
A FUTURE FULL OF
HOPE

A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE PEOPLE
OF THE DIOCESE OF SAGINAW



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OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY
OCTOBER 7, 2011

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Most Reverend Joseph R. Cistone, D.D.
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you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not
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(Jeremiah 29:11).

INTRODUCTION

 In May 4, 2009, I received a phone call from Archbishop Pietro Sambì, Papal Nuncio for the United States. During our conversation, His Excellency informed me that Pope Benedict XVI had appointed me the sixth Bishop of the Diocese of Saginaw. Since that day, my hopes and dreams for this beloved Diocese have filled my heart, mind and prayers.

I embarked on this pastoral letter in order to reflect upon the many experiences of my past two years as Bishop of Saginaw and to offer some indication as to where I hope to lead the Diocese in the next several years. Of course, each day brings new issues and challenges; so, whatever vision I have today always will be subject to the circumstances of life and ministry that may arise. In fact, some of those “issues and challenges” have caused me to amend my vision, even as I was in the midst of my writing.

I intended this letter to be a brief overview. The more I reflected, however, the more I wrote and the more I found myself delving further into each issue. Nevertheless, these reflections in no way fully or adequately address the issues and challenges at hand. In fact, I could write a pastoral letter on each topic. Nor does it exhaust the totality of matters that we, as a Diocese, must address. So, please accept this letter as a mere “preview” of what, I believe, lies ahead for us as the Church of Saginaw.

One final note: Archbishop Sambì died this past summer, on July 27, 2011, one day before my second anniversary. He was a most kind and gracious man, faithful to the Magisterium, with vast experiences stemming from his many assignments throughout the universal Church. Every time I was in his presence, he expressed his interest in and support of our Diocese and me personally. In his first address to the Bishops of the United States as Papal Nuncio, he offered a word of encouragement which, I believe, is so apropos of this pastoral letter and our current position as a Diocese. Archbishop Sambì stated:

Courage. The future is for those who build it with a strong faith!

*“For I know well the plans I have in mind for you,
says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe!
Plans to give you a future full of hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).*

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

I have a special affection for the Prophet Jeremiah, his life experience and writings. The Prophet Jeremiah was writing to the Jews exiled in Babylon, following the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. There is that all-so-familiar and profound passage in his book in which he records God’s early message to him, “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you*” (Jeremiah 1:5).

As a seminarian in scripture class, our professor assigned us a particular reading. It was an article by Reverend Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P. entitled, “*The Theology of Vocation According to Jeremiah the Prophet.*” This article made a deep and lasting impression upon me. Stuhlmueller explored the unique understanding of vocation as experienced by Jeremiah. He wrote:

Jeremiah could reach back to the moment before his conception and realize in the depth of his heart that his vocation was what God wanted of him before he was conceived. A vocation, then, according to Jeremiah, is not doing what one thinks God wants of a person. It is doing what God knows even before conception that a person ought to do. A vocation can, in fact it must, begin by responding to apostolic opportunities. Yet, such a response is only the occasion, not the deepest meaning of a vocation. In the most profound level of the heart, a vocation is a personal union with God who seeks all men in peace and love. A vocation must not degenerate into personal ambition, but rather it loses one’s self totally in God, there to find one’s self again in the union of all men with God. . . . His vocation grew to greater clarity from his ability to sustain hopes that seemed beyond immediate fulfillment (*The Bible Today Reader*, p. 229).

Father Stuhlmueller then presents a reflection that, ever since reading this article for the first time, has inspired me in all my assignments as priest and bishop.

A religious leader must give leadership most of all to people who are frustrated, to people who find it difficult to move any longer on the plateau, to people who are exhausted climbing the mountain peaks. Unless the religious leader can sustain perseverance in his own long, long trek across the plateau, unless he can continue in the strength of God, up and up and over the mountain, he cannot give the kind of religious leadership needed by the people (*The Bible Today Reader*, p. 229).

Through Jeremiah, the Lord professed to His people His mercy and forgiveness ... His love and affection. Despite their separation from the familiar and nurturing surroundings of Jerusalem, God continued to foretell His special plans for them – **A Future Full of Hope.**

Later, in the New Testament, Saint Peter would remind the new community of Christians, and all of us, “*You are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of His own, so that you may announce the praises’ of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light*” (1Peter 2:9).

As we approach the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Diocese of Saginaw, I find it providential that, in the previous verse, Jeremiah records, “*Thus says the Lord: Only after 70 years have elapsed for Babylon will I visit you and fulfill for you my promise to bring you back to this place*” (Jeremiah 29:10). In this, our 74th year as a Diocese, we stand in great hope of the promises the Lord has in store for us.

A NEW BISHOP FOR THE DIOCESE OF SAGINAW

On July 28, 2009, I was installed as the sixth Bishop of the Diocese of Saginaw. This past July, I celebrated my second anniversary as your Shepherd. For me, these two years have been a time of listening, learning, transition, challenges and personal growth. Most of all, it has been a time of grace and blessing.

During these two years, I have traveled extensively throughout the Diocese to establish relationships with my brother priests, deacons, religious, seminarians and laity with whom I am privileged to work and honored to serve. With the exception of just a few remaining churches and schools, I have participated in liturgies in every parish and made pastoral visits to the schoolchildren in their classrooms. This past year, in association with Catholic Schools Week, I scheduled celebrations of Mass with all the students attending our parish and

diocesan schools. I continue to meet new people and make new friends.

There have been many opportunities to meet with religious, political, business and community leaders to discuss the quality of life issues that affect us all. Following in the footsteps of my two most recent predecessors, I participate monthly in the Community Affairs Committee (CAC), commonly referred to as “The Bishop’s Breakfast,” where various community leaders get to know one another better, hear presentations from experts on community issues and share thoughts and opinions on how we can work together for the benefit of all our people.

“To be an evangelizing community, we must know Jesus Christ, the center of our lives, His will for us and for others.”

I also have visited many Catholic, non-Catholic and community institutions to express my own love, concern and support, as well as that of our diocesan community. Some of these occasions include standing in solidarity with our people outside the Women’s Health Center, a local abortion clinic, in order to pray for an end to abortion; serving meals at the East Side Soup Kitchen; painting homes with the young people of YES (Youth Encounter Service); cooperating in the work of Emmaus House and the Ezekiel Project, to name a few. And, of course, engaging in some fun-centered community activities around the Diocese.

People continually ask me how I like being in Michigan. Well, for someone who had spent his life – childhood, school years, priesthood and episcopacy – in a large, metropolitan city in the east, moving to Saginaw has presented a bit of a change. (On a light note, I’m still looking for a real Philly cheese steak and scrapple!) Nonetheless, time and again, I have assured everyone that I am very much at home here. The people of this area, especially you, my fellow Catholics, have made me feel so welcomed and supported. While I occasionally miss the busyness and variety of big-city life, I also appreciate being surrounded by such beautiful lakes and farmlands, not to mention great golf courses. One thing I do not miss is rush-hour traffic back and forth to the office!

These two years also have presented quite a number of challenges. Of course, every diocese has its needs; and it appeared there were a number of critical issues that required my immediate attention. Although it is my intention, in this letter, to address several of these issues in greater detail and propose certain actions, allow me to briefly mention a few of the challenges I have been facing since my arrival.

• I believe that Catholic education – from cradle to grave – is critical to our mission as an evangelizing Church. Unless we know our faith and Him whom we serve, Jesus Christ, we cannot live or celebrate faith effectively. Evangelization begins with our own knowledge and understanding of God. To be an evangelizing community, we must know Jesus Christ, the center of our lives, His will for us and for others. Before I even unpacked my bags in August of 2009, I was informed of the need to identify a new high school principal for Nouvel Catholic Central High School, as well as an acting regional superintendent for Saginaw Area Catholic Schools. In addition, there was no Diocesan Office or Superintendent for Catholic Schools. Several pastors discussed with me the difficulties they were facing in trying to keep their parish schools open. On the adult education scene this past year, the Director of the Center for Ministry relocated in order to assume a new seminary position. In such areas, the Diocese was in need of basic structures and personnel in order to chart a vision for the future of Catholic education and formation at all levels.

• Parishes and schools – their structure, number, activities and resources – form another area that has presented major challenges and requires comprehensive review and restructuring. It is important to remember that the Diocese of Saginaw, established in 1938, underwent realignment when the Diocese of Gaylord was established in 1971. A number of our parishes have been part of three different dioceses. So, it is difficult to compare current statistics to those earlier years. During the first 33 years, and subsequent years as well, the Bishops of the Diocese were obliged to take bold and creative measures to reposition the Diocese in order to meet the needs of a growing Catholic adult and student population. In large part, this meant increasing the number of parishes and schools. Measures were taken in a way commensurate with available personnel – in particular, priests and religious – as well as financial and other resources. This expansion required much effort and great sacrifice on the part of priests, deacons, religious and laity. In 1938, although the Great Depression was a few years in the past, financial times were still uncertain. While some people were disappointed and saddened that they had to separate themselves from their parish of origin to form a new parish, historical records portray it as an exciting and enlivening time. Catholic population was increasing, school enrollment was growing and vocations to the priesthood and religious life were considerable.

However, as Catholic population – and the general population as well – began to decline, the Diocese did not always take sufficient action necessary to adapt to the changing environment. From time to time, some parishes and schools were suppressed or merged. The Bishops and parish leaders took these measures to responsibly address the reality of the day and to provide opportunities for parishes to merge and

consolidate services in order to create and maintain a vibrant faith community, its life and ministry. You could say that the work of consolidating entities required the same boldness and creativity as the establishment of new parishes and schools. In contrast, however, unlike in the days of growth, some of these decisions caused pain, sadness and even resentment. Such change is never easy. Unfortunately, for many people, the loss of their familial parish or school led to a separation from the Church and the Sacraments. The emotional impact of these changes ran long and deep.

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Yet, even as these difficult measures were being taken, diocesan and parish leadership realized that much more needed to be done. This is particularly the case as regards the considerable decrease in the number of children of elementary and high school age.

• **Related to these two challenges is the critically diminished number of priests and the corresponding need for priestly and religious vocations.** While we acknowledge with admiration and gratitude the many ways in which the laity have risen to the call to leadership within parish and diocesan institutions, it is still the priest who serves as the minister of the Sacraments and sacramental grace in our Church. Over the years, we have been blessed with vocations originating from outside the Diocese and are well served by their faithful ministry. On the other hand, an indication of the strength and vitality of faith within a diocese or parish is the ability to foster vocations among the young people in their own midst. Without such “homegrown” vocations, given the current status of available priests and forecasts for the immediate future, we cannot continue to operate as we do today.

A NEW EVANGELIZATION

Blessed Pope John Paul II spoke of a “New Evangelization.” In his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Holy Father wrote, “The expression ‘new evangelization’ was popularized by Evangelii Nuntiandi, Evangelization in the Modern World, by Pope Paul VI as a response to the ‘new challenges that the contemporary world creates for the mission of the Church’” (CTH). In this earlier document, Pope Paul VI wrote:

Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. **She exists in order to evangelize** (emphasis mine), that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection (EN 14).

Pope John Paul II spoke of this “New Evangelization” in many of his works and addresses. In doing so, he was not speaking of a new gospel or a new teaching. Rather, His Holiness described this form of evangelization as being “*new in its ardor, methods and expression.*” In an address to the Latin American Bishops in 1983, the Holy Father stated, “*Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme is always the one Gospel given in Jesus Christ.*”

In traditional usage, “evangelization” has referred to the Church’s mission to bring the Good News to people who have never heard of God or Jesus Christ. When we consider the work of evangelization, we often think immediately of the missionaries in faraway countries. In common practice, however, Catholics have used this term to identify ministry to anyone who was not Catholic, even though they may be Christian. Nonetheless, we Catholics would not usually consider ourselves in need of evangelizing. After all, the majority of us have been Catholic since birth. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Church’s Mission), Pope John Paul II acknowledged a diversity that exists in the Church’s one mission, and identified three different situations.

