

ADDRESS
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PRIEST'S CONVOCATION
BOYNE HIGHLANDS
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My Brothers:

Since we met two years ago in this very place, much has happened in our Church and our world—the death of Pope John Paul II and election of Pope Benedict XVI; the untimely death of Father John West and several of our other priests; the transfer of Bishop Hurley; the closing of some schools and realigning of other schools and parishes; and so on. The hectic and inevitable pace of change is such a facet of our lives that it is very difficult to keep on top of everything, even to remember all that has happened within the space of a week, a month, a year. And so we gather this day to reflect on where we have been and where we are going as a presbyterate and an Archdiocese.

During the last two years, thanks to your own strongly articulated requests at the last Convocation, we have set in motion the *Together in Faith* process as a way of planning for the future. And, thanks to the initiative and untiring energy and leadership of Monsignor Robert Humitz, concurrently, a *Total Pastoral Plan for Priests* has emerged. I would like to focus my remarks on these two plans and how they need to interrelate.

The Total Pastoral Plan for Priests cannot possibly succeed without Together in Faith and, for its part, Together in Faith would be incomplete if it did not thoroughly address the many issues that have been articulated through the Total Pastoral Plan for Priests. The question is how to integrate them and implement them in the months ahead.

First of all, I want to emphasize that both the Together in Faith efforts and the Total Pastoral Plan for Priests involve a **process** of ongoing dialogue. While people naturally look for some conclusions or definition, the whole point of both of these exercises is our conviction that the Lord is to be experienced in and through the “giving and receiving” of human interaction and discussion. We do not want to rush to answers and solutions until everyone is aware, engaged, and at peace with the recommendations.

Secondly, I want to highlight the fact that what we are doing is not just a matter of urgency or necessity. While a shortage of priests and financial constraints are certainly reasons that bring us to the table for discussion, nonetheless, this process should be taking place even in the “best of times.” Change is part of the normal human condition and this kind of dialogue is essential to our very life as a Church. It pains me greatly whenever I hear about a particular priest or parish community that have chosen not to be involved in the dialogue. No one of us can work in isolation and the participation of every parish and every pastor is essential to both of these efforts.

All along, our intention has been for responses and suggestions to come from the grassroots, not from the “top down.” We do not have preconditioned or preordained ideas or conclusions. The Coordinating Committee is simply trying to be honest, objective sounding board, sending back to the respective vicariates questions that need further attention.

Over the last year, I have been part of several meetings with the Coordinating Committee and have reviewed both your vicariate plans and the responses from the Coordinating Committee. As you have probably already heard by now, the Coordinating Committee has just sent letters to the vicars, asking for a response their questions by November 27. During the months of December and January, the Coordinating Committee will continue to dialogue back and forth with the vicars, with the goal of reaching some specific recommendations by the middle of February. Ideally, there should be no surprises for anyone because the data and suggestions supplied are basically the fruit of your own vicariate discussions.

An important point to be underscored is the fact that Together in Faith is an Archdiocesan-wide reality and process. It is not just about parts of the Archdiocese where they are limited resources; rather, the plan and process affects every single parish. Here again, I want to emphasize the fact that whenever a parish chooses not to be involved, everyone is the loser. Even if a parish has financial stability, a strategic location, and a full volume of sacramental life, nonetheless, that parish still needs to consider what it has to give and what it needs to receive from neighboring parishes. Many of the struggles we face in our ministry are the result of parochialism and a choice—directly or indirectly—to narrow our focus on the immediate problems or issues of our parish or school. A healthy priest and a strong parish and/or school are part of something larger—a whole presbyterate, the entire Archdiocese.

The key issues articulated in your vicariate plans speak of racism, the desire for improved youth ministry, and a stronger formation program for ministers of all kinds. All these things will be accomplished only through a sharing of resources and thinking in more creative ways. For instance, for the Church to be “present” to all geographic areas of the Archdiocese and/or all constituent groups does not necessarily require a parish everywhere: parish ministries can happen—indeed grow stronger—even when or if the parish itself should happen to close. With more imagination, we could develop new ways for sharing in the delivery of services such as youth ministry, the formation of leaders, and catechetical and faith formation for people of all ages.

