What I Have Heard and Seen

“What we have seen and heard we proclaim in turn to you so that you may share life with us.”

(1 John 1:3)
WHAT I HAVE HEARD AND SEEN

In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, we are told that John the Baptist, who was nearing the end of his own life and ministry, sent his disciples to ask Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3) Jesus’ response to this question is very intriguing: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind recover their sight, cripples walk, lepers are cured, the deaf hear, dead men are raised to life, and the poor have the good news preached to them.” (Matthew 11:4-6)

Understanding this encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus begins with understanding that the Old Testament prophets had an expectation of who the Messiah would be and what he would do. Of course, Jesus is both well aware of what the prophets foretold, as well as what He had already been accomplishing. In reminding John of those signs, Jesus was telling him that He was indeed the long-awaited One. But He also wanted John to know that what he had been “hearing and seeing” was proof indeed of God being at work in their midst, revealing His Divine Presence among them.

This conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus is a wonderful starting point for me as I reflect on all that I have heard and seen over the course of this first year of my ministry as your bishop.

I am inspired by all that I have observed and learned, and I have heard and seen proof of God being at work in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. Therefore, I am compelled to write this, my first pastoral letter to share with you, not only what I have heard and seen, but also what I have learned, which has helped to form my hopes, suggestions, and vision for how we can move forward into the future together, based on what we have heard, seen, and learned from one another.
It is fairly normal for most people to occasionally experience completely new settings and surroundings. Any of life’s first-time experiences involves: 1) establishing oneself anew, 2) learning “the lay of the land,” and 3) building new relationships. Since the day our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, gave me the official appointment, I have found these to be abundantly true for myself as I have assumed the ministry of bishop of our Diocese of Kalamazoo. Having been born and raised and lived my entire life as a priest and auxiliary bishop in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, I have had to completely re-establish myself here in the nine-county diocesan region of southwest Michigan.

What have I learned thus far?

I have learned how very much I have come to love this part of the country. I love being so near to Lake Michigan and being surrounded by so many other lakes as well. I love the cities, the small towns, and the rural and agricultural areas that make up our diocese. I love driving through these nine counties and seeing life wherever I look. I love the diversity of the nearly one million people who live here. I am so grateful to all those who have helped me to establish myself here in southwest Michigan, and learn the “lay of the land.”

Even more importantly than establishing myself and learning the geography of our nine-county region, however, is the process of building new relationships. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Gregis, the late Pope John Paul II, addressed the role of the bishop.

“He is called above all to foster relationships inspired by the respect and esteem befitting a family where love flourishes, in accordance with the exhortation of the Apostle Peter: ‘Love one another deeply, from the heart for you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.’” (1Peter 1:22-23).

I have taken those words very seriously during this past year; as I have not only been assigned to be your bishop, but I have tried to become your bishop, one who has been given the great privilege and the very serious responsibility of shepherding the flock of Christ in this local Church.

I have spent much time getting to know our priests, my primary collaborators. In doing so I have learned that they come from many different backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences, and that they are dedicated, hardworking and loving men of God — priests of Jesus Christ.

I have also spent much time meeting and getting to know the deacons — also my collaborators in the Sacrament of Holy Orders — religious men and women, and the lay faithful of our diocese. While Catholics make up only about 11 percent of the total population of this area, I have learned that we are making a vital impact in this part of the Lord’s vineyard.

I have also learned that building new relationships is an ongoing task, one that requires me to be available, accessible, and knowable. I hope to do that through my regular column in our diocesan Catholic newspaper The Good News, and in my efforts to be present and visible for all major events in the life of the Church in the diocese, as well as in the wider community here in the Kalamazoo area. And I hope to continue learning, listening, and observing so that I may get to know and love you even more.
How did I hear and see?

Immediately after my installation as the Fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Kalamazoo on June 5, 2009, I announced plans to visit all the Catholic schools, institutions, and parishes of our diocese.

As soon as the 2009-10 school year began, I visited all the Catholic schools in September and October so that I could spend some quality time with the close to 3,400 Catholic school students and nearly 400 teachers and administrators in the 22 schools, as well as the other independent educational institutions in the diocese. At each of those visits, I met with the entire student body in prayer, visited classrooms, and spoke with these young students. I also visited many religious education programs, health care facilities and social outreach programs.