The first situation involves those peoples or countries “*in which Christ and His Gospel are not known, or which lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups. This is mission ad gentes in the proper sense of the term*” (RM 33). The second situation involves those Christian communities that are solid and fervent in faith. “*They bear witness to the Gospel in their surroundings and have a sense of commitment to the universal mission. In these communities, the Church carries out her activity and pastoral care*” (RM 33). This, of course, should be the ideal reality regarding all our parishes.

It is in regards to the third situation, however, that His Holiness addressed the need for all Christians, including Catholics, to rediscover Christ in their lives.

Thirdly, there is an intermediate situation, particularly in countries with ancient Christian roots, and occasionally in the younger Churches as well, where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and His Gospel. In this case, what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization’ (RM 33).

This is the situation in which we, like other dioceses around the world, find ourselves today. Less than one-third of registered Catholics here in the Diocese of Saginaw participate in Sunday Mass or receive the Holy Eucharist. Far less avail themselves of the Sacrament of Penance. We continue to rely on the same few, trusted parishioners to participate in the works of the Church. With the decline in Catholic schools and participation in religious education programs, fewer Catholics actually know and understand what the Church believes and teaches.

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Many Catholics have lost an appreciation for sacramental grace in their lives. In growing numbers, young Catholic couples choose to cohabit rather than embrace the Sacrament of Matrimony. New parents are not spiritually motivated or inspired to seek Baptism for their children. Even at the time of death, all too many Catholics are buried without the benefit of a Funeral Mass or Christian burial. Even while many Catholics, inspired by the commands of the Gospel, remain sensitive to and generous toward those in need, others respond out of a sense of “humanitarian” consciousness rather than a conviction based on the teachings of Jesus Christ and His Church. **The Church “exists in order to evangelize.”**

More and more we experience so-called “philosophies” or “ways of life” that are not only areligious but, to some degree, anti-Christian in nature. Some suggest that power and strength come merely from one’s inner self, apart from any divine grace; that personal gain supersedes the common good; that comfort, wealth, worldly success and pleasure are the true goals of life; that self-gratification is better than assuming the responsibilities of a life of service for others; that violence can be a means to an end; and, that peace, justice and unity can be achieved while continuing to harbor hate in our hearts. **The Church “exists in order to evangelize.”**

There are those who ridicule religious practices as simply “passé” - that is, “out of date.” Under the guise of religious tolerance for non-Christians, Christianity is no longer tolerated. Here in this country, we are witnessing a substantial and not-so-subtle change from protecting one’s “freedom of religion” to allowing for “freedom of worship.” Public display of faith, whether in word or action, is discouraged, if not prohibited altogether. In other words, “freedom of religion” is

only valid and protected when practiced and proclaimed behind closed church doors. For all their objections to religion in general, agnosticism and atheism are slowly becoming the new religions. **The Church “exists in order to evangelize.”**

Pope John Paul II, reflecting on the teachings of Vatican Council II, urged that the missionary activity of the New Evangelization must be the task of all Christians. “*There is a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians, for all dioceses and parishes, Church institutions and associations*” (RM 2).

We, as a Diocese, are at our own “threshold” of faith-life. Could there be any greater time for a “new evangelization” – a “re-evangelization” – within the Diocese of Saginaw? If the time is now, how will we answer this call to be ministers of the new evangelization? What must we do to position our Diocese, parishes, schools, priests, deacons, seminarians, religious, lay ministers, indeed, the entire faithful to be a vital and vibrant presence and agent for a “new evangelization?”

BISHOP, WHAT IS YOUR VISION?

I often reflect back on May 20, 2009, the day my appointment as Bishop of Saginaw was announced. I was apprehensive about leaving the familiar surroundings of home, family and friends. At the same time, I felt an excitement about this new relationship with the people of the Diocese of Saginaw that God, in His wisdom, chose to establish. While it was not of my own choosing, I was absolutely confident that God, in his wonderful plan for me and this Diocese, chose for us to live out our faith-journey together.

In a particular way, during the press conference that day and media interviews which followed, I was continually asked the question, in one form or another: “*What are your priorities for the Diocese of Saginaw?*” People from within and without the Church wanted to know my “*vision.*” Since I knew very little about Saginaw or Michigan, I discreetly responded that it would take some time before I could specify my goals and objectives. I have since realized that I missed a golden opportunity to clearly express what has always been, for me, a core belief.

At the very beginning of my formal Catholic education, like every Catholic of my generation, I was introduced to the *Baltimore Catechism*. In the process, I learned

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a few basic elements of faith that have guided my life ever since. *God made me . . . God is the Supreme Being who made all things . . . God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven . . . To gain happiness in heaven, we must know love and serve God in this world . . . and . . . we learn to know love and serve God from Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who teaches us through the Catholic Church.*

“... our journey to the Kingdom must be in communion with one another – as the Body of Christ, the Church – with Christ as our Head.”

These principles, these elemental truths, have guided me throughout my life, including my priesthood and ministry as a bishop. What is my vision? I knew the answer all along. My vision, my main priority in life, is to know, love and serve God in this world in such a way that I am prepared to live in glory with Him when that day comes. Along with this responsibility, as a shepherd, I also must lead my people in that same knowledge, love and service of God so that they, too, will one day live in glory. My salvation and your salvation! That's it! So simple, yet so sublime.

I can see this image of Jesus standing before us, calling us to Him. As pilgrims on a journey, baptized into the family of God, we encounter each other, form community with each other, pray and learn together, share the Good News with our neighbors and, united in faith, go with Jesus to the Father as one family. Many of our Christian brothers and sisters speak of the need to have a “personal relationship” with Jesus. As a basic foundation of Christian faith, this is certainly true. Everything we do must be through, with and in Jesus Christ. Nothing could be more personal than one's faith. Nevertheless, our journey to the Kingdom must be in communion with one another – as the Body of Christ, the Church – with Christ as our Head. It is in the Church that we are baptized and become members of the Body of Christ, the People of God. It is in the Church that we hear God's word proclaimed and fleshed-out for our personal reflection and transformation. It is in the Church that Christ sanctifies us in the grace of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which nourishes us for this journey to heavenly glory.

It is one thing for an individual to determine his or her own path in life to achieve this goal of union with Christ, here and in eternity. It is more difficult - yet most necessary - for us to lead others to Christ. Husbands and wives must lead one another to Christ. Parents must lead their children to Christ. Priests and bishops must lead each other and the people entrusted to their care to Christ. In fact, all men and women who minister and serve within the Church, to varying

degrees and according to their particular circumstances, have a responsibility for the spiritual well-being and salvation of their brothers and sisters. This spirit of evangelization should be at the core of every Christian, parish, diocese – and, in fact, of the Church universal.

A TIME OF GRACE FOR OUR DIOCESE

At the risk of sounding dramatic, I believe our local and beloved Church of Saginaw is at a critical and defining moment in its history, a “threshold” as it were. Our forthcoming 75th anniversary provides an opportunity for us to reflect upon our past, make a clear and honest assessment of our present and move forward with a common vision for the future. We must work together to create and embark upon this vision. Drifting slowly into an undefined future is not an option.

The words of the Lord, recorded in the Book of Jeremiah, confirm for me what I already knew deep in my heart that day in May two years ago. God knows well the plans He has in mind for you and me as a Diocese . . . *a people of His own*. They are plans for our future, built upon the foundation of our past and the goodwill of the present. These plans will require change, sacrifice, sadness and even loss. They will require patience and forgiveness, as well as boldness and creativity. They will certainly require prayer, openness to the Spirit and a willingness to yield our own will and desires to the will of God and the faith-needs of the generation to come. Whatever the outcome, we know that God's plans are plans for our welfare, not for woe. They are plans to provide for us “*a future full of hope.*”

WE MUST KNOW, LOVE AND SERVE GOD IN THIS WORLD

The *Baltimore Catechism* taught the faith in a question-answer modality. So, the concise response to the question, “*What must we do to gain the happiness of heaven?*” was, “*To gain happiness in heaven, we must know, love and serve God in this world.*” The order to these three actions is logical and formative.

The three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 22: 36-40; Mark 12: 28-31; Luke 10:25-27) record a conversation between Jesus and a lawyer/scribe, in which Jesus is asked

to identify the greatest commandment. Though the three Gospels and translations differ slightly, most of us have committed the answer, in one form or another, to memory: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength . . . and your neighbor as yourself.* The Lord's fuller explanation clearly notes that the love He is speaking about is not simply a sentiment or a romantic feeling. It is an imperative – a mandate – to action.

In order to truly love someone, we must first come to know that person. When we truly love someone, we can more easily and readily give ourselves in service to them. One might say that it is possible to love and serve someone even without knowing them, for example, when you reach out to the poor and needy at home or abroad. However, our Christian perspective helps us to understand that even though we may not know that individual personally, it is God – and the presence of God in our brothers and sisters in need – whom we know and, therefore, love and serve.

Knowledge of God, therefore, is the foundation of a life of love and service. And, in order for us to know God, more fully than we can know of Him by human reason alone, God must reveal Himself to us. *Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, wished "to set forth doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation, the whole world may believe; by believing, it may hope; and by hoping, it may love" (DV 1).*

In this regard, the Council taught:

In His goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the Holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. . . . By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ, who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation (DV 2).

And how is this revealed truth passed on to us?

Christ the Lord, in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion, commissioned the apostles to preach to all men that gospel which is the source of all saving truth and moral teaching, and thus to impart to them divine gifts . . . This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by ordinances, handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had

learned through the prompting of the same Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing (DV 7).

Knowledge of God is essential to our lives as Christians. Passing on what God has revealed remains the work of the Church throughout history, even to this day. This commission is, first and foremost, the work of the teaching office of the Church.

The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit . . . It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls (DV 10).

All this brings me to what I believe to be the first priority of the Diocese, namely, evangelization – and its companion – Catholic education.

THE FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION

Earlier, I spoke of the call for a new evangelization and the Church's obligation to provide religious education – and faith formation – “from cradle to grave.” Certainly, this encompasses much more than elementary and secondary schools. Catholic schools, however, have become a firm foundation on which our educational and formational programs are based.

Books have been written and plays and movies produced that highlight the work of Catholic schools . . . some complimentary, some critical, others simply humorous. Like with all institutions, there are certainly faults and shortcomings to address in our schools. On the whole, though, Catholic schools have made a tremendous contribution to the intellectual and moral strength of our country

and, indeed, the world. Founded on the generosity and sacrifice of parents and parish communities, they have excelled due to the commitment and expertise of many priests and religious congregations, as well as dedicated lay faculty and staff. Trained in the arts and sciences, those educated in Catholic schools and religious programs are recipients of an education rooted in faith in Jesus Christ, giving them the ability to reach beyond worldly success and to strive for personal and moral excellence. Today, the Diocese of Saginaw is so blessed to have men and women – solidly grounded in the faith – serving in capacities as diocesan and parish employees, commissioned lay ministers and teachers, committee and board members, as well as faithful volunteers.

We cannot avoid the obvious concerns that confront us. Our once strong Catholic educational system has fallen upon difficult times. Recalling my own experience, I attended our parish elementary school in the 1950s and early '60s. There were about 65 children in my class – all taught by one teacher in a single classroom. As I recall, there were fewer than 10 other children of our class age who went to public school, each of whom attended religious instruction.

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We were methodically taught the basics of our faith. No doubt that dogmatic, sacramental and moral theology took precedence over Scripture, although Bible history was part of the core curriculum. In those days, ecumenism was not one of our strong suits. But we learned the fundamental principles of what it meant to follow Christ and were taught examples of how those principles and beliefs could and must be lived out in our daily lives. We also participated regularly in the celebration of Mass and the Sacrament of Penance, as well as other paraliturgical and devotional practices. All that we learned was experienced in an atmosphere of faith.