From our experience, whenever people know the facts, they are able to accept the reality and deal with it. The greatest suffering and confusion we have experienced with school closings and parish transitions have always been the result of information not having been adequately shared with all parties. From the Archdiocesan side, we are making every effort to make available all relevant facts and figures, always remembering that, ultimately, what we are talking about is stewardship, using all our resources—human and material—the best way we can.

I also want to say a word about clusters. I realize the great physical and psychological toll these arrangements can make on a pastor—often the workload is doubled. Clusters can be a helpful step on the way to an eventual merge or closure but they should never be considered the last word or the final solution.

These reflections on the *Together in Faith* process bring me to a particular focus now on the Total Pastoral Plan for Priests. After all, my brothers, you are one of the greatest resources we have. I thank you for the time and energy so many of you have given to the process of articulating the Total Pastoral Plan. I have reviewed all the materials and recommendations from the focus areas and concerns. I believe the many people involved have done a tremendous job of identifying the issues. Now the question comes: how do we move this consultative process to the next step?

As I read through the materials, I do not see them as finished products or formal recommendations; I understand them to be a sort of “snapshot” of the present reality and concerns regarding priestly life and ministry, and many of the issues we are facing in parishes. Monsignor Humitz has done a very great service in developing a matrix which shows the overlap and convergence of the issues between *Together in Faith* and the *Total Pastoral Plan for Priests*. It seems to me that we will now need to create an implementation committee that can connect both plans and to continue the dialogue. I have spoken with the regional bishops and Monsignor Zenz, episcopal vicar for the Northwest Region, regarding my hopes that they will engage in a more in-depth dialogue with each of you personally and in small groups as we try to bring together these two dynamic processes which are clearly interwoven.

I know many of you will want to ask more specific questions and I have asked the regional bishops and Monsignor to share the dais with me as we try to respond. By way of summary, I want to reinforce a few points:

- Please take the process seriously, and if you have not been involved, get involved! The well-being of your parish and the whole Archdiocese depends on the participation of all.
- Please communicate with your parishioners and include reference whenever possible to the *Together in Faith* process. We are doing our best to bring the whole matter to people’s attention, but unfortunately, most people tend to hear their news about the Church from the secular media. We will be sending many bulletin inserts; hopefully, that will help. Our Archdiocesan web site, www.aodonline.org, The Michigan Catholic, and CTND are also a continuing and good source of stories and information about this process.
- We all need to take responsibility for the decisions we must make regarding the best use of our limited resources. It is all too easy to sit back and wait for someone else “Downtown” to call the shots. I am asking you to join me and your brother priests in this effort for the sake of the renewal of our own priestly life and ministry, and for the well-being and growth of our own Archdiocese.
- Finally, I want to offer words of gratitude for all those who have been involved in many different challenging circumstances, particularly those who went through school closings this past year. In terms of education, good things are happening in the city and throughout the Archdiocese, and there are even plans underway for a Catholic high school in Detroit. I do not want to go into all the details here and now; you will hear more about these things in the months ahead. I remind you, of course, that the future of our Catholic schools is very much a part of the *Together in Faith* process. Vicariates need to commit themselves to a reasonable number of schools in each part of the Archdiocese.

- Our vicars give an enormous amount of time and energy and I want to publicly acknowledge and affirm them in their leadership. I also want to thank the Presbyteral Council and all of you who serve on the many different committees that were part of the Total Pastoral Plan for Priests. We have reason for pride and satisfaction for what has been accomplished, but as I said, what we have today in both “plans” is the fruit of a process which is far from finished, a work-in-progress, a dialogue and conversation that keeps on going.

Conclusion:

As I draw my remarks to a conclusion, I wish to repeat a couple thoughts I mentioned last night in the homily as we celebrated the feast of St. Matthew—namely, that our work is not simply about accomplishing tasks, but is truly a vocation. Quite often, it is not so much what we do, but *how* we do it and *why* we do it. The *Together in Faith* process and the *Total Pastoral Plan for Priests* are really about spiritual renewal, transformation, and change. The heart of our mission is evangelization, bringing the Good News to others, and we will only be able to do that to the extent that we ourselves are constantly being renewed through lives of prayer and loving dialogue with one another.

With all this in mind, I want to turn to a passage from Paul to the Romans which was the second reading a Sunday about a month ago; his words speak about renewal and transformation as something that must happen primarily from *within*: “*I urge you, therefore, my brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect*” (Romans 12:1-2).