To get to know as many of the faithful as possible, I also made extended visits to each of the 59 parishes of our diocese. I began each visit by arriving in midafternoon and spending at least 30 minutes before the Blessed Sacrament, praying for the needs of that particular parish, as well as praying for unity within our diocese. The visit then typically included time spent with the pastor and any other priests and deacons assigned to the parish. Then I met with members of the parish staff and the leaders of the parish pastoral council and finance council, followed by an hourlong open meeting to which all members of the parish were invited. Parishioners were also provided the opportunity to fill out a questionnaire if they wished to write out their thoughts and concerns regarding their faith. The visit would conclude, as we began, in prayer, with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. My sole purpose in these visits was to listen, to get to know you, to get to know your needs and concerns, to come to know what you have heard and seen.

What have I heard and seen?

Let me share with you a summary of my primary impressions from all these parish visits.

I was so pleased that the most prominent impression I had across the diocese is of the great vitality of our faith. The Church is alive in southwest Michigan! Clearly, in these difficult economic days, our region faces many challenges; yet, I repeatedly and consistently saw signs of deep faith in so many of our people as they approach the challenges of everyday living, individually and collectively, as people of faith.
I also saw women and men — laity, religious and clergy — creatively using their gifts and talents to build up the Kingdom of God in ways that bring life and love to those searching and in need. The educational and catechetical ministries of the diocese are daily reminders of the Church’s assistance to parents in their role as the primary educators of their children. Our diocese sponsors numerous agencies and ministries of social concern, and we should be proud of the way in which they reach out, with the love of Christ, to our sisters and brothers in need. There are people working tirelessly each day to make the Catholic Church’s presence felt in every corner of our far-reaching diocese.

I saw evidence in many parishes of a profound reverence for the Eucharist which in some parishes includes regular times for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The impact of a community united in prayer is powerful and far-reaching and contributes to the many fellowship activities that truly build parishes as families of faith. Our 59 parishes are truly “centers of hope” where creative approaches address concrete, real-life issues in the context of our Catholic faith.

In the midst of all my positive impressions, I also saw clearly that we are facing significant and challenging realities. There are parts of our diocese where people are suffering because of shifting demographics, declining parish membership, and dwindling parish resources. There are also parts of our diocese where two parishes share one priest, and where the demands on the priest are increasing and becoming more difficult for them. While our diocese is relatively young (only 39 years old this year), some of our parishes have been established for centuries. Thus, parish property is aging and in need of major but unaffordable, capital repairs and improvements. Due to the ailing national and regional economy, a number of our parishes face budgetary shortfalls, which diminish their ability to pay living wages to professional ministerial staff, or even to meet the cost of providing for their parish priest. A number of our dedicated priests are serving well beyond the age at which most people retire, and many of our retired priests are still “working” hard, providing substitute help for active priests when they are sick or have to be away from the parish. And sadly, I have also heard and seen Catholics who for various reasons are no longer practicing their faith.

In addition to these general impressions, the following issues (in no particular order) are what I consistently heard being raised as concerns are among many of our Catholic people:

**Adult Faith Formation:** People throughout our diocese recognize the importance of adult faith formation. However, even when opportunities are offered, the participation response is limited — not because of a lack of interest, but due to conflicts, other responsibilities, distractions, or the distance to where the program is being held. There was much discussion about scheduling these types of programs in locations that are more accessible, and possibly offering alternative media formats that people could use in their homes or access on the internet.

**Youth and Young Adult Ministry:** Consistently, I heard a general plea for help in providing ways of reaching out to our young people. It was very encouraging to see that a number of our parishes have strong youth and young adult ministries but many parishes...
number of our parishes have strong youth and young adult ministries but many parishes expressed the need for assistance in this area. Too often, many young people — and unfortunately even their parents — feel that their religious education is complete once they receive the sacrament of Confirmation. We must do all we can to counter this trend. Many of you are also concerned that other faith communities are attracting a number of our young people because of their perceived exciting and entertaining programs.

**Catholic Schools:** I also heard a general concern about the future of Catholic school education. Parishioners have a deep attachment to the parish school yet the financial responsibilities attached to keeping the schools functioning can become an unsustainable financial burden for the parish and for the parents. While a number of the 22 Catholic schools are strong and vibrant, it is clear that many of our schools are struggling. The consensus appears to be that the diocese needs to assist parishes in addressing this reality.

**Vocations to the Priesthood:** Many of you asked me how our seminarians were doing and others inquired about the state of our vocations. While we are blessed to have 14 men studying for the priesthood, the current availability of a sufficient number of priests is a very significant challenge. Currently we have many pastors overseeing more than one parish and many juggling multiple responsibilities. Many of the faithful expressed concern about what the impact of fewer vocations would mean specifically to the future of their parish and for the Church.