Many in Church leadership positions today would acknowledge that, somewhere in the succeeding decades, things have changed in the realm of Catholic education in both methodology and content. While there could be honest debate on the reasons and value of these changes, some results are indisputable. Catholics in great numbers are ignorant of even the most basic teachings of Catholicism. The consequence of this lack of knowledge reveals itself in the disturbing reality that all too many Catholics no longer acknowledge the teachings of the Church, worship together, or appreciate and receive the

sacraments. New emphasis on Scripture and ecumenism is certainly welcome. However, awareness of our oneness with our Christian brothers and sisters has resulted, in some instances, in a lack of understanding of our core Catholic beliefs.

Allow me to share two personal experiences. As a parish priest in a small, suburban parish, I reached out to those spouses of our Catholic parishioners who were of another faith. Many of these individuals attended Mass, were engaged in parish initiatives and actively supported their children in our parish school and religious catechetical program. So, I sent a personal invitation to them to attend a series of teachings in the faith that I referred to as “Come and See.” (This was all prior to the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults [RCIA] program we are familiar with today.) There were no strings attached. No expectation of “converting” to the faith; just an opportunity to learn more about the Catholic faith practiced by their family members. By the way, I also invited the Catholic spouses to attend if he or she so wished.

As you can probably guess, the Catholics who attended the classes had as many, if not more, questions to ask about the faith than did the non-Catholics. It turned out to be a great form of adult education for other grade-school parents as well. It was a return to the basics that strengthened the faith of some of our Catholics and, as you might imagine, became an occasion for others to become Catholics.

The second experience occurred during the time I was Dean of Formation in the Theology Division of our local seminary. As members of the Admissions Board, we were responsible for reviewing the applications of young men interested in attending the seminary in preparation for priesthood. These young men were what we often referred to as the “green wood.” At a time when many young people were not engaged in the life of the Church, these candidates were very much interested in the mission of the Church and answering the Lord’s call to service. Testing revealed, however, that the majority of these young men were in need of remedial work in catechetics. Even those who attended twelve years of Catholic school simply did not know the basics of the faith.

During this same period in which Catholic education was adapting its methodology, Catholics were not immune to the prevailing philosophies of the day, in particular, relativism. Moral absolutes gave way to situational ethics. Lost in the shuffle was an understanding and appreciation of dogma, doctrine, sacraments and ritual. Students, like their parents, began to question and even reject long-standing teachings and disciplines. As a priest, it was frustrating to hear parents and teachers tell our young people: “*You don’t have to attend Mass if you don’t get anything out of it.*”

Whatever the causes, the current status of Catholic elementary and secondary education today is measurable. The ratio of Catholic to non-Catholic

school students is dramatically inverted. Although the percentages may differ from parish to parish, the number of children attending Catholic schools has drastically diminished. In some parishes, there are more children attending religious education programs than the local Catholic school. Even more disturbing is the fact that so many of our young people will go through life with less than three years of formal religious instruction.

Changing demographics and financial constraints also have taken their toll on Catholic schools. In the academic year 2009-2010, three parishes found it necessary to close their schools at the end of the academic year. In February of 2011, two parish schools in Saginaw Area Catholic Schools (SACS) were consolidated with two other local schools. By June of 2011, two additional parishes closed their schools and one school in the Bay Area Catholic Schools (BACS) system closed. For a Bishop strongly committed to Catholic education, this has been a distressing trend. In fairness, one could question my own determination and sincerity. On the other hand, such mergers and consolidations, if executed properly, can create new life and offer greater educational benefits. Although individual schools close, consolidations can allow for opportunities of greater cooperation and collaboration among neighboring schools. At this writing, firm data for this current school year is not available. While early indications show an increase in enrollment for some schools for the 2011-2012 academic year, the overall number of students in Catholic schools has decreased again. Reasons for this decline vary. There are fewer children of school age in the counties which make up our Diocese; families are still moving away in order to seek employment elsewhere; many families are experiencing financial difficulties; some families do not see a value in Catholic education; and, to be honest, others have questions about our academic and catechetical standards.

In all too many parishes, the majority of children receive little or no formal education in the faith. This is not a new phenomenon, but one that has affected the Church for several generations. This concern is intensified by our diocesan practice of children receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation in second grade. On October 4, 1991, after much discussion, Bishop Untener announced his decision to restore the traditional order of the Sacraments of Initiation, i.e., Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist. In doing so, the Bishop outlined a process of gradually establishing this practice within the parishes, a process which, he stated, would include *“a team (or teams) available to parishes to help design youth ministry tailor-made to the particular parish (or cluster of parishes).”* The Bishop then added a stipulation that is readily acknowledged by parish leaders today:

Once we have effective youth ministry in place throughout the Diocese, and have taken the time to prepare the people for yet another change, we can restore the order of the Sacraments. In the interim, however, a limited number of parishes will be authorized to make the change in 1992-93 so that we can learn from their experience along the way.

Bishop Untener concluded his announcement with this caution:

So let's restore the traditional order. But let's set the establishment of successful youth ministry as a stepping stone toward the achievement of that goal. Moving Confirmation out of high school only when there is a youth ministry program that can stand on its own seems to make more sense than moving it and creating a vacuum.

Bishop Untener presented a clear program. But, for various reasons, youth ministry as envisioned by the Bishop did not take root in most parishes. Nevertheless, it did become common practice for every parish to restore the traditional order of the Sacraments of Initiation, which meant that children would receive the initiation Sacrament of Confirmation at an earlier age. I raised this issue regarding the age of Confirmation with our Presbyteral Council with the suggestion that we might consider postponing the reception of the sacrament to an older age. It was a good discussion, which ended with the proposition that, rather than initiate an age change once again, we might first revisit the original plan, concentrating efforts to develop youth ministry, formation and education. I am certain this discussion will continue in the future.

“... so many teenagers and adults are lacking in a formal education and formation in the Catholic faith.”

There are obvious consequences to the current practice. Some teachers of religion find it difficult to teach three sacraments in one year to these young children: Penance, Confirmation and Eucharist. In some cases, children are not properly introduced to the Sacrament of Penance. Of greatest concern is that, for many of our children, the reception of the Sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Eucharist marks the end of their formal Catholic education. There's a television game show called: *“Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader?”* For many of our current and future adult Catholics, the sad reality is that, when it comes to knowing the faith, third grade is the limit.

“I also commend those who serve as administrators and teachers in parish religious education programs. Their generosity and commitment of time and talent to this essential ministry deserve our gratitude.”

As a result, so many teenagers and adults are lacking in a formal education and formation in the Catholic faith. For those who did not attend Catholic school or who attended only limited religious education classes, there is a critical lack of knowledge. Teenagers, young adults and young parents ... even those in their 30s and 40s ... often demonstrate a limited understanding of their faith. In some cases, those who teach the faith lack sufficient knowledge to guide their students. Even those who have attended Catholic school their whole lives can, at times, find themselves uncertain as to what our faith teaches. I often cringe when I hear Catholic politicians take a stand contrary to Catholic moral teaching and then, in order to defend their position, claim to be educated, active and faithful members of the Catholic Church. You will often hear such apologetics in matters that concern life issues, e.g., abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem-cell research or same-sex marriage.

At the same time, I continually witness the wonderful dedication of parishioners, administrators, faculty and staff who strive to help our Catholic schools prosper. In the face of mounting adversities, they aim to provide quality and affordable Catholic education. I believe this core group of interested, energetic and dedicated individuals will serve us well as we embark upon new initiatives to reverse these trends. I also commend those who serve as administrators and teachers in parish religious education programs. Their generosity and commitment of time and talent to this essential ministry deserve our gratitude.

I have the deepest admiration for our parents who do so much to provide a faith-based education for their children. Many sacrifices are made by parents to pay the necessary tuition for Catholic schools and to volunteer their time to various parish and school events. Others who choose to send their children to public or charter schools are very conscientious about making sure their children attend religious instructions. I also am aware of and appreciate the many parents who “home-school” their children and, in doing so, make religious education a core component of their efforts.

There is no way to adequately acknowledge and thank those who so generously provide financial support to our educational programs. In the spirit of true stewardship, they share their personal resources to ensure that others, especially those less fortunate, have an opportunity to benefit from an education

provided by Catholic schools. Some of these benefactors have made it clear to me that it is not their desire to support a “status quo” system. Rather, they expect our schools to demonstrate a proactive position on enrollment, technology, academic excellence, good stewardship, consolidation of resources and, above all, Catholic culture.

In view of this assessment, I offer just a few practical actions that I consider essential in addressing the future of Catholic schools and Catholic education in general.

I remain deeply committed to Catholic schools, both elementary and secondary, and will work to ensure that the Diocese of Saginaw has a strong and vibrant Catholic schools program. I realize that this could mean further consolidations taking place before the structure finds a suitable level. We also might explore more extensively the option of providing busing for children in order to afford them the opportunity to attend a Catholic school.

I believe the recent appointment of a new Diocesan Superintendent of Schools is an essential component of this commitment and direction. The principals of our schools already have expressed their appreciation for the benefits resulting from this appointment.

“I remain deeply committed to Catholic schools, both elementary and secondary, and will work to ensure that the Diocese of Saginaw has a strong and vibrant Catholic schools program.”

While I acknowledge the good work of the advisory boards that serve SACS and BACS, as well as the advisory structures in place in each of the individual parishes, I believe a diocesan-wide vision is needed. During this academic year, I plan to establish a Diocesan Board of Education (DBE) to advise me and the Diocesan Superintendent of Schools in providing quality, affordable Catholic education throughout the Diocese for all those who wish to attend. I realize that finances play a major role in parents’ ability to send their children to a Catholic school and in the parish’s ability to maintain its own elementary school. Therefore, I would expect the DBE to prioritize the issue of identifying and securing funding sources and addressing the difficulty that parishes face in meeting their school assessments and subsidies.

In a similar fashion, I intend to establish a Diocesan Board of Religious Education (DBRE) to advise me and the Diocesan Director of Catechesis in developing a companion religious education program for those children who do not attend Catholic schools. I envision that these two diocesan bodies (DBE/

DBRE) will work together to ensure that a comprehensive and uniform curriculum in religious education is implemented throughout the Diocese.

I already have begun to collaborate with the Diocesan Superintendent of Schools and the Director of the Center for Ministry in order to develop a diocesan-wide program of ongoing education for teachers, parents and children, particularly in the fundamentals of our faith, based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. More will be said about this in the next section related to adults.

ADULT EDUCATION AND FAITH FORMATION

When speaking of Catholic education, it is not enough to address the education of young people alone. Adult Catholics are equally in need of a strong educational and formational background in the faith. First of all, I must acknowledge the wonderful resources available here in the Diocese of Saginaw. For years, the Diocese has created and provided many programs that have helped develop an informed laity. The Center for Ministry and the Lay Ministry Program are great blessings and are core to any effort of providing religious education and formation for adults. As a matter of fact, I recently celebrated the annual Mass for the *Commissioning, Missioning and Renewal of Lay Ministers*. This year alone, 23 men and women were commissioned/missioned at this Mass, 48 celebrating significant years renewed their ministry and 16 celebrated permanent status. Hundreds of men and women throughout the Diocese have participated in theological and faith formation programs sponsored by the Lay Ministry Program.

“The Center for Ministry and the Lay Ministry Program are great blessings and are core to any effort of providing religious education and formation for adults.”

Everywhere I go throughout the Diocese, men and women share with me their experiences and appreciation of the services provided by the Diocese at the Center for Ministry. Not only have they been personally enriched in their own faith, they also have generously shared their knowledge and experience with fellow parishioners in countless adult education and formation programs.

