

A New Year, New Opportunities

As we look with promise on the new year upon us, we might take a moment to reflect on the year that ended and the many ways in which God has blessed our Archdiocesan family.

In a year in which our country elected its first black president – an historic moment that will long live in the hearts and minds of many, most especially our sisters and brothers in the African-American community – 2008 will also be remembered as a year defined by dramatic economic challenges around the world. These challenges were felt “from Wall Street to Main Street” and affected nearly every individual, every family.

The year that ended was a historic one for Catholics in our country, as well, as Pope Benedict XVI made his first visit to the United States in April, helping to mark the 200th anniversary of Baltimore’s elevation to an Archdiocese and the expansion of the American Church.

On the last day of that visit, our Holy Father reminded us:

“Past generations have left you an impressive legacy. In our day, too, the Catholic community in this nation has been outstanding in its prophetic witness in the defense of life, in the education of the young, in care for the poor, the sick and the stranger in your midst. On these solid foundations the future of the Church in America must even now begin to rise!”

As we celebrated the achievements of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, who laid the foundation for our Catholic school system 200 years ago right here in Baltimore, we have begun to chart a course for a new direction for Catholic education in our Archdiocese. Prompted by an unexpected decline in enrollment resulting from a number of factors that threaten the viability of Catholic education here and throughout our country, we have begun a process that must result in a stronger and more vibrant school system that will reflect the Church of the 21st century.

The economic downturn, undoubtedly a factor in the declining school enrollment, left its mark in other ways. Our Catholic Charities reports a sharp increase in the

demand for its services from people from all economic situations, including those who have lost jobs, homes, or both. Patricia Thompson, a client of Catholic Charities, recalled the sudden reality she faced and the impact of her faith and the help she received:

“I was homeless and it was hard to believe. I asked God, ‘How could this happen to me?’ – not knowing that God has a plan for my life. Today, I trust God for everything in my life, especially for his wisdom. Pretty soon I will be moving out of a shelter and into my own place. I thank God for everyone who has graced my life.”

The critical challenges facing so many, tough as they may be, present believers with the opportunity to see the face of Christ in the suffering among us. It is precisely at times such as these that we are reminded of our baptismal call to share the love of Christ and the Good News of the gospel with our sisters and brothers.

That generosity of spirit and service was on display in our local Church throughout 2008 and was most evident in the support of the Archbishop’s Lenten Appeal. More than 25,000 families and institutions gave more than \$6 million to the Appeal, much of which funded the services of spiritual and corporal works of mercy of Catholic Charities and St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore. These funds literally put food in mouths, clothes on bodies, and individuals back to work. Twenty-seven percent of the funds collected allowed children to get a Catholic education through tuition aid, and funded critical improvements to school and church buildings. Every dollar counts and every dollar is carefully allocated as we seek to bring the compassion of Christ to others.

In the difficult economic climate that dominates headlines in this new year, we are already being called to serve many more people in many more ways. We can’t do it without your help.

I ask you, please, to reflect on your blessings and continue to generously share your gifts for the benefit of others through the Appeal. This year’s Archbishop’s Annual Appeal (our new name) will begin prior to this Lenten season, so as to give us all the opportunity to support the many missions, ministries and education programs throughout the Archdiocese and beyond. More information about the Appeal will be shared in upcoming weeks through the mail and your parish.

“Many hands make light work.” As we continue assisting others to cope with the effects of mounting hardships, I ask those who have supported this effort in the past to continue their generosity. For those new members of our Archdiocesan family, as well as our sisters and brothers who have been unable to give in the past, I invite you to share the blessings you have been given with thousands of people like Patricia Thompson.

Make your contribution your baptismal response to Christ’s call to love one another, individuals of all ages and ethnicities – individuals who, but for the grace of God, could be any one of us.