**Evangelization:** There was almost universal concern about how we — parishes and the diocese — can be more effective in reaching out to a growing number of “unchurched” people as well as to fellow Catholics who have fallen away from the regular practice of the faith. Once again, many of you expressed concern that some people are being drawn to the more relaxed nondenominational worship experience. This is a particularly sad situation because when our fellow Catholics pursue other places of worship they perceive as more enjoyable, they are willingly giving up the sacramental life of our faith including the Holy Eucharist. Clearly, we must foster a deeper appreciation of the life-giving power of the sacraments among the faithful of our diocese.

**Hispanic/Latino Integration into Parish Life:** The number of Hispanic Catholics living and working within our diocese is growing, and many of them had made their permanent homes here even before the Diocese of Kalamazoo was established. Many parishes are expressing concern, and to some degree confusion, as to how to create a sense of belonging to the parishes for our Hispanic sisters and brothers in the midst of language barriers and cultural differences.

**Challenges Resulting from Current Economic Crisis:** Shifting demographics in southwest Michigan have dramatically impacted our parishes. Many have seen declining membership especially over the last decade. Schools (both Catholic and public) have closed for a variety of economic reasons including school-age families moving out of the area. Unemployment rates vary from as low as 14 percent to as high as 45 percent in some parts of the diocese. There are many social needs which result from these “challenges,” and most of our parishes have creatively and generously found many ways of responding through a host of social outreach programs throughout the diocese.
Select Societal Issues: Among the many societal issues raised was the effect of “secularism” within our society. Many parishioners (on the parish visit questionnaires) cited the challenge of remaining Catholic in the face of this growing cultural dynamic that wants to de-sacralize all aspects of our society. Also noted was the growing obsession with sports programs and how it negatively affects faith and family life, religious education, and even regular Mass attendance.

Liturical Concerns: Many of the faithful expressed a concern about varying liturgical practices within our diocese. Some felt that such divergent liturgical styles were confusing. Others expressed a fear of a return to what they called pre-Vatican II times. Many desire clear guidelines that are consistently applied.

A Sense of “Belonging” to the Diocese of Kalamazoo: This was the one issue that I raised at most of the parish visits because it is very important to me as bishop. It is extremely vital that every Catholic feels connected to the Roman Catholic Church, united through the bishop to the worldwide college of bishops in allegiance to our Holy Father, the pope. For a variety of reasons, many parishioners do not feel closely connected to the diocese. Some of the contributing factors included geographical challenges — we are spread over nine counties — and a perceived lack of diocesan involvement at the parish level. One of the main objectives of my parish visits was to visibly demonstrate that the bishop is our point of unity, through our pastors, and witnessed to in the lives of every Catholic in our diocese.

Initiatives to Help Us Hear and See

While I was gathering insights into the diocese during this past year, I also have initiated several diocesan structural changes.

Diocesan Pastoral Center: To better reflect the mission of the diocese I renamed the “chancery” (the central administrative offices of the diocese) as the Diocesan Pastoral Center. This name change, while minor, reflects in a more accurate way the ministries and services provided by the diocese. Additionally, in order to better serve our parishes and the faithful, I initiated and implemented an organizational structure for the Diocesan Pastoral Center to improve collaboration, efficiency, and pastoral services to all the faithful and to our parish communities. In this structure ministry offices are grouped under the following departments: Office of the Chancellor, Priestly Life and Ministry, Parish Life, Catholic Schools, Communications, Financial Services, Human Resources, and Stewardship and Development.

Bishop’s Leadership Team: To foster collaboration and consultation within the Diocesan Pastoral Center offices I have created the Bishop’s Leadership Team consisting of the diocesan department directors as well as the Chancellor, the Vicar General, and the executive director of Catholic Family Services. Together, this consultative body works as a cabinet advising me on all major diocesan matters.

Deaneries: I also have organized the diocese into six deaneries. The Deanery, a canonical term meaning region, is meant to foster pastoral care and common action among neighboring parishes and mutual support for the clergy. Our diocese has been divided into the following six deaneries: Central Deanery (13 parishes); Eastern Deanery (9 parishes); Lakeshore Deanery (14 parishes); Northern Deanery (7 parishes); Southeast Deanery (8 parishes); and Southwest Deanery (8 parishes). One of
the pastors within each deanery, in addition to continuing his responsibility of pastor, is
also designated the dean of the deanery. He is given certain authority to help coordinate
activity within the deanery; to be in regular contact with the priests of the parishes
within the deanery for support, encouragement, and assistance; and to foster greater
communication, not only between me, as the bishop, and the
parishes, but also from the parishes to bring concerns to my
attention. Deaneries will serve as regions where diocesan
programs and ministries can be offered to make them more
accessible to the priests and the faithful in their region.
Diocesan Pastoral Center staff will begin to decentralize
diocesan services to make them more available to the people
in the deaneries. It is my hope and intention that deaneries
will better serve the needs of the priests and the faithful.