Early on in my ministry in the Diocese, for some uncertain reason, I experienced an impression held by a few that I did not consider the Lay Ministry Program a

priority. I honestly do not know how this impression arose. Nothing could be further from the truth. What is true is that, before I could fully understand and appreciate the programs of the Center for Ministry, the Director of the Center left the Diocese to assume a new position elsewhere. Consequently, at the same time we were conducting a search for a Superintendent of Schools, we also were engaged in a search for a new Director in this area. I am pleased that we have hired an extremely competent and motivated Director with whom I have begun to work closely to ensure that suitable programs and courses are provided at the Center.

On the other hand, faced with the reality that less than one-third of Catholics are actively engaged in their parishes and Church activities, I believe, and have often expressed, that lay ministers need to assume a “missionary” mind-set and refocus their efforts in order to reach out to those who, for a multitude of reasons, no longer find the Church relevant or essential. These lay ministers must become immersed in the Church’s mission of “re-evangelization.”

I understand that many of the parish-centered adult education programs or series involve teachings on the Scriptures. This is understandable since, for many adult Catholics, the Scriptures were not core to their early religious education curriculum. But even my own parish experience tells me that, by and large, the same, small group of interested parishioners attends such classes. While it is commendable that many lay ministers return to their parishes and offer educational series in this way, I am concerned that our Diocese and parishes are not addressing the deeper commission concerning the “re-evangelization” of the broader parish community. In this regard, I have spoken on many occasions of the need for “personal contact,” that is, of parish programs by which formed and informed volunteers pay personal home visits to all parish families, whether active or inactive. We must be a “welcoming” community; but, we cannot simply wait for people to come to church. We already know that the vast majority are not coming. We must take up our walking sticks and traveling bags and go out to those who are in need of the Good News of Jesus Christ. I would encourage lay ministers to balance the “classroom” setting of evangelization with participation in parish-wide visitation programs. Furthermore, we need to develop and have in place learning opportunities that address Catholic dogma and doctrine, such as the sacramental and moral teaching of the Church, in addition to Scripture.

Returning to my earlier theme, before we can love and serve the Lord, we must truly know Him. Education and catechesis are essential for each one of us, teacher and student. I believe that this must be a priority as we go forward in our growth as a Diocese, as a people of God. It is not enough to concern ourselves about our teens, young adults and children, wherever they attend school. We

must find a way to provide a solid faith-foundation for every adult: priest, deacon and religious, teachers and administrators in our schools, parents of our school-age children and those whose families are already full grown, as well as senior members of our parishes. Everyone is included in this universal endeavor of updating our faith and rejuvenating our Christian ideals.

I will direct my energies to formulating a diocesan-wide program of catechesis and education for every person of every age. As mentioned earlier, I will collaborate with the Diocesan Superintendent of Schools and the Director of the Center for Ministry in order to develop such a program and curriculum for teachers, parents and children, with an emphasis on the fundamentals of our faith based on, but not limited to, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

It is my hope that parishes will collaborate with the Diocese in coordinating local programs with this overall vision. Parish life is a key part of evangelization. When people feel valued in a parish that offers warm hospitality, and when they are uplifted by engaging liturgies that show forth the beauty of the Lord, our efforts to go deeper in the knowledge of the Catholic faith will bear much fruit.

“I will direct my energies to formulating a diocesan-wide program of catechesis and education for every person of every age.”

I plan to establish an advisory board to work with the Director of the Center for Ministry in developing and coordinating ongoing programs for those already involved in lay ministry as well as new applicants. I envision that these courses will help our people to continue to grow in their knowledge of Scripture through the lens of Church teaching while, at the same time, giving greater attention to doctrinal formation, which includes the Catholic tripod of Scripture, Sacred Tradition and magisterial teachings.

I encourage individual parishes – staff and volunteers working together – to engage in a process of personal visitation with every registered family, whether active or inactive. To varying degrees, a few parishes already have begun such an initiative and report positive results. In doing so, you will encounter Catholics who, for a host of reasons, have fallen away from the practice of their faith. Some will need encouragement; others will require a deeper understanding and knowledge of the faith in order to more fervently commit themselves to active participation; some will need canonical or sacramental assistance to reconcile their relationship with the Church; still others will need to experience, on the part of the Church and those who represent it, a sincere expression of sorrow and a willingness to help heal the hurts caused by the failings of those who have ministered on behalf of the Church.

THE EUCHARIST: PASCHAL MYSTERY, REAL PRESENCE

We must know, love and serve God in this world. It is in the great gift of the Eucharist through the celebration of the paschal mystery where knowledge of God leads to love, and knowledge and love lead to service.

In the homily I gave at my Installation Mass, having recalled the words of Mary at the Wedding Feast of Cana, “*Do whatever He tells you,*” I asked the question: “*How do we know what He is telling us? How can we know God’s will?*” I went on to say:

The answer can be found here, in the Eucharist ... My chief priority will be that of promoting a deeper love and appreciation for the Eucharist. Part of this is the urgent task of drawing Catholics who have drifted away back to the Church, back to the Mass and Sacraments, in order to have life and to know what it is that the Lord is telling us (IH, 2009).

In this pastoral letter, I have stated that evangelization, together with Catholic education, is my main priority. So, one might ask: “Has the priority changed?” Not at all! The Eucharist is the foundation, the very essence, of what it means for us to be a Church. All priorities must find their source, meaning and grace in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is considered under many aspects: the Body of Christ, the Bread of Life, the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacrament of Sacraments, the Real Presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Each day, you and I can encounter Jesus, in His Eucharistic presence, in the celebration of Mass and in personal contemplation and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The Eucharist is Christ Himself; and, the Mass is the “celebration of the Eucharist,” the celebration of the paschal mystery.

“The Eucharist is the foundation, the very essence, of what it means for us to be a Church. All priorities must find their source, meaning and grace in the Eucharist.”

The Mass is divided into two major parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In the Liturgy of the Word, we come to know God the Father, “creator of heaven and earth,” God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in His redemptive activity, and God the Holy Spirit, through His grace and inspiration present throughout all of salvation history. Hearing the Word of God, we become aware of God’s unconditional love for us and His power over all things, both in life

and death. We encounter Jesus, The Word, who draws us into his saving actions. From the writings of the Old and New Testaments, the Church reveals God's plan of how we Christians, the Body of His Son, are to live as a faith community, united in love for God and one another.

Internalizing the Word of God, newly heard or recounted, leads to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. We recall the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and are caught up in His saving act. In the "breaking of the bread," symbolic of the body of Christ broken for us on Calvary, we find our own hearts *burning inside of us* with love for the Lord. As our knowledge of God's love for us grows, our own love for God deepens within us. And so, at the conclusion of the Mass, we are sent forth, in the **knowledge** and **love** of the Lord, to **serve** our brothers and sisters.

We must know, love and serve God in this world.

“Not only does the Church draw her life from the Eucharist; the Church, you and I, also draw our identity from the Eucharist. We come to know who Jesus is and who we are as His body through authentic Eucharist.”

Having celebrated Mass and other liturgical rites in most of the parishes throughout the Diocese, I have seen first-hand the attention given to the preparation and carrying out of liturgical celebrations. In general, the liturgical music and actions are performed with care, enthusiasm and sincerity. At the same time, I must acknowledge that I have also noted that some parishes have fallen into liturgical practices that are not in keeping with the directives of the Church. The Mass is core to our proper understanding of the Eucharist, as well as God's will for us. For this reason, the Church wishes to safeguard the words and actions used in the Mass in order to ensure that the message and meaning conveyed by the celebrant and ministers are truly authentic, not merely provincial or even personal. At my installation as your Bishop, I stated:

Not only does the Church draw her life from the Eucharist; the Church, you and I, also draw our identity from the Eucharist. We come to know who Jesus is and who we are as His body through authentic Eucharist. We come to know what God wants of us by a better understanding and appreciation of the life of Jesus as proclaimed each time the Eucharist is celebrated. In the proclamation of the Word and the sacred prayers which envelop the Liturgy of the Eucharist, as well as our worthy reception of Holy Communion, we come to know the true Jesus, the Suffering

Servant, the Lamb of God, our Lord and Master . . . and His will for us. That is why the Church shows such care for the elements of the Mass, how it is celebrated, the words spoken, the posture and attitude of the priests and people. That is why [...] priests and deacons must show special care for our preached words and daily lives. All our actions as servants of the Lord flow from and are enlivened by our understanding and faithful celebration and reception of the Eucharist (*IH*, 2009).

The Church's desire for ritual uniformity and orthodoxy can, and does, allow for local customs and even the unique personality of the priest celebrant. Especially as we embark in this coming year to introduce the changes prescribed within the new *Roman Missal*, I will ask the cooperation of all involved in the liturgical life of our parishes to collaborate with me and the Office for Liturgy to ensure that the new translations and the norms established in the General Instruction (GIRM) are fully implemented.

It is important for us, as Catholics, to know who it is and what it is that we receive. Because the Eucharist embodies so much of the truth of our faith, of Who Christ is and how we should live, it is essential for us, as Catholics, to spend time in contemplation of this great Presence. *Eucharisticum Mysterium, Instruction on Eucharistic Worship*, issued by the Sacred Congregation of Rites in 1967, commenting on *Presbyterorum Ordini, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, stated:

It would be well to recall that the primary and original purpose of reserving the sacred species in church outside Mass is the administration of the Viaticum. Secondary ends are the distribution of Communion outside Mass and the adoration of Our Lord Jesus Christ concealed beneath these same species. (For) the reservation of the sacred species for the sick . . . led to the praiseworthy custom of adoring the heavenly food which is preserved in churches. This practice of adoration has a valid and firm foundation, especially since belief in the real presence of the Lord has as its natural consequence the external and public manifestation of that belief (*EM* 49).

When the faithful adore Christ present in the sacrament, they should remember that this presence derives from the sacrifice and is directed toward both sacramental and spiritual Communion. In consequence, the devotion which leads the faithful to visit the Blessed Sacrament draws them into an ever deeper participation in the paschal mystery. It leads them to respond gratefully to the gift of Him who through His humanity constantly pours divine life into the members of His body. Dwelling with Christ our Lord, they enjoy His intimate friendship and pour out their hearts before Him for themselves and their dear ones, and pray for the

peace and salvation of the world. They offer their entire lives with Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit, and receive in this wonderful exchange an increase of faith, hope and charity. Thus they nourish those right dispositions which enable them with all due devotion to celebrate the memorial of the Lord and receive frequently the bread given us by the Father. The faithful should therefore strive to worship Christ our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, in harmony with their way of life (EM 50).

I encourage every parish to provide opportunities for the faithful to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and to contemplate and adore our Lord.

The opportunity to know God better begins at the moment we enter the church. There, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, we can settle our hearts and minds, not to mention our bodies, and become aware of the presence of the Lord in this sacred place and, indeed, in our lives. This requires an atmosphere of quiet and reflection. Here in the Diocese of Saginaw, I appreciate the way in which many of our more recently built churches have designed gathering spaces at the entrance of the church. These spaces allow parishioners to greet each other and share the events of the week, while allowing those within the body of the church to enjoy an atmosphere of solitude and reflection. I encourage parishes to foster a sense of quiet and reflection in the body of the church, especially before services begin.

“ I encourage every parish to provide opportunities for the faithful to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament and to contemplate and adore our Lord.”

I ask parishes to consider anew the option of having the tabernacle restored to a prominent place within the sanctuary. This allows for people who do not have the opportunity to spend time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament during the week to have some time when they attend Mass on the weekends, before and after Mass.

