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y dear friends,

During the first week of Lent I had the privilege of celebrating the rite of election for candidates for the rites of initiation (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist) and for those of other faiths who have been baptized and are being received into full communion with the church. Some 219 (mostly adults) were “elected” as catechumens for the rites of initiation and 318 are to be received into full communion with the church at Easter. These 537 candidates, in addition to those unable to be present for this ceremony, will be new members of our church. This growth is taking place in almost every parish and mission in the diocese. I was deeply touched by the fervor and faith of those present.

In my homily, I reminded them the church they are embracing and that embraces them is not made up of perfect members, but rather people who are weak and sinful and striving to be closer to the Lord. In a society that seems to expect its leaders and members, whether civil or religious, to be endowed with perfection, it is worth recognizing that God alone is perfect. God has called us to love one another as He has loved us. As we celebrate Easter this year, again we need to remember Christ has come among us to redeem and save us. In and through Him, by our baptism, we share His victory over sin, darkness and death itself. What a gift it is to be an imperfect people and yet be chosen by God to be His own.

First Eucharist – Over the next weeks and several months, in the springtime, many of the young people in our diocese will be receiving the Eucharist for the first time. The Eucharist is a great gift of the Lord Himself to His people. The church asks that young people, and others as well, be prepared suitably for participation in the Eucharist. I certainly want to commend the many parishes with parental involvement in the catechesis and celebration of the sacraments as part of sacramental preparation. Such practices and involvement will be an opportunity for helping parents deepen their own understanding of, and appreciation for, the sacraments of reconciliation and Eucharist. It may be helpful to clarify here. Although there was a period of brief legitimate experimentation through the 1970s, church law Canon 914 clearly states that as children are prepared for and celebrate the Eucharist, it should be “preceded by sacramental confession.” In other words, it is not enough to simply provide catechesis for the sacrament of penance and then allow children and parents to decide whether or not they wish to seek penance. The normal expectation is that everyone who is being properly prepared will celebrate the sacrament of penance prior to the Eucharist. It would be an exception that someone does not receive the first sacrament



of penance before the Eucharist, and not the norm. It appears there is some confusion on this matter. I am most grateful to parents, religious education coordinators and all who do such a wonderful job in preparing our young people for the sacramental celebrations that are such an integral and important part of the life of the church.

CSA – The 2008 Catholic Services Appeal is drawing to a conclusion and we have received contributions from all 103 parishes and missions. Over the last year, some 23,000 contributions were received, which range from \$2 to \$20,000, with the average gift being \$250. A total of \$5.8 million was raised and \$1.2 million of that total was returned to the parishes that have exceeded their target. Ninety-six of our parishes met or exceeded their target during the past year. A full report of our parish contributions to the Catholic Services Appeal is available on the Web site.

Like the seasons of the year, the CSA is upon us once again. As we anticipate the 2009 effort, it may be helpful to recognize that it is Catholic Services Appeal contributions that support the diocesan services and ministries that are provided to our parishes, as well as the general operation of the diocese. This year, the theme of our Catholic Services Appeal will be *So Faith May Flourish*. You will be receiving a letter from me, in addition to what your pastor will be sending, asking your support for this effort to maintain the ministries of the church. I am most grateful to those who are so generous to the CSA

over and above the generous support that they provide to their own local parish communities. It is a source of great encouragement to know that so many people see the life of the church as bigger than their own parish or even the diocese itself, but as part of the universal church. In light of the financial situation in our country, we do not anticipate any increase in targets and are exploring a variety of ways to continue our ministry without increasing parish targets.

Ordination – In the months ahead, I ask your prayers in a special way for Deacon Aaron Ferris and Deacon Michael Burt, who will be ordained to the priesthood in June, along with David Gross, who will be ordained to the diaconate. I am most grateful God has called them to the official ministry of the church and I am grateful they have responded to that call so generously. At the same time, I ask you to pray for vocations and support the work of our Vocations Office, headed by Father Ronald Hutchinson. We are coming to a point in the diocese where it is unclear whether we will be able to provide pastors in parishes where we have customarily done so.

I am especially grateful to our senior priests who continue to serve us in the various parishes of our diocese. It would be most difficult for us if they were unwilling or unable to continue the wonderful work they do in assisting our various parishes. I was ordained a priest in 1965 and these past 44 years have been a wonderful time. I am most grateful to have had the opportunity to serve as a priest and now more recently as a bishop here in Grand Rapids. I consider myself to be especially blessed. I invite others to consider this important ministry in the life of the church and those called to other ministries, to pray for priestly and religious vocations.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,
Most Reverend Walter A. Hurley
 Bishop of Grand Rapids