**Diocesan Pastoral Council:** Just as every parish should have a
Pastoral Council to provide consultation and collaboration for
the pastor, every bishop needs a Diocesan Pastoral Council,
for the same purposes. Recently I established the Diocesan
Pastoral Council which is composed of 31 members,
representing lay people (24), those in religious life (2),
permanent deacons (1), and priests (4). The Diocesan Pastoral Council, after time in
prayer and orientation, had its first official meeting on June 5th. This consultative body is
a very important forum for me as I continue to listen to the voices of this local church.

**Funding the Ministries of the Diocese:** The “financial lifeblood” of any diocese is rooted
in the generosity of the faithful. Each diocese conducts some form of a diocesan-wide
annual appeal for financial support. Throughout the history of our diocese, this approach
was known as KDSA, or Kalamazoo Diocesan Services Appeal. The target amount for
each parish to contribute to the appeal was determined by a formula that considered
the total number of contributing families at the parish and the total amount of the parish
offertory.

One of the concerns I heard
regularly during the early months of my
time here as bishop was regarding the
fairness or justice of the KDSA appeal
process. There was fairly widespread
confusion about its purpose and how
the formula was determined. This led
to reluctance to support what was not
understood. It became clear that this
critically important primary funding
source for the diocese had to be
reviewed and renewed.

After working with two special
committees made up of laypeople
with expertise in this area and parish
staff and clergy, a new approach was
recommended to me which I approved.
Known as the Bishop’s Annual Appeal,
this effort has already been implemented. In addition to the appeal process in the
parishes, we also looked carefully at the diocesan budgeting process. Rather than using
the diocesan need as the starting point (and thereby determining the goal for each parish
based upon it), a simple percentage of parish offertory income became the goal for each
parish. This approach provides a clearer and more easily determined annual goal. Just as parishes must live within their means, so too, will the diocese live within its means. It is my hope that this new approach will be simple and just and demonstrate good stewardship both for the parishes as well as the diocese.

**Envisioning for the Future:** In response to what I have initially heard and seen, I have also already initiated an “Envisioning for the Future” process among the Bishop’s Leadership Team of the diocesan pastoral staff. With the help of a professional facilitator from the Catholic Leadership Institute, the Bishop’s Leadership Team will meet monthly to reflect on what I have heard and seen, and to clarify our hopes and dreams for the diocese, and to formulate a long-term strategic plan to realize them. This envisioning process will put us on track to develop a plan of action by this time next year. Along the way, I will be consulting regularly with the major diocesan consultative bodies (College of Consultants, College of Deans, Presbyteral Council, and Diocesan Pastoral Council).

**Into the Future:**

**Commitments**

**Who We Are** Envisioning for the future is not quite the same thing as moving into it. Before doing so, we need a roadmap — a set of priorities, goals, and objectives to guide us. But even as we envision the future, we need to be mindful of who we already are. I would like to briefly reflect on some of these foundational realities and offer the ways in which I believe we need to commit our diocese to specific future actions.

We are Christians, followers of Christ, baptized Catholics, and members of a particular parish community in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. We are likewise part of the entire Body of Christ, members of “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church” throughout the world. As the Second Vatican Council taught us so clearly, “We are the Church,” and we live out that identity in the following dimensions:

*The Domestic Church:* Each and every one of us has an experience of family that is unique to us. Today’s family has a variety of structures from two parents to single parents, foster parents to blended families and multi generational households. Whatever the structure, its impact on our lives is undeniable. If we have been blessed (as I have) with being born into a loving and faith-filled family then that is the greatest of all earthly blessings in our lives. It is in our families where we find our individual identity; it is in our families where we become aware of our gifts and talents; and it is in our families where we learn our first set of values. In our families we come to know God and God’s ways for us. There too we first learn to pray.

Church documents in more recent times have referred to the family as “the Domestic Church.” How beautiful that designation is! I’m fairly certain that very few of us would consider our homes as a “church” but what we have come to realize over recent years is that “Church” is not a building; Church is the gathering of the faithful. And the first of such gatherings is our family.

In our homes, faith is taught and lived at its most foundational level. There, we learn what it means to love because we see it lived out each day — not through lesson plans or textbooks but through faith-filled living by our parents, family members, and caregivers who pass the faith to new generations. The Domestic Church is critically important for our future. Many experts have accurately observed that in our modern society, the basic institutions of marriage and the family are under attack.
Therefore, I commit our diocese to a profound respect for the family — the Domestic Church — and the promise of support for its growth and development by each of us individually, and all of us collectively.