I also encourage parishes to schedule Eucharistic days or, if possible, to reintroduce the traditional Forty Hours devotions on an annual basis. These extended times of prayer and reflection in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament are formative for our relationship with the Lord. For my part, beginning this year, I have scheduled a Forty Hours Devotion at the Cathedral, with the intention of continuing this celebration on a yearly basis.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

In the now fairly dated movie *Love Story*, we hear that romantic adage “*Love means never having to say you’re sorry.*” For me, it has always raised a Shakesperianish query: “*True or not true? That is the question.*” When all is said and done, the right answer is: “not true.” We must accept the fact that we are not perfect, acknowledge our own sins and failings and forgive the sins of others if we are to maintain a loving relationship with God and others. Expressing sorrow for offenses is essential in any loving relationship. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus Christ, in His ultimate wisdom, gave us the Sacrament of Penance to afford us every opportunity to repair any broken relationship with God, others and even within ourselves.

The introductory remarks in the recently revised *Rite of Penance* advise us:

Just as the wounds of sin are varied and multiple in the life of individuals and of the community, so too the healing that penance provides is varied. Those who by grave sin have withdrawn from communion with God in love are called back in the sacrament of penance to the life they have lost. And those who, experiencing their weakness daily, fall into venial sins draw strength from a repeated celebration of penance to reach the full freedom of the children of God. ... In order that this sacrament of healing may truly achieve its purpose among the faithful, it must take root in their entire life and move them to more fervent service of God and neighbor (RP 7).

For Catholics, the Sacrament of Penance has been closely united to the Eucharist, because faithfulness, love and forgiveness are so intertwined. It also is our tradition to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in an individual, personal way between the priest and penitent. The Church does acknowledge that there may arise, from time to time and by exception, the need to celebrate the sacrament in a general way. However, even when this is the case, the Church advises that:

... those who receive pardon for serious sins through general absolution are to go to individual confession as soon as they have the opportunity before any further reception of general absolution. And unless a moral impossibility stands in the way, they are absolutely bound to go to a confessor within one year (RP 34).

I am grateful to our priests for generously providing time and attention to the faithful who wish to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance in a personal, individual manner. I encourage all our people to avail themselves of this sacrament on a regular basis, in an individual setting.

Because these two sacraments are core to our lives as Catholics, I encourage that measures be taken to make Eucharist and Penance more accessible. It is my hope that, through the review and restructuring of parishes throughout the Diocese, we can better coordinate schedules in a way that allows parishioners to participate in Mass daily and in the Sacrament of Penance on a regular basis. This will, of course, require parishes to work together on a regional basis and parishioners to be willing to travel beyond their local church. A restructuring of parishes will allow priests and parishioners to better coordinate and celebrate liturgies in order to ensure that there are sufficient ministers to assume all the liturgical responsibilities in an appropriate manner.

PARISH LIFE AND CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

*I*n order for the bishop to best serve the needs of the people entrusted to his care, each diocese is divided into parishes. I have found it true that most Catholics are more informed about and more aligned with their individual parish than their diocese as a whole. In fact, for some Catholics, it is difficult to distinguish between their Catholic faith and the parish church. In my hometown, when asked what part of the city they are from, even non-Catholics will name the Catholic parish in which their home is located.

In some ways, there is merit to this association. Over time, we develop a sense of loyalty to, and affection for, our neighborhood parish, a personal commitment to its well-being and continued existence. We maintain strong affinities to the church where we were baptized and confirmed, made our first penance and received our first Holy Communion. For many individuals, it also is the place where they were married and from which their family members were buried. Many parishioners take a great interest in the liturgical celebrations and programs of education and outreach. Where parish schools existed, such fidelity made for great rivalries in sports and other activities. The strength of a diocese is dependent upon the faith-life of each parish.

In all my parish visits over the past two years, I have been impressed by the enthusiasm of the people for their local parish church and community. It is obvious that our people take great pride in their parish and its history. Quite a number of our parishes predate the establishment of the Diocese of Saginaw. Some have been in existence for more than 150 years. They have established a strong history, identity and mission.

As I noted earlier, in the first 25 to 50 years after its establishment in 1938, the Diocese of Saginaw experienced a continual growth in Catholic population, as well as a corresponding growth in the number of parishes. So much so that, in 1971, the Holy See found it necessary to create a new diocese in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula, the Diocese of Gaylord. Several months ago, I took the opportunity to enjoy reading a special edition of *The Catholic Weekly* newspaper published on May 25, 1952. Page after page described the many new parishes that had been established to meet the growing population and needs of the people. At that time, the Diocese included the northeast half of the Lower Peninsula, all the way to the Mackinac Bridge, but did not include Isabella or Clare Counties (which at the time were part of the Diocese of Grand Rapids). All the parishes were staffed with one or, in many cases, two priests. The ideal was for each parish to have its own grade school and – in some instances – its own high school. Overall, “growth” was the operative word.

“In all my parish visits over the past two years, I have been impressed by the enthusiasm of the people for their local parish church and community. It is obvious that our people take great pride in their parish and its history.”

During the last 15 to 20 years, the contrary has been true. While individual parishes may have grown, our Diocese, as a whole, has experienced a downward trend, both in population and in Mass attendance. Most recently, the economic challenges of our area and the corresponding decrease in population have presented major concerns, not just for businesses, families, and individuals, but for the Church as well. In considerable numbers, long-time neighbors and fellow parishioners are moving to other parts of the state and country seeking employment. This outward migration continues to have a considerable effect on parish registration and school enrollment. All throughout the 11 counties of our Diocese, reports show a continual decline in population, as well as school enrollment, even within the public schools. There are simply fewer people and fewer children. In 2000, there were 2,169 baptisms compared to 1,662 deaths. In 2010, there were 1,224 baptisms compared to 1,474 deaths.

In 1988, at the time of our 50th anniversary, the Diocese of Saginaw was composed of 115 parishes/missions and 160,000 Catholics. Currently, our Diocese is composed of 105 parishes (and four additional churches) serving approximately 108,601 Catholics over 6,955 square miles. Compared to 1988, we now have at least 50,000 fewer Catholics, but only six fewer churches.

PRIEST PERSONNEL

For some comparison, I consulted the 2011 *Kenedy Directory*, which provides information, based on annual updates, for every diocese within the United States. In Michigan, there are seven (arch)dioceses. The Metropolitan Archdiocese of Detroit is the largest. It has 271 parishes serving 1,413,612 Catholics. Population-wise, the Diocese of Lansing is the second-largest, with 207,977 Catholics and 84 parishes, followed by the Diocese of Grand Rapids with 178,000 Catholics and 91 parishes. The Diocese of Saginaw is next in line with 108,601 Catholics. The Dioceses of Gaylord and Marquette are small, population-wise, but cover a much larger geographical area. The Diocese of Gaylord has 80 parishes serving 59,328 Catholics. Although it has half the number of Catholics than Saginaw, Gaylord covers a geographical area nearly twice the size of our Diocese (11,171 square miles). The Diocese of Marquette, which encompasses the entire Upper Peninsula, is the most interesting of all. In an area of 16,281 square miles, the Diocese has 72 parishes serving 49,497 Catholics. Perhaps the local Church that compares best with Saginaw is the Diocese of Kalamazoo. Covering 5,337 square miles, the Diocese of Kalamazoo serves 102,152 Catholics (almost our total) in 46 parishes (less than half the number of parishes in our Diocese).

A number of parishes in the Diocese of Saginaw have small congregations. In some respects, this is a characteristic that has its advantages, given the fact that many people know each other. On the other hand, such limitations of parishioners and corresponding financial resources make it difficult to sustain all the aspects of parish life necessary for viability and vitality. In those cases where the parish is administered by a pastoral administrator (PA), since the parish pays the salary and benefits of the PA, some parishes cannot support the stipend and/or expenses of a priest who serves as their sacramental minister.

The circumstances that our parishes face today mirror those of many parishes throughout the country. On average, less than one-third of registered parishioners practice their faith, that is, attend Mass and receive the Sacraments regularly. The number of those who support the parish and its mission financially is even smaller. Where there is a parish school present, those who send their children to the school have a passion for its existence. However, this does not always translate into the children or their families practicing the faith by attending Mass.

In recent years, most of our neighboring dioceses have undergone a comprehensive review to assess the status of each parish, resulting in the reorganization and consolidation of parishes. While the Diocese of Saginaw has not established a diocesan-wide, comprehensive plan, over the years, a number of parishes have either been closed or merged with neighboring parishes due to local demographic shifts and population decline.

In any discussion involving changing demographics and parish life, the status of priest personnel is a major factor that must be considered. Since my earliest meetings with my brother priests and parish leaders, a major topic of discussion has been our inability to sustain the number of parishes and the need for restructuring.

The Diocese of Saginaw is blessed with dedicated priests. In these two short years, I already have formed bonds of friendship and mutual respect with my brother priests. The majority of our priests grew up in homes and parishes here in the Diocese of Saginaw, or surrounding dioceses during the time of restructuring. More recently, a number of our priests have come from other parts of the country and the world. We also are well served by a number of priests who are members of religious congregations. They serve here, however, only for limited terms and in increasingly diminishing numbers, due to their own personnel needs. In addition, there are other priests serving here who are not incardinated, which means (canonically) that they are members of other dioceses. A few facts may prove helpful to better understand the current status of our presbyterate.

“The Diocese of Saginaw is blessed with dedicated priests.”

As of this writing, there are 54 diocesan priests in full-time, active ministry within the Diocese. Of these 54 priests:

- 26 are 59 years of age or younger
- 13 are between 60 and 64 years of age
- 9 are between 65 and 69 years of age
- 6 are between 70 and 79 years of age

These numbers are significant since, here in the Diocese of Saginaw, priests are permitted to retire at the age of 65.

In addition, two diocesan priests are in graduate studies in Rome and are expected to return to the Diocese full-time in June 2012; one is in part-time ministry; one is on a health leave; one is on an extended leave of absence; and one priest is in service in another diocese.

With 109 churches, it is easy to appreciate what a great asset it is for the Diocese to be served by our senior/retired priests, as well as priests from religious communities and extern priests (i.e., priests from other dioceses serving in our Diocese). Of the 33 senior/retired diocesan priests:

- 7 are regular sacramental ministers, ages 69 to 84
- 15 assist with Mass and Sacraments where needed, ages 68 to 86
- 11 are fully retired, infirm or live elsewhere

As a point of interest, one priest, age 81, travels nearly 100 miles round-trip every weekend to serve as a sacramental minister, not to mention conducting funerals and other parish liturgies throughout the week! Other senior priests experience similar circumstances.

In addition, there are five extern priests in full-time service, one of whom is over 70 years of age; two externs who serve as sacramental ministers; and six religious priests in full-time service, one of whom is a full-time chaplain at St. Mary's Hospital.

There is another important statistic to consider: On any given weekend, there are 222 Masses scheduled in parishes throughout the Diocese (77 on Saturday evening and 145 on Sunday). This does not include those additional Masses that may be celebrated for pastoral reasons or to commemorate special events.

There are currently 17 deacons, religious and lay women serving as pastoral administrators. These individuals provide an important and valuable service to the pastoral and administrative aspects of parish life. In those parishes served by pastoral administrators, there is still the obligation on the part of the Diocese to appoint priests to provide sacramental ministry to each parish. In January of 2003, shortly after Bishop Untener instituted the position of pastoral administrator within the diocese, he was interviewed by the Saginaw News:

Using pastoral administrators to fill priest vacancies is not a long-term solution, emphasized Bishop Kenneth E. Untener, head of the estimated 139,664 parishioners within the Saginaw Diocese. *"The Catholic Church is centered on the Eucharist," he said. "We absolutely cannot do without that. Ordained priests are essential to the long-range future of the Church. However, short term, which in the Catholic Church can be a lot of years, they are a wonderful blessing ..."*

I also wish to address here the contributions of our permanent deacons. The ministry of deacons within our Diocese is a wonderful gift. Our deacons do so much to assist in the pastoral work of parishes as well as institutions throughout the Diocese.

The *Rite of Ordination for Deacons*, the formal instruction to the candidates, notes:

Strengthened by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, you will help the Bishop and his priests in the ministry of the word, of the altar, and of charity, showing yourselves to be servants to all. Among other duties, you will be called upon to instruct believers and unbelievers alike in the teachings of the Church (RO 199).

