



Bishop Hurley smiles during a light moment at the close of Mass, June 5, 2010. Coincidentally on that day, he celebrated the 45th anniversary of his ordination.

Staffing our parishes with priests to celebrate Mass on Sundays in the 103 parishes and missions of the diocese continues to be a challenge. We currently have eight parishes or churches that do not have an assigned pastor and in four others the pastors are over the usual retirement age, but continue to serve. Were it not for the generosity of our senior (retired) priests and priests who are willing to double up and cover multiple parishes, we would be unable to have Sunday Mass in a number of parish locations. August 4 is the feast of St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests who gave his life in the service of his people. I invite you to keep all priests in your prayers and at the same time pray for vocations to the priesthood.

As you know we are currently involved in a planning process called “Our Faith, Our Future” which is helping us look ahead and determine how we might best plan for the present realities and the future needs of our diocese with fewer priests.

The planning process has been underway in the Big Rapids, Northwest Lakeshore and Grand Haven Deaneries and I am expecting to receive recommendations for those deaneries from the coordinating committee within the next few weeks. The four deaneries in Grand Rapids have just begun the planning process and those remaining - the Ionia and Muskegon Deaneries - will begin their planning in late fall and into early winter. I want to express my gratitude for the many generous people who have been meeting over these past months; who are deeply committed to the church and their parishes; and at the same time are willing and excited about and believe in planning for the future. While the lack of availability of priests was the impetus for starting this study, it provides us all with an opportunity to look to new ways to bring the church in our area to life. As parishes look individually at their makeup, ministries and operations, they often discover they are duplicating what is happening in a neighboring parish and identify areas in which they could be stronger. They also may see something seriously lacking in present parish operations that could be remedied by bringing some of our parishes together into one parish with multiple Mass sites. It is clear that we may need to consolidate, close and merge some parishes. While that may be the result in some instances, we did not begin the process with a predetermined conclusion, but rather

with the realization that the future will be different from the past in all parishes.

In those areas where there are schools, the schools are also part of the study. Our schools too face many challenges of low enrollment, for a variety of reasons, including a much lower birth rate reflected in a much smaller number of baptisms. Our schools face many financial challenges even though our current tuition rates are lower than other schools who do not receive government assistance. Michigan has one of the most restrictive state constitutions when it comes to aid to private schools. The restrictions of our state constitution have and continue to seriously impact the viability of our schools and Catholic and religious schools throughout the state. In addition there are many in our Catholic community who do not see a value in our private Catholic schools. The home-schooling movement and the establishment of Charter schools have also had a major impact in many areas.

I want to thank those who have been so generous in the support of our schools and for the men and women who teach and administer our Catholic schools. We must never forget that most of our schools were established and operated by the religious communities of women and men who dedicated their lives to these ventures. We owe the religious sisters a debt of gratitude for their sacrificing lives on behalf of our schools. Please remember their dedicated and generous service in your prayers.

As we look to the future I look forward to working closely with Mr. David Faber, our new superintendent of schools, and I am grateful to him for taking on this challenge. We know that in order to be successful, the future has to be different than the past or even the present.

As we look to the future I am reminded of the passage from Saint John's Gospel when Jesus tells Saint Peter: “Amen, Amen I say to you, when you were younger you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted, but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and take you where you would not go.” (John 21:18).

While we do not yet know definitively where this process will take us, we do know that the Lord will be with us as he promised. For that reason and that alone we can be confident and filled with hope.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,
Bishop Walter A. Hurley

M

My dear friends,
With the onset of summer, many of the activities in our parishes take a breather unless, of course, you belong to a parish that has a lot of visitors during the summer. When I visit the northern parishes during June, July and August it is always nice to see familiar faces and families at Mass on Sundays. As we used to say and still should: “There is no vacation from God!”

from the bishop