

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B - 2024)

Today I would like to talk to you about our upcoming Diocesan Ministries Appeal. The kickoff for this important collection is in two weeks. It will be on the weekend of May 4th and 5th.

Now the reason I wanted to talk to you about this Appeal is that there have been some changes this year. To begin with, the name has changed. For almost 50 years, this collection has been called the United Catholic Appeal. So, it's going to take some time for us to get used to calling it by its new name, the Diocesan Ministries Appeal, and that's true for both me and you.

Now, more important than the name change is why the change?

The answer is because our culture and our world have changed. 50 years ago when the United Catholic Appeal collection was started by Bishop Paul Anderson, the world was a different place. Many of you were not even born then, and the rest of us were a lot younger.

President Richard Nixon had just left office to be followed by Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Since then there have been seven more presidents. The Pope at the time was Paul VI, and after him were John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis.

50 years ago, our nation was nearly all Christian and people looked at things from a Christian perspective. Generation Xers were small children. Boomers were young and those who fought in World War II and went through the Great Depression were still with us.

However, since then the world has changed. We are no longer a nation where the vast majority of people follow the teachings of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Instead, especially among millennials and those born after them, those born after about 1980, the majority are simply pagans. Most do not know Jesus Christ nor have they even been baptized. It is these people who now shape and form society.

So, we live in a different world from that of 50 years ago. We who follow Jesus Christ and who love Him and keep His commandments are in the minority. As one local example of this, last week I did a little survey. I counted the number of homes on Old Highway 61 between I35 by Quality Home down to the Hinckley city limits by the lumber yard.

There were 55 homes more or less. Of these, 10 of them were homes where I knew Catholics lived. Of those 10 families, only four of them go to Mass each week. So, on that stretch of road, four out of 55 or about 7% are practicing Catholics. Obviously, some of the others go to Protestant services, but it's clear that the majority do not practice any faith. I would also say that these numbers would be true anywhere in the parish.

So, my point is that if we are going to keep our faith and to pass it on to our children, we have to be even more intentional and deliberate than ever. We must also support each other and band together in prayer and fellowship as we are doing in our parish Ark small groups.

Now Bishop Daniel is very much aware of how the world has changed. In fact, he is constantly making the point that we are now a mission diocese. That is, we are a place where the majority are not Christian and where the majority have not heard about the saving teachings of Jesus Christ. He points out that we are no longer a Diocese where the majority know Jesus, believe in Him and live by His teachings (as was the case 50 years ago).

This means we have to change the way we have been doing things. We are no longer in the position of simply maintaining and strengthening the Catholic faith as we have done over the past 50 years. Now we are in a totally different position. Now we are in the position of introducing the Catholic faith to people who have never heard about Jesus Christ. Now we are in the position of rebuilding, often from the ground up.

Now, like Saint Peter in our first reading today, we must proclaim to those whom God places in our lives that Jesus Christ was crucified but has been raised from the dead, and most importantly, that **“There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven ... by which we are to be saved.”**

That, my friends, is and always has been the mission of the Church, and that is what we must all be about today. Our mission is to tell others about God the Father’s love for us. We are to let them know that those who believe in Jesus Christ and are baptized become part of God’s family and that we may be called children of God, and that one day, we will see God as He is.

This is the good news we have, and it is the mission of the Church – and we are the Church – to spread this good news and to pass it on to all we meet.

Now we can do this individually which is an essential first step. That is the beginning, when we invite friends and neighbors and classmates and coworkers and relatives to Mass, to join us in worship or to join us in fellowship in our small groups.

However, that is the first step. It’s like planting a seed. Next, the faith must be nurtured. It needs to be watered and fertilized, and that is where our parish and our Diocese come in. As the family of God, we do things on a parish level that cannot be done individually. For example, we support and maintain our parish Church where we worship God and celebrate the Sacraments.

This also goes beyond the parish to the Diocesan level where the mission of the Church is advanced in ways that individual parishes cannot do, and this is where the Diocesan Mission Appeal comes in.

Because of the changes in our society, because we are a mission diocese, Bishop Daniel is restructuring our Diocesan programs to help our parishes and all of us, to go out and bring the Catholic faith to those who do not know Jesus. Hence the new name. No longer United Catholic Appeal, but Diocesan Mission Appeal to stress that we are all on a mission together.

Hence also, changes in what your donations will be used for. They will no longer be supporting the Bishop's staff and office. Those things will be supported in other ways. Rather, your donations will be used in three main areas:

First, will be ministries for Education and Family. This will include religious education and support for our youth. Diocesan programs for our young people such as Camp Survive and Tobit are part of this as is support for our Catholic schools. Also in this category is support for families such as young couples starting out in marriage. Here too will be support to build a culture of life to foster our belief that every human life from conception until natural death is precious. This is especially important in our culture where we are taught that the solution to life's problems is to kill as we see with abortion and doctor assisted suicide.

The second category are ministries for Evangelization and Outreach. Here there will be a new focus on programs to share our faith and to introduce people to Catholicism. This will also include things we have been doing and will continue to do, namely, outreach to those in need, to those who are hospitalized and those in prison. It will also include Newman ministries to our college students. In these cases, the appeal supports the priests who work in these areas.

The third category are ministries for Vocations and Clergy Support. This includes fostering vocations to the priesthood and religious life and training of seminarians who will be the next generation of priests. Here also is care for our elderly priests who have given their lives in service of the Church.

So these are the things the Ministries Appeal supports, and none of these ministries could exist without you. Now let me conclude with some of the nuts and bolts.

Bishop Daniel feels that to bring home the point that these ministries are on the Diocesan level that the Ministries Appeal should be made by him and should be administered from the Diocese. Hence the changes.

Starting this year, Bishop Daniel will send you a letter and appeal to you for support, and you should have already gotten you appeal packet. However, I also sent you a letter this week in case you were missed. Also, the envelope in it with your donation should be sent to the Diocese. That said, if you put your donation into the collection, we will make sure it gets to the Diocese. Also, I would encourage you to still use the monthly UCA catchup envelopes in your packet. These were printed before the name change to the appeal was made.

One final change. Beginning this year, the Diocese (and not the parish) will be sending out statements on what you give to the appeal for your taxes.

Change always involve some adjustments, but these changes are important and necessary as we continue to share in the mission of the Church which is to bring the saving teachings of Jesus Christ to the people of our times, our neighbors and friends and families. Amen.