In this instruction, deacons are encouraged to be an integral part of the Church's work of evangelization.

The permanent diaconate within the Diocese of Saginaw had been discontinued for many years. Several years ago, new candidates were invited to apply; and, this past spring, I had the joy of ordaining four new permanent deacons.

Last year, I appointed one of our priests to serve as Director of the Permanent Diaconate. Currently, he is working with the Director of the Center for Ministry to re-establish an academic and formational program to prepare future candidates for this ministry. This program will be in keeping with the guidelines established in the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*.

A FUTURE FULL OF HOPE: PLANNING TOMORROW'S PARISHES

*I*n September of this year, I announced the start of a strategic planning process designed to engage parishioners to assess the state of the churches across the Diocese and develop recommendations to enhance the vibrancy of parish life. It is our hope that, through this process, we will be in a position to enliven sacramental, educational and community life, including service and stewardship, for all of our people. Every parish will be asked to assess its strengths, name concerns and explore ways in which it can work with other parishes to better serve the People of God in the work of evangelization. We have retained a consulting firm specializing in parish planning to assist us in this endeavor.

"... it is essential to keep in mind that the Church exists to evangelize. Our call is to do the work of Jesus Christ, to the best of our abilities, whatever the structures and resources at our disposal."

This process involves change that might prove very difficult for some of our devoted and loyal parish members. Nonetheless, we must undergo this process together and address the number of sustainable parishes, as well as priestly vocations. Recommended solutions for change will vary throughout the Diocese. This is not a process of closure, although some parishes may close. It is a process designed to assess how parishes can best perform the work of evangelization with the resources available. Certainly one solution is the “merging” of parishes. However, several options can be considered, which include ways for parishes to work together more closely by combining resources and energies and by sharing paid staff.

In 1949, two months after I was born, my parents purchased our family home. I knew no other home. My two brothers and I found our faith, vocations and security in that home. In 1982, mom and dad decided to sell our home and accept my brother and sister-in-law’s invitation to live with them. It was not easy for our parents to leave what had always been the symbol of our family life. At one point, my mother expressed particular concern for me. While each of my brothers had established his own family and home, my parents’ house remained my only “home.” Mom began to feel some regret that I would no longer have a home to call my own. I assured her that home for me always would be wherever she and Dad were. **They are my home.**

“*Hard decisions will need to be made and I know that some people may be disappointed, even uncertain of the future. In faith, God will see us through!*”

Many parishioners have developed the same affection for their local parish. The parish church was the place of Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, the burial of their loved ones and liturgical life in general. For many, it was the place of their Catholic school education or religious instruction. It holds happy memories of picnics, bazaars, school and athletic events, even fundraising endeavors. Strong friendships occur wherever vibrant parish life exists.

I deeply respect this history, devotion and commitment. This relationship is what parishes are all about and a source of strength for the larger diocesan family. Having said this, it is essential to keep in mind that the Church exists to evangelize. Our call is to do the work of Jesus Christ, to the best of our abilities, whatever the structures and resources at our disposal.

The need for the Diocese to consider the process of merging parishes is not new to my tenure as your Bishop. Both Bishop Untener and Bishop Carlson grappled with this necessity. Some consolidation took place among parishes in the city of Saginaw and a few parishes elsewhere. But, for various reasons, the broader issue of diocesan-wide

restructuring was not carried out. I am aware of the pain experienced as a result of some of these past reorganizations. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the time has definitely come to review the structure and resources of the Diocese and to take necessary measures to restructure the Church of Saginaw to be in the best position to evangelize.

In the light of the present reality facing our Diocese, serious measures must be taken. No bishop treasures the thought of being the agent of this type of change to parish communities. Nonetheless, I have assured my brother priests and the pastoral administrators that I understand this to be my responsibility, as Shepherd of this local Church, at this moment in our history; and I will commit myself to this task.

At the end of my freshman year in high school, I was brought to the emergency room with abdominal pains. Dr. Annon, the attending physician, told me it was my appendix and that he needed to operate immediately. My face must have clearly shown my disappointment and fear. With a caring smile, Dr. Annon said to me: “*Don’t look at me in that tone of voice!*” I am bracing myself for a similar look from some of you when the outcome of our study is realized. Hard decisions will need to be made and I know that some people may be disappointed, even uncertain of the future. In faith, God will see us through!

I am grateful that the priests and pastoral administrators have indicated their support in this endeavor. In the next year and a half, parishes will engage in a comprehensive study to help determine how we, as a Diocese, can best accomplish the work of evangelization. It is our hope that, through this process, we will be in a position to enliven sacramental, educational and community life, including service and stewardship for all our people. The consulting firm will coordinate this study at a parish, regional and diocesan level.

Parishes will be asked to honestly assess the vitality and vibrancy of their parish programs and ministries, as well as the viability of upholding the responsibilities of a parish for the foreseeable future. Many factors will need to be considered, including priest personnel, parish population, growth/decline analysis, the ability to maintain active parish Pastoral and Finance Councils and available financial resources (to name a few). We must attentively address the needs, challenges and opportunities that present themselves to this local Church in this time and place.

At the completion of this process of review, certain recommendations will be presented for my approval. Although the review process will conclude at that time, the implementation process will, of necessity, take longer and proceed in phases. And, like any required regiment for healthy living, this cannot be a one-time event. Our local Church will need to engage such a process on an on-going basis to ensure that the work of evangelization remains vibrant, within the parameters of given resources.

PRIESTLY VOCATIONS

As we look to the future and engage in a review of our parishes and resources, we must, at the same time, consider ways of increasing awareness of the need for priestly and religious vocations. While the Diocesan Bishop, as the chief shepherd, always is the prime vocations director, the work of identifying and fostering priestly vocations is the work of the entire Church. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are rooted in good, solid, Catholic family life, nurtured and encouraged by loving parents and siblings, by friends and fellow parishioners. Most of all, vocations to the priesthood are brought about through the recognition and encouragement that come from their parish priests. In survey after survey, seminarians identify the parish priest as a main incentive for their considering a priestly vocation.

“While the Diocesan Bishop, as the chief shepherd, always is the prime vocations director, the work of identifying and fostering priestly vocations is the work of the entire Church.”

Even before being installed as your Bishop, I met with our seminarians to get to know them and to discuss with them their thoughts on the priesthood and seminary life. At that time, I was introduced to 13 seminarians. Last year, one additional young man entered seminary studies. Of these 14 men, six have been ordained to the priesthood and two to the diaconate. Four are still in seminary training and two have gone on to other endeavors. Despite the upturn in ordinations to the priesthood over the past five years, our Diocese is still very much in need of present and future priests.

Our Diocese is blessed by organizations such as the Serra Club and the Knights of Columbus who do so much to support our seminarians with prayer, encouragement and much-needed financial assistance. So many individuals, organizations and businesses assist us financially each year through *The Bishop's Seminarian Golf Outing and Dinner*, as well as through private donations.

I have repeatedly expressed my conviction that a number of the young men of our Diocese are hearing the call to priesthood. After all, this is the Church of Jesus Christ. I have no doubt that He will sustain His Church with sufficient priestly vocations. For our part, we, as members of His Church, priests, religious, parents, family members, relatives, friends and fellow parishioners, must work together to develop and nurture a culture and environment of fostering priestly vocations.

To help coordinate efforts in this regard, I appointed one of our young pastors to assume additional responsibilities as Diocesan Director of Priestly Vocations. I also appointed another experienced pastor to serve as Director of Seminarians. In the past two years, we have worked to develop programs to gather together young men, at times with their parents, for opportunities to discuss the life of a priest. A Vocation Discernment Day resulted in two busloads of young men spending the day at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, and a bus-load of young women visiting convents/religious houses within the Diocese. We realize that not all of these young people are committed to pursue a vocation in the priesthood or religious life. However, these measures are helping to create an environment and culture for priestly and religious vocations to flourish. Through such initiatives, I have the opportunity to establish personal relationships with these young men and women.

Forming bonds of friendship with brother priests is essential for healthy ministry. Those preparing for priesthood also must enjoy a familiarity with the Diocese in which they will serve. When vocations were more numerous and from local parishes, the past practice of the Diocese was to enroll the seminarians in several different seminaries around the country and even in Europe. This diversity of experiences was advantageous to the Diocese in many ways. Even then, however, many diocesan seminarians spent at least a portion of their studies with other diocesan seminarians at the same institution. With fewer seminarians of varying backgrounds from outside the Diocese, the practice of employing different seminaries presents concerns of its own. Seminarians themselves have expressed a desire to attend seminary together in order to have common experiences and form greater bonds of friendship. Over the past two years, our seminarians were enrolled in five different seminaries. As new men apply for seminary training, we will explore the possibility of reducing the number of seminaries in order to increase the opportunity for diocesan seminarians to study together, at least at some stage of their preparation, and to form stronger bonds of friendship with one another.

“For our part, we, as members of His Church, priests, religious, parents, family members, relatives, friends and fellow parishioners, must work together to develop and nurture a culture and environment of fostering priestly vocations.”

Because many of our recent vocations and ordinations have come to us from outside our Diocese and even from other countries, I want to ensure that our presbyterate enjoys a unity and fraternity that enrich their personal lives and help them to better serve the faithful entrusted to their care. While such diversity

can be a blessing, bridging cultural and generational gaps is often a challenge. I am aware of my responsibility in this regard and will continue to help my brother priests to know and appreciate one another in greater measure. This is achieved, in part, by our quarterly meetings, priest assemblies, regional and diocesan liturgies and even by informal dinners and the occasional round of golf.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

*M*arriage and Family Life is one of those topics which, as I indicated earlier, deserves a completely separate pastoral letter. For the purposes of this letter, I need to acknowledge these issues as important priorities for the Church and for our diocesan vision and ministry. To do so, I wish to borrow some thoughts from a previous article I wrote for *FAITH Saginaw* magazine.

The Second Vatican Council spoke of the family as the “domestic church.” In *Lumen Gentium, Constitution on the Church*, the council taught:

The family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children. They should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care any religious vocation (LG 11).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also speaks of the nature of the family:

The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason it can be called a ‘domestic church.’ It is a community of faith, hope and charity; it assumes singular importance in the Church . . . (and) is a communion of persons, a sign and image of the community of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. In the procreation and education of children, it reflects the Father’s work of creation (CCC 2204-2005).

Each Christian family exists as a microcosm – a miniature version – of the Church itself. Like within the Church, every member of the family has a specific role and every family has its moments of pride and embarrassment. No family is perfect. However, each family is in a perfect position to emulate and make present the unity of the Trinity and the love of the Holy Family.

Today’s families are challenged by fast food, cell phones, computers, the

entertainment media, materialism and consumerism, to name a few issues. These societal influences affect not only the way family life is conducted, but how we celebrate liturgy and live out our faith on a daily basis.

The Church, then, is a reflection of the individual families that make up the Church. And, in turn, each family is a reflection of the quality of love, respect and unity witnessed in the lives of the parents:

Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church. Thus this love can lead the spouses to God with powerful effect and can aid and strengthen them in the sublime office of being a father or a mother . . . As a result, with their parents leading the way by example and family prayer, children and indeed everyone gathered around the family hearth will find a readier path to human maturity, salvation, and holiness. Graced with the dignity and office of fatherhood and motherhood, parents will energetically acquit themselves of a duty which devolves primarily on them, namely education, and especially religious education (GS 48).

The Church community and her work of evangelization are directly affected not only by the blessings and goods that come from strong married and family life, but also by the struggles and failures which arise from the breakdown of marriage and family. At times, husbands and wives can be the cause of their own difficulties due to poor communication or other personal/interpersonal weaknesses. However, there also are outside agents that threaten the bond of love experienced by couples and children. For example, in the midst of our current economic downturn, by no fault of their own, many of our people wake to find themselves without a job or health care . . . even lacking food or shelter. Other families find themselves struggling with issues of aging, physical, emotional or psychological sickness, or the loneliness caused by separation and death.

