

EYES FIXED ON JESUS

Dear Brother Priests and Deacons, Brothers and Sisters of the Central Region,

I take a moment at the start of the New Year to extend to you my prayers and best wishes, and to speak a word of encouragement as we prepare for the Archbishop's letter for priests and parishes as a pastoral response to the **"Together in Faith II"** planning process over the past year, due to be issued in February.

As we begin the year with the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God, we place our efforts in her maternal hands...along with the steady support of St. Joseph, foster father of the Child Jesus. The Holy Family can sharpen our sensitivities and our faith as we strive to be the Family of God in this Central Region of the Archdiocese.

Faced with daunting challenges to their security, the Holy Family trusted in God and moved forward bravely, not allowing the uncertainty of their circumstances to shake their confidence that the God and Father of us all would help them make a way. So He will do for us, as the Church in the Cities of Detroit, Hamtramck and Highland Park. I find my inspiration in Archbishop Vigneron's episcopal motto, "Eyes Fixed on Jesus" ...and invite us all to do that, together.

I have received, and shared with Archbishop Vigneron and Mr. Chip Miller, Chair of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council, a number of letters relative to the APC's published recommendations from the process, from pastors, parish councils and individuals. I was able to share these comments in a series of meetings with the Archbishop and other members of the Episcopal Council. Your love for your parishes, and concern about the planning process moving forward, came through loud and clear. I think it is safe to remark that, when it comes to the challenges that the Archdiocese faces in terms of declining population in the City, a projected decline in the number of priests available for assignment, and creative suggestions for how to address these realities, "all our cards are on the table." That is to say, there are no hidden agendas...only the real challenge of focusing our resources in the best way. It is helpful then, to remind ourselves that we are doing Jesus' work.

We looked at demographic and population data not to permit these alone determine our way forward, but to be objective about the significant challenges we face. In facing our financial difficulties, we discovered that not only are our resources scarce, but we have slipped into a denial of the real costs to support our mission and our presence. Now that we know more about these structural problems, we can roll up our sleeves and address them. There is a dying involved in this, I do not pretend to deny it; but we are believers in a Risen and Abundant Lord.

An article on the economic challenges facing the City of Detroit in the *Detroit Free Press* a few days ago quoted someone as saying "Denial is not an effective turnaround strategy." And so, at times painfully, we have confronted the facts about ourselves as parishes and as

a Church. Like the City, the Church needs nothing less than a “turnaround strategy” in order to strengthen our witness. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who will show us a way.

What is clear to me, from the experience of the TIF planning process, is that we have found strength in working together. This walk in faith is hard...but with the love and support of our sisters and brothers in Christ, we can continue our journey.

Many years ago, someone gifted me with a poster that has, although wrinkled and torn, survived my many moves from one assignment to another. It shows a rag doll with its head passing through an antique hand-cranked roller, in the way that clothing was wrung for washing in the old days. At the bottom is a quote from Scripture...with an added phrase from the school-of-life: *“The truth shall set us free...but first, it will make us miserable.”*

The truth is that Jesus has set us free...but, we still live trapped in old ways, old habits and ways of doing the mission, old ideas about ourselves (and others!) that make us feel, well, miserable!

In the coming months, we will continue, as parish and vicariate leaders, to face the whole truth about ourselves, and about the importance of our mission as Catholic Christians. The Good News is that we have an incalculable resource in our faith; the bad news is that we have limited priests and financial resources. This faith and accompanying scarcity is by no means limited to the archdiocese’s Central Region: folks in parishes throughout the archdiocese will be asked to face the same issues and challenges as they deal with these realities.

As a Deacon in my early years of preparation for ministry on Detroit’s East Side, I found strength in listening to and singing Gospel songs that reinforced what I knew, in faith, to be true. One said, *“I thank God for my problems, I thank Him for the pain He brought me through. For if I never had a problem, I’d never know that faith in God can solve them: I’d never know what faith in God can do.”*

I am blessed to have you as fellow travelers on this journey, because we share the same faith in God’s ability to overcome the real difficulties we face. I would not choose anyone else to journey with.

A final anecdote: Each year at Christmas, my family shares a Polish tradition from my mother’s ethnic heritage, the breaking and sharing of a bread wafer called an “oplatek.” This broken wafer is then shared with each family member present, each one offering his to the next, and the others sharing theirs in turn. Just as important as the shared wafer are the words of peace for Christmas and of good wishes for the coming year...and, in some cases, a word of apology (with the accompanying word of forgiveness) for some acknowledged hurt caused over the past year. In my experience, the children exchange laughter and hugs...the adults frequently are crying tears (both of joy and of sorrow). It is a happy and healing moment (I’m grateful for my Polish heritage!). The connections, for all of us, with the Eucharist are probably obvious. I mention this both to acknowledge my own need to ask forgiveness for anyone I may have offended as 2011 comes to an end...and to invite all of

you to remember to pray for one another, especially across the Central Region, as you gather for Sunday Mass. Be as specific or intentional as you wish: God does hear our prayers! I believe He rejoices in our efforts to truly love one another.

Moving forward together in faith, brothers and sisters, is the continuing challenge that awaits us in the New Year. Let us, with our Chief Shepherd, Archbishop Vigneron, do it together...with our eyes fixed on Jesus.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, starting with a cross symbol followed by the name "Donald F. Hanchon".A second handwritten signature in cursive script, identical to the one above, starting with a cross symbol followed by the name "Donald F. Hanchon".

+Bishop Donald F. Hanchon
Central Region Moderator
12-28-2011