their faith and encounter Jesus through the Gospel and in other ways enabling them to go forth and proclaim the Gospel. Small groups are a powerful way to accompany one another as pilgrims on the journey.

There is a difference between being a follower and a disciple. We need more disciples in the Church who like John the Baptist can boldly speak in the wilderness and be a witness to the light. Pope Francis says, “Missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples” (#173).

## Embracing Our Missionary Role

In this light we need to give special attention to those who have become lukewarm or have left the faith. We need to remind them that God loves them and does not want



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them left behind. Pope Francis says it well in “The Joy of the Gospel” when he writes, “To those who feel far from God and the Church, to all those who are fearful or indifferent, I would like to say this: the Lord, with great respect and love, is calling you to be part of his people!” (#113).

Through our Christian baptism we have a particular role in the work of evangelization. Pope Francis states, “The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized. Every Christian is challenged, here and now, to be actively engaged in evangelization; indeed, anyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love. Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus; we no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples’” (#120).

Even though the work of evangelization is a shared responsibility among all of the baptized, it is my hope to create an Office of Missionary Outreach to assist our parishes in forming “missionary disciples” for the future. This office will also serve as a source of inspiration for all of the baptized in the work of proclaiming the Gospel.

## Priority # 2 - Healing

The second priority I invite you to work on with me as we move from the darkness is HEALING. Our world and Church are hurting. There are many wounded among us. The pain can be overwhelming; the scars are real. Let me say that if any one has been hurt by the Church in any way, I beg your forgiveness. One of the revelations we have to be reminded of is that the Church, although a divine institution, is also human, made up of human beings who are broken. Where there is humanness, there is goodness and possibility as well as weakness, sin and evil. However where there is Jesus, there is always forgiveness.



## Healing Through Prayer

It is important to acknowledge our hurts and also to work together to the best of our ability in a spirit of forgiveness. Seldom does healing happen instantly. It takes time and much prayer. If you are struggling with a personal hurt from someone, I want to offer advice given to me many years ago by an older priest: The best way to deal with your hurt is to pray for the person who hurt you. It worked for me.

## Healing Through Reconciliation

If we have caused hurt to anyone in any way it is incumbent that we make a good confession and do everything we can to make amends with the person we hurt. The worst thing we can do with our hurt is to allow it to fester, or worse yet, to deny it. Sooner rather than later these hurts will affect us and our relationship with others.

## Healing Through Therapy

In an instance where the wound is deep and needs to be processed, there is no harm in seeking help from a counselor. However, keep in mind that most clergy are not trained counselors. Our diocese can certainly help in finding someone for you to talk to. The work of healing ultimately means letting go. I am reminded of the phrase, “Let go and let God.” There is no better way to begin the process of letting go than by turning to Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

## Priority # 3 - Communication

The third priority that I invite you to work on with me is COMMUNICATION. Sadly, we are living in a time in which, for some, the Church has become irrelevant. We cannot stop inserting our voice into the world. As a diocese and in our parishes and schools we need to communicate clearly and boldly. We need to ensure that what we do and who we are is transparent. We need to take advantage of every media source at our disposal and use it for the good of the Church, be it newsprint, email, web site, television (CTNY) and social media. Social Media has become the new front door of the Church. We need to work hard to identify a seasoned expert who can coordinate all of these communication efforts and speak on behalf of our local Church. It is important that we meet the people where they are. I am asking all of our parishes to devote greater resources to social media.



## Priority # 4 - Service

The fourth priority I invite you to partner with me on is SERVICE. In preparation for my ordination as bishop, I prayed through the Rite of Ordination for Bishops. It is interesting to note that in the homily provided in the Rite it states, “Bishop is a title of service, not of honor.” As bishop I need to be a servant leader who seeks to lead a Servant Church. We cannot be a church that exists solely for ourselves. We need to be a Servant Church that reaches out to the poor, homeless, imprisoned, sick, lonely, and forgotten, keeping in mind that whatever we do to the least of our brothers or sisters we do to Jesus. (Matthew 25:40)

## Deanery Needs Assessment

This diocese has had a long tradition of service through the Propagation of the Faith and Missions Office, Catholic Charities, and other partnering organizations. In order that we might continue to grow our efforts at being a Servant Church, I am asking every deanery under the direction of the Dean to conduct a needs assessment of their respective territory with the hope of continuing to reach out to those in most need. No one can be left behind. I pledge the assistance of Catholic Charities along with my hope that deaneries and parishes will network to provide resources for the most vulnerable. Our parishes cannot afford to become complacent or self-serving, and as Catholics we cannot live in our own little world ignoring those in need.