“No family is perfect. However, each family is in a perfect position to emulate and make present the unity of the Trinity and the love of the Holy Family.”

Parents have a complex balancing act to perform in safely guiding their children in this world, given all the worldly distractions that surround them. So many people have a keen interest in our young people, but not necessarily for their well-being and salvation. The political world wants to influence them

“The one gift that parents can give to their children for their well-being and ultimate joy is the gift of our faith.”

so that they will “come on board” to certain political and ideological agendas. Some believe that if government can win the minds of children, it will control their thoughts and desires as adults. Others prey on the idealism of young people who have such limited experience and often lack opportunities to measure their developing principles against the realities of life.

The one gift that parents can give to their children for their well-being and ultimate joy is the gift of our faith. Strength and courage come from knowing our faith, trusting in God’s direction and relying on the grace of His Sacraments throughout our lives – grace which helps us stand against the tide to do what is right and moral, kind and just.

The Diocese must continually review our programs for marriage preparation, marriage enrichment and Natural Family Planning education. Our Marriage and Family Ministry Office is committed to supporting the U.S. Bishops’ *Pastoral Initiative for Marriage*, working to strengthen marriages, families, parishes, and society at large through various programs, workshops, presentations and resources.

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS

*T*he Church has more than a vested interest in our young people. The strength and growth of society depend upon the intellectual and moral formation of our youth. Young people are our future workers, leaders and volunteers. The earth and all its goodness will continue to be entrusted to their careful use and stewardship. They are the disciples who will continue to make Christ present in this world. They will carry on the faith and morals that guide us in this life.

Parish youth programs are an integral part of the Church’s responsibility of forming and informing our young people on what it means to be Catholic men and women, living lives in union with Jesus Christ. Of course, formal instruction in the faith remains a priority. And, even though some diocesan and parish youth activities may not address Catholic teaching in an academic way, they provide opportunities for our young people to understand how the teachings of Christ and His Church are put into action, particularly as they reach out in charity to those in need.

Adolescents are old enough to be true witnesses to Jesus Christ and can willingly spread and defend their faith through spoken word and action. Any diocesan plan for evangelization must include our young people as both recipients and givers. Their enthusiasm and desire to serve are contagious virtues which inspire adults to action and form the foundation for our reason to believe in “**a future full of hope.**”

In many conversations with parish leaders, I understand that youth ministry has struggled for many years in the Diocese of Saginaw. One reason for this struggle reverts back to an issue discussed earlier – that is, that there is a considerable drop-off rate of youth in parish programs after the reception of First Eucharist and Confirmation.

A second reason occurs in the form of a reaction to this dilemma. Since there are fewer young people involved in parish programs, parishes tend to devote fewer resources to youth ministry. Currently, there are fewer than 10 full-time Youth Ministers in the Diocese. If the parish does employ a Youth Minister, it is usually on a part-time basis. The vast majority of ministers serve on a volunteer basis. I am extremely grateful to those men and women who generously give of their time, talent, and even treasure to this important ministry. However, because of their own full-time responsibilities, it is not always possible to give sufficient “quality time” to this work.

I am aware of the many measures the Diocese and parishes have taken to address the needs of our young people and I have even participated in a number of these endeavors. I have personally been involved in the March for Life, Feed the Fire Masses, Faith Night with the Saginaw Spirit and the *Youth Encounter Service* (YES) projects, in addition to local parish youth events. The Diocese also sponsors two summer camps, eighth grade and high school senior retreats and World Youth Day pilgrimages.

“The Church has more than a vested interest in our young people. The strength and growth of society depend upon the intellectual and moral formation of our youth.”

While the Diocese can offer many opportunities such as these, the real work of youth ministry must occur on the parish level. The fact remains, however, that the vast majority of parishes are not capable of maintaining a Youth Minister, either full or part-time. This is one area where a reorganization of parishes and parish structures will be of great assistance.

OTHER SPECIFIC PASTORAL PRIORITIES

Up to this point, I have shared my thoughts on a number of specific areas of parish and diocesan life that will require creative thinking, commitment and prayer on the part of everyone if we are to be about the work of the “new evangelization.” Evangelization must be a part of everything we *do* and everything we *are* as a community of faith. Every aspect of parish and diocesan life must be imbued with a spirit of evangelization.

In the sections that follow, allow me to address a few additional areas of pastoral life that also demand our reflection and attention, though this is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

I must also acknowledge the cultural diversity within our Diocese. We are blessed by the varied traditions and faith experiences of those individuals whose family trees trace back to Europe and Asia, as well as the Filipino and Native American communities in our midst. Hispanics, however, represent the fastest-growing community in our Diocese – in fact, throughout the country. In addition, the black community is a majority presence within the city of Saginaw. So, I will address these two groups specifically.

“*Evangelization must be a part of everything we do and everything we are as a community of faith. Every aspect of parish and diocesan life must be imbued with a spirit of evangelization.*”

▪ RESPECT FOR LIFE

The social mission of the Church centers on the life, dignity and rights of every human person – born and unborn, from conception to natural death. When speaking of respect for life issues, matters such as abortion, euthanasia (mercy killing), murder, capital punishment, self-defense and the just war theory often take front stage. However, the obligation to respect and safeguard life is much broader.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers an extensive array of “respect for life” teachings that deserve our attention and reflection. This list includes: scandal (respect for the souls of others); personal health and bodily integrity; people involved in scientific research; respect for the dead; as well as concepts such as safeguarding peace and avoiding war, homelessness, poverty and hunger, both here and abroad.

Our respect for life also encompasses respect “for a life in Christ.” It demands our attention to the moral quality of life, which often can be threatened by societal trends and mores. This is especially true when it comes to protecting the well-being of our young people. Pornography, pre-marital sex, cohabitation, profanity, gratuitous sex in movies, television and musical lyrics, drugs, alcohol, as well as racism and bigotry – all these are of concern to us from a “respect for life” perspective.

In a fundamental way, the Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy are intended to help us respect life by demonstrating our compassion for others and, where possible, alleviating their pain and suffering. The traditional lists of these acts of kindness are:

Corporal Works of Mercy: To feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, give shelter to the homeless, visit the sick, ransom the captive, and bury the dead.

Spiritual Works of Mercy: To instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, admonish sinners, bear wrongs patiently, forgive offenses willingly, comfort the afflicted, and pray for the living and the dead.

Our diocese and individual parishes, in countless ways, continually demonstrate our concern for life, in all its forms and all its stages. Sometimes our acts are done in full view of others; other times, they are performed in private and unheralded ways. As we look to the future of parish life and diocesan priorities, all our endeavors must be solidly based upon a firm respect for life.

▪ THE GROWING HISPANIC COMMUNITY

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the Hispanic population in the 11 counties which makeup the Diocese of Saginaw is 34,932, the majority of which are of Mexican origin. The highest concentration of Hispanics are found in Saginaw County (15,573), Bay County (5,093), Gratiot County (3,301) and Isabella County (2,197). Over the past 10 years, the Hispanic population has increased by 17 percent.

The average age of Hispanics is between 15 and 35 years of age. Many Hispanics are not registered in parishes; and, due in part to the broken immigration system, the traditional structure of family is in crisis.

Recently, the Catholic Bishops of Michigan issued a statement on immigration, calling upon the federal government to uphold its responsibility to develop and

enforce a comprehensive immigration policy. In our statement, we called upon the government to strive to “*uphold the human dignity of all persons and work against any injustice which would compromise the dignity of immigrants; promote and give priority to the reunification of families; and recognize the rich contribution to the community by those immigrants and migrants who work and live here.*”

“*We are a multicultural Church. We must strive to welcome and include everyone, regardless of color, ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic status or ability.*”

Outreach to the migrant community is a priority for the Hispanic Ministry Office. This includes attending to the needs of migrants at work in the fields, providing religious education for children and adults as well as sacramental preparation and celebrations, and offering daily nourishment through local food pantries.

I have had several opportunities to celebrate Mass for the Hispanic migrant workers. They are a people of deep faith and appreciate the opportunity to celebrate their faith in liturgy and cultural events. In a particular way, the Diocese must plan appropriately to ensure that we offer greater access to the celebration of Spanish and/or bilingual Masses and other Sacraments.

As we move forward, it is important to help our predominant culture to develop a greater awareness of, and respect for, the various cultures, histories and traditions of the people of the Diocese. We are a multicultural Church. We must strive to welcome and include everyone, regardless of color, ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic status or ability.

▪ **BLACK CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

I want to acknowledge with appreciation and admiration my brothers and sisters in the black community. I have enjoyed meeting with the *Black Catholics Advisory Committee* and celebrating with the community - liturgically and socially. While the black Catholic community within the Diocese of Saginaw is small in number, comparatively speaking, they remain an essential gift in the midst of our local Church.

When we speak of evangelization, we must, with great regret and sorrow, acknowledge our failure to adequately embrace our brothers and sisters in the black community. The fact that the majority of the citizens of the city of Saginaw are black and that black Catholics are a very small segment of this majority is a sign of our

ineffectiveness in bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to this segment of God's family. Whatever faith affiliation, the one gift we can so easily share, as Catholics, is our faith in Jesus Christ and His Church. In our evangelization efforts, we must give particular attention to our black brothers and sisters.

▪ **OUTREACH TO THE POOR AND VULNERABLE**

Early in life, I learned the expression “**Charity begins at home!**” Obviously, like all virtues, one best learns charity in the opportunities that present themselves in our own family experiences, e.g., sharing with our brothers and sisters or helping our parents without them needing to ask. The complete lesson to be learned, however, is that charity that begins at home forms us to be charitable in other circumstances. How often we have heard that expression used to condone indifference or refusal to be charitable to others. Someone once expressed to me: “*Charity begins at home; therefore, I have to think of myself first! Once I do that, I have nothing left over to give.*”

Charity is not an option for Christians. Concern for the poor and vulnerable is an integral part of evangelization and fundamental to what it means to be Christian. We are not just asked to give from our excess. We are called to give from what is ours in a way that allows us, in some way, to experience the need of another.

I have no doubt that the average Catholic is unaware of the many and varied programs and initiatives that are currently in place on both the parish and diocesan level. We are not very good at “tooting our own horn” when it comes to speaking about our outreach to those in need; but, it is important that you know something about the works of the Church, many of which you support by your generosity and service. Allow me to mention just a few: grief ministry; post-abortive ministry and counseling; divorce ministry; support for the families of children with disabilities; food and shelter for the poor; assistance to low-income women and men; the Mother Teresa Fund, which assists low-income women expecting a child or who have recently given birth; abortion alternatives; and assistance to migrants through distribution of food and personal items; as well as providing temporary housing. Through Catholic Family Services, the Diocese provides counseling and other services for low-income families and individuals, and, through many parishes, ministry to those in prisons and to their families is given great attention.

“*Charity is not an option for Christians. Concern for the poor and vulnerable is an integral part of evangelization and fundamental to what it means to be Christian.*”

The economic situation in our state and our Diocese continues to worsen. This fact is certainly one which affects our need to address the restructuring of our Diocese and parishes. However, it is a fact which compels us to advocate on behalf of those who are most in need. The Diocese is engaged in legislative advocacy on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. Efforts are made to address situations regarding social and economic justice, freedom, development and relations between people, both in families and in society.

Besides local needs, the people of our Diocese are very conscious of the plight of people around the world. My own recent experience in Ethiopia and Kenya on behalf of Catholic Relief Services helped me understand more clearly not only the needs of the poor, but also the wonderful ways in which the people of our Diocese continue to respond with love and charity.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us of the importance of charity:

The interior penance of the Christian can be expressed in many and various ways. Scripture and the Fathers insist above all on three forms, fasting, prayer and almsgiving, which express conversion in relation to oneself, God, and to others (CCC 1434).