The Parish Church: While the family provides the foundation for what it means to live a life of faith, it is essential that individuals engage in the larger experience provided by a parish. Parishes are established under the authority of a pastor who represents the bishop, and “in some manner, represents the visible Church constituted throughout the world” (Vatican II, “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” art. 42). With these words, the Second Vatican Council provides the context out of which we are to view the significance of our parishes. The parishes of our diocese are the places where the faithful hear the Word of God, celebrate the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, and are directed to serve their sisters and brothers in need. While the configuration of parishes changes over the life and history of every diocese, including our own, the essential role of the parish and parish life will not change, as they should always be “centers of hope” for all the faithful because it is in our parishes where we receive the life-giving source of our faith, the Eucharist.

Therefore, I commit our diocese to even greater efforts to provide help and support to our parishes by whatever means are necessary and available to us so that they can continue being those “centers of hope” that they are called to be.

In addition, parishes are also the places where the faithful are fed, nourished, and formed and where they receive the sacraments.

Therefore, I commit our diocese and its parishes to make every possible effort including through the Sacrament of Penance, pastoral care, and the assistance of the Church’s canonical services to help the faithful who are alienated or separated from the Church for any reason to be reconciled with the church and, if possible, be free to receive the Eucharist.

Another dimension of a parish is its operational dimension. All pastors benefit from the collective wisdom of consultative groups of laity.

Therefore, in the near future, I commit to asking every parish in the diocese to have the required Pastoral Council and Finance Council. In this day and age, having such active consultative bodies in place is no longer an option, but an absolute necessity to provide strategic advice and expert counsel to our busy pastors.

It is important to note that all that is said of parishes also applies to other communities of faith within our diocese, such as communities of religious women, college campus ministries, and those residences and institutions where people live and gather regularly for prayer and the Eucharist.

The Diocesan Church: “A diocese is a portion of the People of God which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the local presbyterate. Thus by adhering to its pastor and gathered together by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular Church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative” (Vatican II, “Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church,” art. 11).

While the Domestic Church (the family) and the Parish Church are essential building blocks of our complete identity as Church, they are both elements of a larger reality, the Diocesan Church. It is the diocese and its bishop that are the unifying links of Catholic identity throughout the world. Sometimes, there might seem to be some distance —
both geographical and emotional — between parishes and the diocese. The geographical distance can easily be addressed in a variety of ways. The emotional distance, which sometimes is expressed in “them and us” terminology, must also be addressed since that kind of “distance” is not of the Holy Spirit and produces only the “bad fruit” of mistrust and disunity.

Therefore, I commit our diocese to an ever greater cooperation among our 59 parishes, as well as our institutions and our Diocesan Pastoral Center. In addition, I commit myself to being present to parishes and institutions to build on the foundation of the relationship that has been established as the bishop who is shepherd of this entire flock and the pastor of this diocesan church. We will work for an ever greater sense of connectedness and the understanding that all of us are important and essential parts of the Diocese of Kalamazoo. I also commit myself to being present to all priests of the diocese and seeking ways and resources to strengthen the fraternal bond.

The Universal Church: While we are members of the Domestic Church, the Parish Church, and the Diocesan Church, we also belong to the Universal Church. When we say we are “Catholic,” we identify ourselves as belonging to every aspect of “Church.”

For any of us to consciously exempt ourselves from any one of those essential components of our identity as Catholics would be doing the Church, and ourselves, a disservice. At times, there are those who love their parish so much that they would give all their time and attention just to that part of the Church, but not feel any obligation to the diocese nor to the Universal Church. On the other hand, there are those who might relate directly to all that the Holy Father says and does, but choose to somehow ignore what the bishop or their pastor has to say. As faithful Catholics, we must identify with every aspect of what it means to be “Church.”

We are Catholics who belong to a spiritual reality that goes beyond our homes, our parishes, our deanery, or our diocese. We are privileged to be part of the Universal Church which traces itself back to Christ himself, who founded His church on the “rock,” St. Peter, and who, along with the Apostles, began the mission that Jesus entrusted to them: “Go out into the whole world and proclaim the Good News.” It is our privilege and our responsibility to continue to faithfully carry out that mission to the best of our ability.

Therefore, I commit our diocese to an ever deeper and larger “vision” of all the dimensions of what it means to be Church.

**Into The Future:**

A **Vision**

Over the course of this first year of my ministry, as a result of all that I have “heard and seen,” I have come to know and love the Diocese of Kalamazoo. I also have great hope for the future as we continue our journey of faith together in this part of God’s Kingdom. In this final section of my pastoral letter, I would like to share with you the more immediate “vision” of what I believe we are all called to hear, see, and do as a family of faith.

