

Philadelphia leader: 'Painful' year may bring school, parish closings

PHILADELPHIA - Three months after his installation, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Philadelphia warned Catholics that the archdiocese faces "very serious financial and organizational issues that cannot be delayed."

In a pastoral letter dated Dec. 8, the archbishop called Advent "a season of self-examination in the light of God's word" and said there was "no better time to speak frankly about the conditions we now face as a community of believers."

The letter hinted at coming closings or mergers of parishes and schools, and said the operating budget of each archdiocesan department will receive "careful scrutiny."

"To whatever degree complacency and pride once had a home in our local church, events in the coming year will burn them out," he said. "The process will be painful. But going through it is the only way to renew the witness of the church; to clear away the debris of human failure from the beauty of God's word; and to restore the joy and zeal of our Catholic discipleship."

Archbishop Chaput also said the first months of 2012 will see the resolution of all the cases of priests who have been suspended following allegations of sexual misconduct with minors, as well as the start in March of the abuse-related criminal trial of four priests or former priests of the archdiocese and a lay teacher.

"The harsh media environment likely to surround" the trial "will further burden our laypeople and our clergy," the archbishop said. "But it cannot be avoided."

Archbishop Chaput stressed that the "overwhelming majority" of priests "have served our people with exceptional lives of sacrifice and character."

"The hard truth is that many innocent priests have borne the brunt of the church's public humiliation and our people's anger," he said.

He also emphasized the role of church leaders as stewards of church resources "for

the whole Catholic community, to carry out our shared apostolic mission as believers in Jesus Christ.”

“This means that as archbishop, I have the duty not just to defend those limited resources, but also to ensure that the church uses them with maximum care and prudence; to maximum effect; and with proper reporting and accountability,” he said.

Although the archdiocese “remains strongly committed to the work of Catholic education,” Archbishop Chaput said that mission “is badly served by trying to sustain unsustainable schools.”

He said a blue-ribbon commission would make its recommendations in January and “will likely counsel that some, and perhaps many, schools must close or combine.” A similar “careful scrutiny must be applied to every aspect of our common life as a church, from the number and location of our parishes, to every one of our archdiocesan operational budgets,” he said.

“This honest scrutiny can be painful, because real change is rarely easy; but it also restores life and health, and serves the work of God’s people,” Archbishop Chaput said. “We cannot call ourselves good stewards if we do otherwise.”