

**Church of St. Patrick, Inver Grove Heights
December 9 and 10, 2017**

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you this evening/morning. I appreciate Father Hart's invitation to share with you a little bit about the on-going needs of religious women and men and to share some reflections on today's readings.

I will say a little more about my own Community, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, later. However, just a few introductory facts. I am currently serving as the Director of LifeTransition Ministries at The Catholic Cemeteries. It is a position that was created to serve parishes and parish staffs regarding end of life issues and bereavement. Prior to this, I was a member of Archbishop Flynn's senior staff as director of parish life and personnel. And before any of that, I taught school and ministered in parishes in the Archdiocese for over 25 years. So all in all, I have served in this Archdiocese for almost 47

years! I'd like to say that I started working while in kindergarten, but I can't...

It is the time of year in which many agencies are asking for financial help. Yes, in a sense, this special collection is no different, but yet, it really is...as you reflect on your own situation and the needs around you, let us put it all in the context of our faith and the messages of today's readings.

Many of us are in an ideal place to begin Advent, but we don't know it. It can be tempting to think, because our world is a scary place, so much is unknown, even a threat of nuclear war looms and all of that can prevent us from entering into Advent. We might feel that without a big change in our mood or without distancing ourselves from the negativity around us that we are just not able to get with this Advent thing. Nothing could be further from the truth. Advent is about letting God come to us. We do the letting and God does the coming. And, the whole mystery of our faith is that God is not reluctant to come to us.

So, how do we let that happen? Are we the people “who walk in darkness” or have “thick clouds” over us? Is the way before us full of valleys and hills? Does it seem like we are in a desert? Are there wild beasts out there that are ready to devour us? Have we been guilty of some things we aren't proud of? Have we lost touch with who we really want to be? Has our fidelity become a bit shabby? Then, Isaiah proclaims that our God is ready to come and save us.

The readings of Advent open up a whole series of promises, full of powerful images that keep reminding us that our God will come to save us.they invite us to imagine when a “time will come for singing”...they give us the opportunity to hope beyond our wildest hopes in the past...they open our hearts to imagine the love of our God embracing us in the coming of one like us, who knows our life and its struggles and offers us hope every day, in every moment.

Isaiah tells us how every valley will be filled in, every mountain will be leveled. In other words, with the coming of our God nothing remains the same. Every person and all material matter are transformed by the presence of God. Isaiah pleads with us to prepare ourselves for such transformation, to make straight the way for God to enter our lives and our world. Clear away whatever stands in the way of experiencing God's transforming power.

So, how do we do that? How do we open ourselves to that transformation? Well we can all slow down. We can all breathe more deeply. We can all begin to trust that this will be a blessed time.

That transformation is reiterated in today's Gospel reading from the beginning of Mark, where we meet John the Baptist. The voice crying in the desert as he preaches transformation. Get ready, John tells us, because once Jesus enters our lives, nothing will ever be the same again.

So, today's message is about transformation--- not just little changes here and there, but whole, radical transformation. Not a minor "tweaking" of our lives, but a total makeover, where every dimension of life, as we know it, is changed. That's what the power of God does in our lives.

What appropriate readings on this second Sunday of Advent, especially as we prepare for the annual collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious. This is the 29th year and living proof that things can be turned around by the power of God. More than \$775 million has been collected to supplement the cost of direct care for retired religious. And through the incredible generosity of our parishes here in the Archdiocese, \$395,000, was collected locally in 2016. The elderly religious who served the church and worked for practically nothing are the main beneficiaries. Yes, Community living does provide economies of scale, and more and more Congregations are utilizing the benefits of government programs for the elderly, but that is not sufficient.

Another important fact worth noting is that there is a complex formula which assures that the communities most in need receive the most aid.

Many of the larger congregations, including my own, do not receive "direct care assistance". That means that smaller communities experiencing greater need are able to benefit more.

I am in my 53rd year as a member of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, headquartered in Dubuque, Iowa. Our demographics are not unique. Over 2/3 of our membership are over 80 years old. That means the compensation for ministry work and our investments are supporting them. These women laid the groundwork for many of us. It is unfortunate that most of our children and grandchildren do not know any religious. However, the good works and the presence of religious live on in many of our lives and will...well into the future.

Thus, in many ways, this year is almost as crucial as the first collection, 29 years ago. The need is so great. None of this is ever taken for granted and be assured that the retired women and men religious pray daily for all benefactors. Whether your life has been deeply impacted through a personal experience of women and men religious, or whether it has been indirectly affected by their enormous influence, theirs is a need worthy of support.

And lastly, I know that more than ever transparency is so important. For those of you interested in the annual report and in how the funds are distributed, please visit the national office's web site "retiredreligious.org" for all the information.

Let us remember that Advent is all about hope, expectation and transformation. The collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious has exceeded everyone's expectations...and by the grace of God, it will continue to transform great adversity into great accomplishments. Be open to that radical change, that heart make-over,

to that transformation we are all called to...and
please give what you are able.

Thank you so much and may God bless you.