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y dear friends,

Some weeks ago the agreement for my cell phone expired and I received a new phone with touch screen, etc. The new phone can do many more things, more quickly than my previous one. Shortly after receiving it, someone on our staff asked me how I liked my new phone. My response was that I “hated it.” I thought seriously of returning to the older, more familiar model that I was able to use almost without thinking. The issue of a new phone or an old familiar one is, in itself, not of any particular importance. However, in many ways it does describe our attitudes (or at least my own) toward the comfortable and familiar and a certain resistance to change in all areas of our lives – personal and communal. Letting go of the familiar is not easy for any of us.

Over the Labor Day weekend, the Detroit News reported that Ernie Harwell (age 91), the long-time Detroit Tiger radio announcer, had been diagnosed with an incurable “bile duct cancer.” He invited people not to refer to him in the past tense, but to wish him well and pray for him. When he left his career in broadcasting, Harwell did not say goodbye to folks; he thanked them for all they had been to him and declared “now God has a new adventure for me. I’m ready to move on.” In facing his illness, this “new adventure,” he stated, “long ago I dedicated my life to God, let him take over, let him direct my path and I’ve tried not to worry about anything ... I have a great peaceful feeling about this.”

Today many people are facing challenges that require significant change in their lives. Those who have lost jobs, those who have lost homes, those near retirement who have lost savings they had planned on, immigrants whose families have been separated, couples with broken marriages and a fractured family life can find it difficult and challenging to

let God take over and to let go of some of the things that were once important and now are no more. Yet it is in our faith that we find our peace. We do what we can do and let God do the rest.

In the community of the Church we also face serious challenges. The issues we face are not in any way unique to the Diocese of Grand Rapids, but are being faced by church communities across the country. In 1965, the year I was ordained a priest, there were 58,632 priests in the United States and this year there are 40,666. In 1965 the Catholic population was 45.6 million and in 2009 it is 65.2 million. In 1965 there were 179,954 religious sisters and in 2009 there are 59,601. There were no permanent deacons in 1965 and today there are 16,380. There are currently 3,400 parishes in the United States without a resident pastor as compared to 549 in 1965. (These numbers have been provided by the Center for Applied Research (CARA).)

As we embark on the “Our Faith, Our Future” planning process, we too, as the Diocese of Grand Rapids, must look at our own situation and look to discover where the Lord is calling us. In the course of the planning sessions that will be taking place, beginning with the Northwest Lakeshore, Big Rapids and Grand Haven deaneries and parishes, the specific figures for our own diocese will be provided. However, regardless of the specific numbers, we are faced with the same issues illustrated in the CARA statistics above. Issues that include growing numbers of people in our faith community, fewer and aging priests, a population shifting from the Midwest and secular values that are increasingly having an impact our lives.

The challenge that we are faced with is: How do we best provide pastoral care in the light of the present circumstances that are very different than the past? Pastoral care has to be centered on the Eucharist, making sure it is worthily and well celebrated through out the Diocese of Grand Rapids. There is always a difference between the value or the goal and the means that we use to accomplish it. Clearly, we will have to do some things differently than we have in the past. What we do, however, must also be within the framework of the beliefs and practices in the Catholic Church. At a recent meeting of our priests, I mentioned that we are not entering this process with a predetermined solution of closing or

Continued on page 9. ▶



and staff who attended the annual Back-to-School Kick-off gathering

► viene de la página 4

El reto que tenemos ante nosotros es: ¿cómo mejorar la atención pastoral que proporcionamos a la luz de las circunstancias actuales y que son muy diferentes a las del pasado? El cuidado pastoral tiene que estar centrado en el Eucaristía, asegurándonos que se celebre bien y dignamente a través de la Diócesis de Grand Rapids. Siempre hay una diferencia entre el valor o el objetivo y los medios que utilizamos para lograrlos. Evidentemente, tendremos que hacer algunas cosas de forma diferente que en el pasado. Lo que hacemos, sin embargo, debe también estar en el marco de las creencias y prácticas de la Católica Iglesia. En una reciente reunión de nuestros sacerdotes, mencioné que no ingresamos en este proceso con una solución predeterminada de cierre o fusión de cualquier número de parroquias. Pero al mismo tiempo no podemos eliminar la posibilidad de fusionar o cerrar parroquias; es mi esperanza que podamos conservar nuestras iglesias y misiones como viables y significativas comunidades de fe, pero con la posible necesidad de algunas reestructuraciones. He visitado todas nuestras parroquias varias veces y hemos querido apoyarlas y fortalecerles lo mejor posible. También puede significar que todas estarán mejor atendidas si algunas de las parroquias se unen. Así también yo mencioné que tenemos que tratar con las realidades y hechos que nos

► continued from page 5

merging any number of parishes. While we cannot eliminate the possibility of merging or closing parishes, it is my hope that we can retain our churches and missions as viable and significant communities of faith, but with the possible necessity of some restructuring. I have visited all of our parishes several times and want to build and strengthen them as best we can. It may well mean that all will be best served by some of the parishes coming together. As an aside, I also mentioned we need to deal with the realities and the facts of our present day challenges. What is the best solution? I am not sure. That is why we are embarking on this adventure. It is the facile solutions for the Lord's church, not in accord with either church doctrine or practice (e.g. ordaining married men, ordination of women), that are not part of this process. To spend time in our deaneries on these types of solutions serves no useful purpose. Also simply clinging to the familiar and the past will not serve us well.

Our parishes need to work together and not in isolation. I ask your prayers that the Lord will be our guide in all that we do in His name. To paraphrase Ernie Harwell: We thank God for the past, for letting us be part of His church and now God has a new adventure for us. Let God direct our path. Let us have a great peaceful feeling about this.

With best wishes,
Bishop Walter Hurley

traen los desafíos de hoy. ¿Cuál es la mejor solución? No estoy seguro. Por eso es que nos embarcamos en esta aventura. *Son las soluciones superficiales para Iglesia del Señor, las que no están acuerdo con la doctrina o práctica de la Iglesia (por ejemplo, la ordenación de hombres casados, la ordenación de mujeres), las que no forman parte de este proceso.* Usar el tiempo en nuestros decanatos en estos tipos de soluciones no cumple ningún propósito útil. También simplemente aferrarnos a las formas del pasado no nos servirá bien.

Nuestras parroquias deben trabajar juntas y no en aislamiento. Les pido sus oraciones para que el Señor sea nuestro guía en todos los que hacemos en su nombre. Parafraseando a Ernie Harwell: Damos gracias a Dios por el pasado, por permitirnos formar parte de su iglesia y ahora Dios tiene una nueva aventura para nosotros. Dejar que Dios dirija nuestro camino. Tengamos una gran sensación de paz al respecto.

Con los mejores deseos,
Obispo Walter A. Hurley



►► Bishop Hurley talks with St. Patrick School (Parnell) fifth-grader Alex Richmond. Alex raised two pigs for auction at the Kent County Youth Fair and had written bishop a letter inviting him to participate. Unable to attend, Bishop Hurley visited Alex and his family at their Lowell farm on Thursday, Aug. 6 to see the pigs before they were sold.