**The Word of God and Evangelization.** “Evangelization” is a word unfamiliar to many Catholics. However, it is intimately linked to us and to the Sacred Scriptures. Because our Catholic faith is centered in the Eucharist, there are those who think that Catholics do not read the Bible. However, as we know from the regular practice of our faith, our
Sunday Mass is made up of both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council pronounced the Word of God as central to our lives as Catholics; it is at the heart of every celebration of the sacraments.

However, each of us must ask ourselves: Do we regularly read the Scriptures? Do we take time to study and understand the Bible? Are we able to find the comfort and strength which God wants us to have through His life-giving Word?

And as we more fully embrace God's Word we will also be inspired to share that Good News with others. That is the essence of “evangelization.” Many think one has to be a professional or an expert or ordained to “evangelize.” However, the Church teaches us that each member is called by baptism to share the faith with others. This is evangelization. It does not necessarily mean that we must stand on street corners and distribute texts to passersby; it does mean that each of us has an obligation to live our faith in such a way that others are drawn to it. Once we understand the joyful and hope-filled message of God’s Holy Word, we will find ways to share that Good News with others.

My vision in regard to the Word of God and evangelization is that all our parishes, or parishes joined together within the Deanery, would provide catechetical programs for both young people and adults that directly address the Scriptures as taught and lived in the Catholic Church. Every parish/parishes should provide some form of Bible study within our Catholic tradition.

Also in regard to evangelization, I would like to highlight the “Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults” (RCIA). This program is a rich and powerful way of sharing our faith with others: the unchurched, the unbaptized, or those non-practicing Catholics yearning to return to the practice of our faith. The RCIA begins with an encounter between individuals, an invitation to “come and see” what it means to be a Catholic Christian. The process continues in the parish where a program of welcome, formation, and instruction takes place over a period of months, and the accompanying rites during Lent introduce individuals to the parish community of faith. In early Lent, all those who are preparing for initiation or full communion gather at the Cathedral as a visible sign of the life of faith in the diocesan church and the joyful welcome by the bishop. This process culminates in the sacraments of the Easter Vigil. The RCIA is a very important way for us to be faithful to our mission to “evangelize,” and it is pivotal if we are to grow as a community of faith. Unfortunately, this extremely important program of evangelization is still untried in some parishes.

In my vision for the immediate future, I want to identify the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as a priority for our diocese and for every parish in our diocese.

Similarly, each parish must be aware of how important it is to have a sense of “welcome” and “hospitality” for new members and visitors. Equally, each parish should find ways to contact those who are absent from the Eucharistic community.

In the near future, Catholics across the diocese will begin to hear of a particular program which will be reaching out especially to Catholics who have become irregular in the practice of their faith. The program, “Come Home to the Catholic Church,” will be designed to reach out to our sisters and brothers estranged from our faith.

These are some important ways that we as a diocese and all our parishes, can renew our commitment to share God’s Word and to participate in evangelization.
The Centrality of the Eucharist. It has been said that the “fruit of evangelization” (and the strength of the “evangelist”) is the Eucharist! Our efforts to share God’s Word and to participate in evangelization leads directly to the Eucharist, to the real presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

However, if our efforts at bringing others to Christ in the Eucharist are to be life-changing, then the celebration of this great sacramental mystery must be truly vibrant, reverent, and faithful to the liturgical directives of the Church, and not the product of our personal tastes or agendas.

While every liturgical celebration is rooted in the life and experience of the gathered assembly, it must transcend each gathering and be united to that of the entire Church. Every priest and deacon must take seriously his sacred duty to celebrate the Eucharist (and all sacraments) in strict accord with the directives of the Church. While feasts and seasons, music and environment, provide opportunities for diversity in the celebration of the Eucharist, we must never lose sight of the fact that the Eucharist, “the source and summit” of our Catholic faith, leads us to unity. Therefore, we must avoid anything in our sacramental celebration that creates disunity.

Additionally we must strive to reunite any of our faithful who are alienated or distanced from their participation in the sacraments.

In my vision for the diocese, I would hope, beginning with the bishop, that every pastor, priest, and deacon, every liturgical minister, and every member of the faithful will do everything we can to encourage and foster great devotion to the Eucharist. I would also hope that each parish’s budget and other resources would reflect the priority that the celebration of the Eucharist is for them in their daily life.

My vision for the diocese also includes the hope that all those involved in liturgical ministries — readers/proclaimers of God’s word, altar servers, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, ushers/ministers of hospitality, and members of worship/liturgy committees will fulfill their ministries with great devotion and avail themselves of ongoing formation and in-service programs.