The works of mercy are charitable actions by which we come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities. Instructing, advising, consoling, comforting are spiritual works of mercy, as are forgiving and bearing wrongs patiently. The corporal works of mercy consist especially in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God (CCC 2447).

Our Diocese will make every effort to continue and to increase our capacity for outreach and service to the poor. We will work with parishes and local entities to raise awareness about the effects of poverty on individuals, families and the broader society, and to advocate on their behalf to challenge policies and laws that further burden the poor and vulnerable.

▪ STEWARDSHIP

Evangelization finds great expression in the way Christians exercise good stewardship in their lives. In 1992, the United States Bishops issued a pastoral letter entitled *Stewardship, A Disciple's Response*. The opening paragraph offers a foundational summary of the place and importance of stewardship in the mission of the Church:

“The most successful evangelization taking place today is in parishes, which have worked long and hard to help people understand the true concept of stewardship and giftedness, and which provide an atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and needed.”

Three convictions in particular underlie what we say in this pastoral letter.

1. Mature disciples make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves.
2. Beginning in conversion, change of mind and heart, this commitment is expressed not in a single action, nor even in a number of actions over a period of time, but in an entire way of life. It means committing one's very self to the Lord.
3. Stewardship is an expression of discipleship, with the power to change how we understand and live out our lives.

Disciples who practice stewardship recognize God as the origin of life, the giver of freedom, the source of all they have and are and will be. They are deeply aware of the truth that, “*The Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it*” (Ps. 24:1). They know themselves to be recipients and caretakers of God's many gifts. They are grateful for what they have received and eager to cultivate their gifts out of love for God and one another (*Origins*, pp. 458-459).

Stewardship is about a change of heart. It is a way of life and the work of a lifetime. The Church refers to the four pillars of stewardship: hospitality, prayer, formation, and service. The most successful evangelization taking place today is in parishes, which have worked long and hard to help people understand the true concept of stewardship and giftedness, and which provide an atmosphere where everyone feels welcome and needed.

Stewardship is about time, talent and treasure. In previous sections of this pastoral, I acknowledged the many ways in which people are engaged in the Church's mission through their sharing of time and talent. Treasure, however, is also an essential component of good stewardship. The Bishops noted:

While many Catholics are generous in giving of themselves and their resources to the Church, others do not respond to the needs in proportion to what they possess. The result now is a lack of resources which seriously hampers the Church's ability to carry out its mission and obstructs people's growth as disciples.

This pastoral letter recognizes the importance of church support, including the sharing of time, talent and treasure. But it situates church support in its broader context – what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

This also is the context of stewardship. Generous sharing of resources, including money, is central to its practice, and Church support is a necessary part of this. Essentially, it means helping the church's mission with money, time, personal resources of all kinds. This sharing is not an option for Catholics who understand what membership in the Church involves. It is a serious duty. It is a consequence of the faith which Catholics profess and celebrate (*Origins*, pp. 459-460).

I have been amazed at the generosity of the people of this Diocese, particularly in these difficult economic times. Especially in recent years, considerable measures have been taken to develop an environment of discipleship that recognizes all three aspects of stewardship: time, talent and treasure. In addition to the contributions of time and talent, on both a diocesan and parish level, the financial support within the diocesan community is extraordinary. A number of new endowments, foundations and major gifts have enabled the Diocese and individual parishes to not only maintain current programs, but move forward in ensuring that the future work of evangelization is on sound footing.

Great efforts have been made on a parish level to educate the people on the needs of the Church and the various ways in which they can plan present and future financial support for this work. Many parishes have created Stewardship Committees. Stewardship and discipleship have been key messages in homilies. Greater accountability for diocesan and parish finances is addressed through the issuance of year-end reports. The Diocese continues to address ways to advise parishioners on how they can support the Church through estate planning, annuities and other charitable forms of giving.

While no one likes to hear talk of “money,” the reality is that the Church must rely on the faith-inspired financial support of all its members. While the Michigan Catholic Conference is working with legislators to find creative and acceptable ways to direct state funds to parents and students, the cost for Catholic education rests solely on the parents in the form of tuition, and the parishes in the form of subsidy and assessments. We are also experiencing new regulations on the part of the U.S. government that will make it difficult, and in some cases impossible for our Catholic institutions to provide aid to the poor and vulnerable by forcing these institutions to violate their moral principles and religious convictions. One such mandate by the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services requires all health plans to provide coverage for contraceptives and sterilizations. These regulations would affect Catholic hospitals, educational institutions, social service agencies, dioceses and parishes, as well as the desperately needed ministry of Catholic Relief Services in poor and needy countries around the world.

I appreciate the fact that so many people are very generous when individual appeals are made for their financial assistance. I also can appreciate the fact that the appeals can seem endless, with no clear, overall plan. It would be my hope that we, as a Diocese, could establish an extensive and comprehensive financial plan that could be presented not only to the circle of major donors but to all the faithful of the Diocese, a plan that would encompass the overall needs of the Diocese. Certainly, from time to time, particular and unexpected needs will arise. Nonetheless, I would hope to establish such a plan that would help you, the faithful, to have a clear understanding of what is needed financially to accomplish the essential works of the Diocese.

▪ COMMUNICATIONS

When Jesus walked the earth and proclaimed the Good News, there were no telephones, telegraphs, daily newspapers, express mail couriers, TV stations, telephones, computers, websites, Twitter, streaming, YouTube, blogs, Facebooks, iPods, iPads, or whatever is coming our way in the future. There were simply the writings of the Old Testament and the spoken word of the New. Eventually, the disciples realized that the “oral tradition” was not enough and proceeded to capture Christ's teaching through the written work of the Evangelists and others such as Saint Paul.

I remember, back in the '80s, visiting the EPCOT theme park in Orlando and venturing through the Bell Telephone exhibit. The presentation foretold that one day we would actually see on screen the person we were talking to on the telephone. Imagine that! I wondered if I'd ever live to see that day.

“While personal encounters always will be primary in our efforts to spread the Gospel message, it is imperative to harness the power of all forms, trends and technologies of modern media in order to remain relevant in today's world and to evangelize in ways never before possible.”

The world of communications and media continues to advance so quickly that it is difficult to keep up. But “keep up we must” if we are going to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world that relies on the ever-expanding modern technology. From my first day in the Diocese of Saginaw, the various new forms of communication have been at work in my ministry. On the day of my announcement as Bishop, people here in mid-Michigan and back home in Philadelphia watched as our Communications Office tweeted my every move, including my visits to the Cathedral, St. Mary’s Hospital, St. James Parish and All Saints Central School, Blessed Sacrament Parish and St. Francis Nursing Home, concluding with Evening Prayer at Holy Spirit Church. From that day until now, I have attempted to use the Internet to bring the message of Jesus Christ and the works of the Catholic Church, not only to the attention of the faithful of our Diocese, but to the broader community in which we live and serve.

My intention is to reach out in every way possible in order to inform, engage and encourage the members of our local Church through personal encounters and personalized messages that enhance the opportunities for all people to experience Jesus Christ. While personal encounters always will be primary in our efforts to spread the Gospel message, it is imperative to harness the power of all forms, trends and technologies of modern media in order to remain relevant in today’s world and to evangelize in ways never before possible.

Our primary audience remains the Catholic community of the Diocese of Saginaw. This includes diocesan staff, parishes and schools, and various church-related organizations. I am particularly conscious of reaching out to those Catholics who are not active within the Church and parish communities. Nonetheless, I am also attuned to the need for greater communication with other local faith communities and the civic community at large.

I continue to work closely with our Communications Office to use the Internet and other modern means to spread the message of our work as a Church. *FAITH Saginaw* magazine will remain an important printed form of communication to all our households. At the same time, we will further develop *FAITH* Video, a new and exciting means of communicating diocesan and parish happenings in a way that allows viewers to experience or relive events and be inspired by the people and ministry of the local Church of Saginaw, as well as to convey “up-to-the-minute” news.

The website is easy to locate: www.saginaw.org.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

*M*y dear friends, I am deeply grateful for your patience and attention in reflecting with me upon the mission of the Diocese of Saginaw. I reiterate my remarks, made in the introduction, that this pastoral letter was not intended to address every challenge we face as a Diocese. If an issue of particular concern for you was not addressed, please be assured that I will make every effort to meet my responsibilities as your Bishop in attending to the work of evangelization here in our local Church.

I wish to thank the various members of the diocesan staff who contributed information regarding the many services provided by their offices, as well as helpful insights and suggestions.

I noted earlier how meaningful Father Stuhlmüller's teaching on the life of Jeremiah has been to me in my own vocation and priesthood. As I conclude this pastoral letter, permit me to add this final quotation, which has given me many hours of reflection and which continues to motivate me as your Bishop in these grace-filled days:

A vocation, then, is a call to sustain hopes never to be tasted in all their joy. A vocation is a call to transmit hopes too great for the present but possible in the next generation ... Such a vocation projects the image of a person willing to be purified even in the understanding and hopes of what God wants of him ... Jeremiah points out that the greatest mystery of faith is the mystery of vocation, the mystery of one's individual relationship to God and of God to one-self. Faith is always a matter of hope beyond vision ... (it) proclaims the necessity of trust in one's intuitions. A vocation begins by a response to a particular opportunity, but what sustains a vocation is that hidden inarticulate intuition where God is present, compelling one ever onward, seeking what the person himself cannot yet understand (*The Bible Today Reader*, p. 230).

“I truly believe that we find ourselves at the threshold of ‘A Future Full of Hope!’ I am convinced that, together, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, we will experience in these coming days the grace and strength to bring a New Evangelization to our beloved Diocese of Saginaw.”

I truly believe that we find ourselves at the threshold of “**A Future Full of Hope!**” I am convinced that, together, with our eyes fixed on Jesus, we will experience in these coming days the grace and strength to bring a New Evangelization to our beloved Diocese of Saginaw.

Two years ago, at my Installation Mass as your new Bishop, I concluded my homily with these words:

I am humbled and grateful for this opportunity to serve as your Shepherd. I bear a deep love for God, our Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I have a strong affection for Mary, our Mother, and for the Saints. I love the Church and her Sacraments. I am committed in fidelity to our Holy Father and pledge my obedience and docility to all that the Church teaches. From a human perspective, I bring a lot of enthusiasm, good will, and a sense of humor. I admit that I also carry with me many faults and failings which are easy to point out by those interested in doing so.

And so my dear friends of Saginaw, **HERE WE GO!** Here we begin, together, a new chapter in the life of this wonderful Diocese. Nourished by the Eucharist and, through the intercession of our patroness, Mary of the Assumption, may we be faithful servants of the Master and have the courage and faith to **Do whatever He tells us!**

God Love You!

+ Bishop Cistone

Most Reverend Joseph R. Cistone, D.D.
Bishop of Saginaw

ABBREVIATIONS

CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>
CTH	<i>Crossing the Threshold of Hope</i> , Pope John Paul II
DV	<i>Dei Verbum, Constitution on Divine Revelation</i> , Documents of Vatican Council II
EM	<i>Eucharisticum Mysterium, Instruction on Eucharistic Worship</i>
EN	<i>Evangelii Nuntiandi, Evangelization in the Modern World</i> , Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Paul VI
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World</i> , Documents of Vatican Council II
IH	Installation Homily, Bishop Cistone, July 28, 2009
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium, Constitution on the Church</i> , Documents of Vatican Council II
MD	<i>Mediator Dei, Mediator Between God and Men</i> , Encyclical by Pope Pius XII
RM	<i>Redemptoris Missio, On the Church's Mission</i> , Encyclical by Pope John Paul II
RO	<i>Rites of Ordination</i>
RP	<i>Rite of Penance</i>

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A FUTURE FULL OF
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