## Unified Voice

At the same time, we need to also work hard to become a unified voice against injustice. We cannot allow the sin of racism to continue to exist. We need to challenge one another to see Christ in every human being and to behold the dignity of every human person from the womb to the tomb and to examine and reform social systems that perpetuate racial injustice.

## Priority # 5 - Joyful Witness

The final priority I invite you to work on with me is to be a JOYFUL WITNESS. In this time of darkness, we need to testify to the light of Jesus Christ. We cannot allow the darkness to overwhelm us, for we are people of hope who believe in Jesus Christ, the light of the world. We need to make more of a concerted effort to point to his light.

One of the best ways for us to do this is by being true to our baptismal calling and to keep the light of faith burning brightly in our hearts and homes. We need to take seriously our call to discipleship and grow in that call by being bold in our expression of faith. We cannot be Catholics in name only. We cannot live in silence. We need to live our faith and be proud of it. The people of the six counties of this diocese and the world need to hear and know about Jesus.

We are called to always witness with joy. The Scriptures are replete with sentiments of joy. As a Church we behold this wonderful gift every year on the Third Sunday of Advent and the Fourth Sunday of Lent. To be joyful does not always mean a life without suffering. Pope Francis in “The Joy of the Gospel,” writes, “I can say that the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in poor people who had little to hold on to. I also think of the real joy shown by others who, even amid pressing professional obligations, were able to preserve, in detachment and simplicity, a heart full of faith. In their own way, all of these instances of joy flow from the infinite love of God, who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ” (# 7).



We stand here today on the faith of our brothers and sisters who have gone before us. No doubt they carried their crosses not hesitating to make Jesus known in a joyful way. May God give us the courage to live our faith, not just privately but publicly, in the world gripped by fear and resistance.

## The Witness of Saint Joseph

One of the models to assist us is Saint Joseph, our mighty patron. It is interesting to note that there is not one word ascribed to Saint Joseph in the Gospel and yet, the stories about him demonstrate a man of deep faith lived out in action. Quiet, humble, but ever so powerful Saint Joseph lived his faith even in the face of fear.

Pope Francis has declared a Year of Saint Joseph to commemorate his 150 years as Universal Patron of the Church. In announcing this declaration, Pope Francis writes, “Even though Joseph fears God’s will; his history, and plan were at work. Joseph, then, teaches us that faith in God includes believing that he can work even through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses. He also teaches us that amid the tempests of life, we must never be afraid to let the Lord steer our course. At times, we want to be in complete control, but God always sees the bigger picture” (# 2).

## The Intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary

As we embark upon this exciting journey together, we entrust ourselves not only to Saint Joseph but also to the handmaid of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Evangelization. She is always there to intercede on our behalf. At that first miracle at Cana she said, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). May God give us the grace through her intercession to embrace our particular role and do whatever Jesus tells us.

## The Grace of the Holy Spirit

May we not discount the presence of the Holy Spirit and our need to allow it to take over our life and work. “Yet, there is no greater freedom than that of allowing oneself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, renouncing the attempt to plan and control everything to the last detail, and instead letting him enlighten, guide, and direct us, leading us wherever he wills. The Holy Spirit knows well what is needed for every time and place” (“The Joy of the Gospel,” #280).

In this unprecedented time of darkness may we walk forward in faith together as a “Spirit-filled people” always seeking to joyfully witness to the light. May we pray amid our differences and challenges “that all may be one.”

February 19, 2021

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