Finally we, as a diocese, are already making every effort to prepare for the implementation of the new translation of the Roman Missal that will take place on the First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2011. It will require patience and understanding on the part of all of us, and it is my hope and prayer that we will approach this time of transition in that spirit.

Preserving the Future of Catholic School Education: I wish to assure you of the absolute support on the part of the diocese in general, and me in particular, for Catholic school education. We are committed to continue doing all that we can to keep Catholic education affordable and accessible. Along the same lines, it is my fervent hope that we will be able to look for creative, and additional, ways to help fund our Catholic schools into the future and make Catholic education an environment that is multiculturally sensitive. While all 22 Catholic schools are providing quality education to thousands of young people, they are doing so under great financial constraints, as I have heard and seen in the parish visits as well as the school visits. Very soon we will begin inviting experts to come together to proactively collaborate on a plan to secure the future of our schools.
Marriage Preparation: It is my hope that we will promote and support marriage with strong programs of remote, proximate, and immediate preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage. I also hope that we will keep encouraging programs such as Marriage Discovery and Engaged Encounter to assist in our marriage preparation programs.

Marriage Enrichment: It is my hope that every parish/groups of parishes will develop programs, such as Marriage Encounter, to help to enrich and support marriage and family life. It is also my hope that we would find ways to encourage the nationally recognized program Retrouvaille, an enrichment program based on Marriage Encounter, to help troubled marriages.

Family Support Programs: Throughout our diocese many parishes provide family-centric programs. These are vital to promoting a faith-filled family unit which is supported by the parish.
Vocations: As we are all aware, our common vocation begins on the day of our baptism. Every one of us — bishop, priests, deacons, religious women and men, and lay faithful — share that common lifelong baptismal vocation to holiness of life. However, as we also know, there are particular life vocations to which God calls individuals: marriage, the committed single state, a life of consecrated life as a religious woman or man, or the ordained ministry as a deacon or priest.

The need in our diocese is great for vocations to the religious life and to the ordained ministry. I would ask all our Catholic faithful to pray intently for more young women and men to listen for God’s call to their hearts to consider whether God is calling them to a life of generous service in the Church as a sister; brother; a permanent deacon or a priest.

We are currently blessed with 14 seminarians who are discerning a call to the priesthood. Please pray for these young men who have responded to God’s call. It is a proven fact that most young men consider a vocation to the priesthood because someone in their life — a relative, a trusted friend, or another priest — asked them to consider it. Please suggest to young men you think would make a good priests to consider this very important calling.

Ministry to our Hispanic Sisters and Brothers: One of the beautiful dimensions of our diocese I heard and saw during my parish visits is the growing Catholic Hispanic population. While there is a migrant population each year who come for the seasonal work in our area, there is a large and growing, stable population of Hispanic Catholics. I was deeply impressed to see how actively involved many of our parishes are in reaching out to the migrant population. I am also very inspired to see that our parishes are attempting to make every effort to insure that both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking members are included and cared for in the life of the parish.

Additionally, it is my vision that we see each of our sisters and brothers with the eyes of God and recognize them as children of God created in His image regardless of their race or country of origin. We must do everything we can to provide pastoral care for all our fellow Catholics in our parishes and throughout our diocese including those who have “fallen away.”
Service to Our Neighbors. While advancing our best efforts at evangelizing, celebrating Eucharist, and teaching our faith, we also realize that this fulfills only part of the command our Savior gives to each of us who choose to follow in His footsteps. As we know, Jesus told us. If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps.” (Matthew 16:24). Perhaps Jesus was never any clearer in terms of what it means to “follow” Him than in the parable He told in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, the judgment scene at the end of the world:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another; as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25: 31-39)

While we believe and try to live the centrality of the Eucharist in our lives, we must be equally bold in “following” where Jesus leads as we leave the eucharistic table. Jesus always will lead us to those who are in need. In all my parish visits, what impressed and encouraged me more than anything else are the large numbers of parishes that have comprehensive service and outreach programs, ranging from St. Vincent de Paul programs, to Food Pantries, to Prison Ministry programs, to nursing home and homebound programs, and the list goes on and on and on. In addition to the outreach by our parishes we also have a number of impressive Catholic institutions such as our Catholic hospitals reaching out to the infirmed with a faith-based approach to healing, and Catholic Family Services (an affiliate of Catholic Charities USA), which provides much-needed resources to many in need from young mothers to teens in crisis throughout our diocese.

