

CASA 2015

Open Your Hearts in Welcome

Three years ago I prepared a recorded message in which I invited you to "Open Your Hearts in Welcome." Well now we have a new pope whom the Lord is using to bring about a missionary transformation of the Church, for which I once again invite you to "Open your Hearts in Welcome."

One area where I invite you to open your hearts is to welcome vocations to vowed religious life, and especially to help promote female religious vocations. Pope Francis said: "Women have an ability to give life and tenderness that we men don't have." This tenderness is something we very much need in today's Church and today's world. The Lord has now blessed us with 41 seminarians and four ordinations to the priesthood last year, for which we are all very grateful!

But women's vocations are still lagging behind, as are male vocations to religious orders. Pope Francis – himself a Jesuit and so a member of a religious order – has named 2015 the "Year of Consecrated Life," in appreciation for our vowed religious, and to promote religious vocations after decades of sharply declining numbers. What can we do about this?

Religious vocations are very different from a vocation to the diocesan priesthood. The need for priests is obvious, the role of the priest is clear; the diocese recruits them, provides their education, ordains them and assigns them. That is the reason we have to make such a strenuous effort to raise the money needed for their education.

By contrast, each religious order is independent financially and otherwise. Each has its own distinct call and its own vision of how to form its members. We have members belonging to 25 different religious communities serving in Arkansas, each of which has its own vocations director, its own charism.

This can be very confusing to a young person who feels called to religious life. For this reason, the diocese uses money raised from our annual CASA – Catholic Arkansas Sharing Appeal – to fund our minister for religious, Sister Joan Pytlik, DC, to help with this discernment. She will be supplying our parishes with resources for what we can do to promote religious vocations during this Year of Consecrated Life. Our religious have long been ministers of healing, education and welcome to all people – which today we need more than ever!

This is just one reason I am asking you to donate to CASA, which funds our diocesan offices, including Sister Joan, and other offices supportive of Pope Francis' call for evangelization, like our Faith Formation Office and our offices for the permanent diaconate, for Catholic schools, and for youth ministry and campus ministry. It also funds, or partially funds, many other things, including the education of our seminarians and the efforts of Catholic Charities, all of which serve to enliven our efforts to spread the Good News of "the undeserved mercy and forgiveness of Jesus Christ." More information can be found in this week's Arkansas Catholic.

If you do not yet subscribe, please do – it is my best means of letting you know about what the Lord is doing in our midst. Subscription forms are being provided to you along with your CASA pledge card to be filled out during this Mass. Our guideline for your 10 percent tithe to the Lord before taxes is 5 percent to your parish, 4 percent to other charities and 1 percent to this CASA appeal.

Take your Adjusted Gross Income, drop three zeros and give that amount to CASA each of the next 10 months. If you earn \$50,000 per year, give \$50 per month to CASA for the next 10 months and that is 1 percent.

Today I need to ask you to make an especially generous donation to CASA this year. Our finances are much tighter than in the past, in part because so many young men have opened their hearts to welcome Jesus' call to serve you as your future priests. This has created a problem – a good problem, to be sure, but one we didn't have six years ago when we had only 17 seminarians: how to pay for 41 seminarians at \$32,000 per student per year.

For the last three years we've had to dip into our endowment, which we really can no longer afford to do. I have moved into an apartment in our House of Formation (which is also paid for in part by CASA) and sold our very nice bishop's house – this will also save the diocese some money in operating expenses going forward, and the more modest lifestyle will do me good!

How about you? What sacrifices can you make to provide greater financial support for CASA, and in this way, further support the work of the Church in Arkansas?