

To the Whole Church

2009 New Year Letter to the Clergy

*Hear this, all you peoples! Give ear, all who inhabit the world,
you of lowly birth or high estate, rich and poor alike.
My mouth shall speak wisdom, my heart shall offer insight.
-Psalm 49:2-4¹*

January 1, 2009 – The Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord Jesus Christ

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

2008 has seen great growth, strides and advancements in our particular church. Throughout the year, we experienced continued growth both in ministry and ministers. We have been fortunate enough to welcome seminarians and clergy with a passionate love for Christ and service to His people- and we continue to do the work God commands us to do. I wish each of you continued success in the care of the souls entrusted to you in the coming year.

The Voice of the Church

On the wall next to my desk, I have a small ceramic tile hanging from a loop of wire, which was made by an artisan in Provincetown, Massachusetts. On the tile is the image of a Northern Gannet, which is a bird that is best known in Cape Cod for diving dramatically from the air to the water, and eating from the large schools of herring often found in the estuaries on Cape Cod.

On this ceramic, the gannet is looking towards the sky, and there are the words “LOOK UP.” I have it hanging there so that it will remind me to pause and ‘look up’ so that I can be ever mindful of the great expanse of the universe of God.

Our place in the great universe of God as servants is absolute. As priests, deacons, religious, and seminarians ministering to our brothers and sisters, we need to be ever mindful that our work is a **responsibility** given to us through an office that we did not seek, but were chosen by God and drawn to service by the will of the Holy Spirit.

None of us voluntarily sought out this life of service, denial, and sacrifice- we were quite honestly conscripted into the glorious service of the divine, handpicked by the very hand of God.

We have been given a gift in return for being conscripted. **When we “look up”** to God we don’t just see the blue sky, we see a portion of the canvas on which God has painted our universe, and our place in it. Secure in the knowledge that our time here is being safely guided until we are called to the next life, we are free to serve the will of God in accordance with **God’s plan for humanity**.

I often get asked, what does your church stand for, or what do we have to say on this or that issue? The question that begs in my mind often is “*What do we have to say?*” or in a more forward thinking and moving thought “**We have things to say!**”

¹ New American Bible

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As heralds of the Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ, **we do have things to say**. We are responsible for the continued and never ending delivery of the important messages of truth, love, acceptance, and service. We as a church have the opportunity to deliver this message to a contemporary people in a contemporary fashion, drawing people to be new disciples of Jesus Christ.

Freed from the constraints of oppression, control, and subjugation by people who minister from a place of power and not from a place of service, we have the potential to be **true heralds of the truth of God** without the filters or fears of retribution that many of our brothers and sisters in ministry within other churches have to work through.

The Message of the Church

The message that we are mandated to herald is often hard to deliver to those who need to hear the message so desperately: those who are in the midst of coping with very real and very urgent needs, suffering in physical, emotional or spiritual pain, or those who through neglect and abuse, harbor anger in their lives toward God and the earthly institutions through which we work.

In order reach those in most desperate need, it is paramount to our mandate that we work harder and with deep conviction deliver the message of the Gospel to them in such a manner so that our voices will **rise up above the din and the distraction** of modern, daily life, so that the people of God can receive the help, comfort, and renewal they so desperately need.

It is no longer good enough, or acceptable to think “job well done” when we are delivering our mandated message to a half or quarter filled church on a Sunday. Sitting back and thinking about the great attendance on Easter or Christmas is not a **good litmus test** for us, the contemporary heralds of the Gospel of truth and love. For every person who hears the message in church on Sunday, we undoubtedly walk by, look away from, or step over a dozen others through the course of our week, without giving them much thought.

I have long believed that Sunday Mass is not the finish line, to our week; it's not the goal we trudge towards, but **the starting line**, from which we move forward as Christians. The Sunday worship experience **is important as the start of the week for Christians**. As the day of rest, Sunday should give us the energy to move forward through the rest of the week as **heralds of God's enduring message**.

It is from that Sunday start that we should take the **message of the Gospel** and the **renewing energy of the Eucharist** out the door with us to the people in the street. We need to embrace that old protestant adage of the **“seven day a week church!”** and truly **live the message we herald**, every day. The message of the Gospel can be delivered as easily with words as it is with our hearts and hands.

The New Message

As we continue to prepare for our 2009 Extraordinary Gathering of the Whole Church, the bishops will begin to dialogue with our clergy, and we will all invite and talk with our laity on our churches message, and how we can maximize our abilities to be the heralds we are chosen to be.

We will begin to talk about ideas like **Missio Dei**, bringing Jesus Christ to the people, and not waiting for them to ‘seek and find.’ **We need to begin to break down the concepts of church** as an exclusive club, party or event only for those who we choose or feel worthy to enter this House the Lord.

We will continue the practice of not reserving the celebration of the Eucharist, or any sacrament, to hallowed, musty buildings. **We will continue to bring God's love and the great universal prayer to people everywhere, at any time.**

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In the coming year, **our mantra** will be one of *open doors, open arms, and open hearts*. **Our prayers will be** both the institutional time honored **words we know**, as well as **dirt under our nails** and **soresness in our feet**. We will be heralds of the Good News with our hands, hearts and mouth.

We will pray constantly, daily, through intentional thoughts, words, and deeds. We will do so in our parishes, in the hopes that the Sunday worship experience will have a multiplying effect – that those who hear us herald the truth and love of Christ will react the way a long distance runner does when the starter fires his pistol- all taking off running to spread the Good News and love they have just heard and experienced. **This is the call of the true herald of truth and love!**

We will not just be the herald in acceptable and expected places and moments. **We will herald the truth** on the bus, in the store, at the doctor's office, in every instance, grasping every chance, and **every opportunity that God arranges for us** in this great and wonderful universe.

We will be bringing the message that is old and yet always new again to college campuses, homeless shelters, inner city and at risk youth, to nursing homes, gay bars, hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, and street corners- anywhere people are gathered, waiting, **looking up**. Everyone is entitled to hear the good news from the heralds God has chosen!

The people of God in the world are like my friend the gannet. At first, it may seem odd that a bird that should be looking down into the salt marshes from above for his next meal to be instead looking up towards the sky.

In fact, he is looking up searching for his friends flying high above, towards that next great banquet so he too can take wing, **sing glory to God**, fly high and go with them to the great **banquet provided by God** for them all.

Our friend the gannet has faith that if he just sits on the dock for just a minute longer, he will be guided towards what his body and soul desires- he knows that he will be guided by those he trusts, by those who already know the way.

As Heralds of God's gift to the people, we are called to be the ones trusted, to be the ones to lead the way!

We all want to find best way to reach to the sky, to sing Glory to God, and travel home so that we too can experience the promised '**... way, the truth, and the life.**'² It is our desire as Christians to go up to heaven to be with our friends and family at that great banquet; the great banquet of truth and love that God has prepared for each of us.

As the Herald of God's message, and as God's workers and chosen servants, every action we take in our lives should be part of the goal of our mandated mission- to lead the people of God to that great banquet and heavenly reward.

Let us all pray that in the coming year we each become better prepared to lead the way.

Given on the Feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord,
the first day of January, two thousand and nine at
Washington, District of Columbia, United States of America.

The Most Reverend Michael Seneco, SPSA, DD, L.Th.
Presiding Bishop

² John 14:6