

The Doable Dreams

The Catholic Review

Happy New Year, dear readers!

As we begin 2011, I thought it useful to use this year's inaugural column to look back at the challenges we faced together in 2010 and to look ahead to those we will face in 2011.

Last year, it was necessary for me and my brother bishops to make some difficult decisions for the strengthening of our Archdiocese. This year, it will be equally important to maintain our resolve if we are to bring about the changes that are necessary to ensure the stability and growth of a number of our Church's priorities.

Most notably, we addressed declining enrollment in many of our Catholic schools, especially those in Baltimore City. The approach was two-pronged.

First, we created a special office to put together a plan that would reduce our system of most of its 10,000 empty seats while maintaining the critical presence of Catholic education throughout the Archdiocese.

Simultaneously, we empaneled a committee of experts from the field of education, as well as business, philanthropy and religion, to address the underlying causes of the enrollment decline and to strengthen our school system, attempting to make our schools more accessible and affordable to Catholic children and to children from our more impoverished communities.

In March 2010, the Office of School Planning and Implementation presented plans

for a newly aligned school system reflecting the consolidation of 13 schools and the creation of a new school in Southwest Baltimore. The process was predictably painful but necessary. Some 65 percent of our displaced students are again in Catholic schools, and we will continue to work to increase that number. Several new academic initiatives were also outlined to make our schools more attractive in an increasingly competitive environment. These initiatives resulted in the creation of the first Catholic dual language school, the first Catholic Montessori school and the first school to incorporate the innovative New American Academy. This new teaching system, referred to as a new approach to urban education, was created by the Dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Three months later, I announced the 56 recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Catholic Schools. These recommendations, which I would later accept in November, are insightful and comprehensive. They embrace four key areas of our school system: Academics, Catholic Identity, Governance and Stewardship. The work of implementing the recommendations has begun. The plan calls for years of collaborative effort on the parts of pastors, principals, teachers, students, parishioners, parents, donors and others. I will continue to draw on the goodwill, expertise and generosity of people throughout the Archdiocese, Catholics and non-Catholic, to realize the “doable dream” set forth by the Blue Ribbon Committee.

To that end, there may be a tendency for parish and school leaders, as well as others, to seek exceptions to these recommendations, to see one’s own situation as not falling under the provisions of the Committee’s Strategic Plan. We must resist the temptation to allow for such exceptions and maintain our resolve to apply the reforms that will bring about the transformational change needed for our schools to thrive.

Another major challenge to our mission as an Archdiocese that we began to tackle in 2010 was the sustainability of our parishes, the parish being our Church’s basic cell.

Specifically, the slow but steady decline in the number of active priests, the shortage of new priests and the variables in Mass attendance throughout the Archdiocese are stretching our resources beyond sustainable limits. Thus, we announced the first step in the comprehensive inter-parish process of addressing these challenges in calling for the need for a review of all Mass schedules in every region of our local Church.

Out of necessity, some areas had already begun this process, such as in Western Maryland, where Monsignor Jim Hannon now oversees some nine parishes and where a regional Mass schedule was introduced in 2010. In addition, our new Department of Evangelization is unveiling a new lay formation process called Equip for Ministry, which is designed to help train the generous laity of our Archdiocese for the increased and new roles they will certainly be called on to play in our Church's near future.

Every parish will be asked to participate in this planning effort, and recommendations will be expected to emerge from the parish- and region-based discussions that will take place in the year ahead. While we know we cannot effectively continue operating as we currently are, there are no other absolutes. No decisions have been made. The canvas that is our Church's future in this regard is a blank one and awaits the colorful brushstrokes of our parish's leaders and faithful if our "doable dream" and collective vision is to be realized. Such good faith, grassroots cooperation is highly preferable to administrative intervention, which we hope to keep to a minimum.

Here too, there may be a tendency to cling to what has been, what we are comfortable with, and to resist change. Change here, however, is inevitable if we are going to serve effectively the changing nature of our parishes, cities and towns. So, as we make our personal commitments for the new year, let us include a resolution to persevere in the work we forged together in 2010 and to make those inevitable

sacrifices on behalf of the Church, the people of God, whom we love and serve.