It is my vision that all our parishes, every member of our faithful, and all our Catholic institutions and agencies will take seriously the journey of faith on which Jesus is leading each of us — to be His loving and compassionate presence with the least of our sisters and brothers, those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, ill, in prison, or in any kind of need.

Hope for the Future

As I began this pastoral letter, I recalled the conversation found in Saint Matthew’s gospel between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. As John was approaching the end of his life, he wanted some kind of reassurance that Jesus — the one for whom he had prepared — was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. And that is why Jesus said to John’s disciples: “Go back and report to John what you hear and see…” Jesus gave John the “proof” he asked for in terms of the signs — the effects — the good works that Jesus had been performing, all of them indications that He was indeed the Promised One — the Holy One of God. John, his disciples, and all people of good will would certainly be able to say: What we have heard and seen in all that Jesus said and did assures us that God is present among us and we are filled with joy and hope!

It is with that same purpose that I too have written to you to report on what I have heard and seen throughout my first year as your bishop. And I have shared with you the signs — the effects — the many good works taking place within the parishes and institutions of our diocese as a certain “proof” that God is indeed present among us. And that should fill all of us with joy and hope!

In addition, I have also shared with you my insights into our identity as God’s holy people living our faith here in the nine counties of southwest Michigan which make up our diocese — who we are. We are the Church, and we live out our faith, which comes to us through our baptism, in the domestic churches of our homes, in our parish churches, in our membership in the diocesan church, united with our sisters and brothers throughout the world as active members of the universal church.

Finally, as I continue into this second year, and look forward to all the years to come in the future as your bishop, I have shared with you my vision in regard to a number of particular areas of the ways we daily live our faith life together: It is my hope that by this time next year, we will be able to formalize a diocesan vision for the future together; with established priorities, goals, and particular objectives that will guide and help us continue to clearly hear Jesus’ Good News as we remain faithful to our mission of “following daily in His footsteps,” and continue to see the signs, effects and good works that reflect God’s abiding presence with us.

Just as Jesus gave proofs to John the Baptist that gave him hope, so too, I pray that this pastoral letter is an occasion for all of us — the entire Church of Kalamazoo — to be filled with that same hope. My own Episcopal Motto, Waiting in Joyful Hope, reminds me, and I hope all of us, of what our posture as God’s holy people is to be in this world. We are people who, as we pray in the prayer following the “Our Father” at every Mass, have the posture of “waiting in joyful hope.” We pray that our saving Lord will “deliver us from every evil…grant us peace in our day…keep us free from sin and from all anxiety…as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.” There is so much for us to do, as God’s people. We have multiple and heavy responsibilities and,
yes, we are burdened with many anxieties. Very few of us are able to just “wait around.” However, in the midst of the busyness of our lives, our spiritual posture is one that reminds us that we are waiting for all that is to come when our life in this world ends. In that sense, our lives are a very long advent which prepares us for the joy of entering into the fullness of life that awaits us in Heaven. That’s why our hearts are both joyful and hope-filled as we wait for what is to be. And yet, here and now, we have much to do; we have lots to hear and see; we have the Good News of Jesus to witness to in our daily lives.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in his recent encyclical On Hope (Spe Salvi) wrote this:

“God is the foundation of hope, not any god, but the God who has a human face, and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary ‘hereafter’ situated in a future that will never arrive; His Kingdom is present wherever He is loved and wherever His love reaches us.” (# 31)

Our loving God, in the fullness of time, sent His only-begotten son into our world, to be God’s abiding presence among us forever — to be “the God who has a human face.” And Jesus — the God with a human face” — has established His Kingdom in our world, including here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo. As members of God’s kingdom, let us live our faith with joy. Let our faith fill us with hope, as we work hard here, with our heart set on what is still to be. United together as God’s holy people, let us continue giving witness to God’s abiding and loving presence among us so that we will be the signs, the effects — the good works which prove that Jesus is indeed the one who has been promised from the fullness of time, He who is the reason for our hope and the cause of our joy.

Let me conclude with these beautiful words of St. John, the beloved disciple:

“What we have seen and heard we proclaim in turn to you so that you may share life with us. This fellowship of ours is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. Indeed, our purpose in writing you this is that our joy may be complete.”

(1 John 1:3-4)

Asking God’s blessings upon all of us who make up the Church here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo, through the loving intercession of our Blessed Mother whom we honor in a special way during this month of the Rosary, and St. Augustine, the Patron of our diocese, and praying that our joy will be complete as we continue waiting in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, I remain

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+Paul J. Bradley

Most Reverend Paul J. Bradley, D.D., M.S.W.
Bishop of Kalamazoo

October 7, 2010
Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary