



Celebrating our Work, Reflecting on our Teachings and Traditions: A Call to Action

**Catholic Charities of Saint Paul and Minneapolis
2011 St. Nicholas Dinner
December 1, 2011**

Remarks of Tim Marx, Chief Executive Officer

A Celebration of Our Work

Good Evening. Thank you for joining us at our St. Nicholas celebration. I have been to many St. Nicholas dinners in the past. It feels so good, and is so meaningful to be home, helping to carry on the inspiring work of Catholic Charities.

As we enjoyed a good meal tonight, know that Catholic Charities provided 1.1 million meals this past year. When we leave for our safe and warm homes, we will be providing shelter and homes to 1,400 women, men and children who might otherwise be left to the streets.

As we appreciate the ability to support our mission, know that:

- Debbie, whose child was at risk during her pregnancy, delivered a healthy boy who is developing on track after receiving pre-natal and parenting help from our Seton Clinic.
- Maleek, from North Minneapolis, entered kindergarten this year ready to learn after attending our Northside Child Development Center.
- Andrea, who came to St. Joseph's Home for Children at age 8, and would scream when anyone came close to her, is at home tonight, re-united with her family.
- Shawn is resting at home before work tomorrow, proud of the lease that he displayed at our Opportunity Center, which helped him put homelessness and unemployment behind him.

- Sam, who suffers from chronic alcoholism, continues to live at our Glenwood Residence, rather than on the streets and in detox because we advocated for continued state funding for him and thousands of others.
- Joyce, a frail elderly woman in Scott County, with the support of our Aging services, cared for her husband as he died at home, as they wished.

Healthy starts at the dawn of life. Safety nets and fresh starts on life's journey. Dignity at the sunset of life. This is what Catholic Charities provided for 35,000 children, women, and men in our community last year. We celebrate *all* of this tonight.

Building on the Past and Confronting the Realities of Today

It is my honor to serve as the sixth Chief Executive Officer of Catholic Charities. The ability to do our work today, and tomorrow, stands on the shoulders of many from our past and in our present—our Bishops and faith leaders, our Board Chairs and Board members, my predecessors, our staff and volunteers, our community leaders and private partners, and all of our generous supporters and investors.

These shoulders are as important now, as ever, as we confront the most challenging and consequential times of our generation. Homelessness and poverty are increasing, opportunities for individuals and families to achieve their full potential are more and more scarce, and vitriol and gridlock in the public square defy reason and prevent progress.

These realities should not weigh down tonight's celebration. As Archbishop Nienstedt wrote in his column last week "rather than curse the darkness, we need to work together to find the light." And there is light as we gather tonight, light that shines from the Catholic Social Teaching that guides us, light rooted our 142 year tradition of giving life to this Teaching, and light that is pointing to a better future.

Let me offer some reflections on our Teaching, our tradition, and the future.

Catholic Social Teaching: Dignity, Community, Responsibility, and Solidarity

Catholic Social Teaching is based on the fundamental belief in the life and dignity of each human person. It recognizes that human dignity exists in community. And how our communities are organized—in economics, politics, and law—matters.

The poor and vulnerable must be preferred—*how they are faring is a moral test of our society*. Importantly, there are both rights *and* responsibilities—to each other, our families, and our communities.

Finally, we live in solidarity as one human family, seeking a just social order in which there is dignity and opportunity for everyone. As Isaiah wrote, “the work of justice will be peace; the effect of justice, calm and security forever” (Isaiah 32:17).

A Tradition of Bringing Catholic Social Teaching to Life in Saint Paul and Minneapolis

Since 1869, Catholic Charities has been a bright, shining example of putting these teachings into action.

Throughout our history—from the days of pioneer life and the aftermath of the Civil War, through the Great Depression, into the tumultuous 1960s, and now into the new millennium, we have responded, both with direct service, and through advocacy on important public policy initiatives such as welfare reform, health care access, and innovative solutions to homelessness.

Catholic Charities is now the largest social service agency in the Twin Cities region. We serve people across the continuum of age, need, and opportunity; we are a respected advocate for social justice; we have more than 535 incredibly hard working employees, and volunteers who provide over 200,000 hours of generous service. Our Board is dedicated, and we have more than 20,000 investors and donors, and scores of collaborative partnerships.

We and our partners are working as hard as ever.

Stretched to our Limits: A call to Action to the Community

Yet we are falling behind. Our capacity is stretched to its limits.

Before the recession in 2008, the number of people experiencing homelessness was declining slightly. We were making progress toward ending homelessness. By 2009, there was a sharp increase of 25%, and it has worsened dramatically since then.

Poverty is increasing in Minnesota—poverty rates over the last decade have nearly doubled to 11.6%. This is 600,000 people, including 180,000 children. The disparities by race and ethnicity are stark and disturbing, and contribute to similar disparities in education and employment. Imagine trying to support and sustain a family of four on \$22,000. It is worse for the 250,000 Minnesotans who are in “deep poverty”, living on half the poverty income.

Living in poverty requires difficult choices and trade-offs as all of its causes and effects are interrelated:

- Do I buy medicine or pay rent? Buy food or pay for child care?
- Do I spend wages on a taxi to get to work when there are no busses, or risk losing my job?

All of this results in personal hardship and turmoil. And today at Catholic Charities we are witness to the hardships and the turmoil.

This summer we turned people away from the Dorothy Day Center for the first time in 30 years. We have struggled, and in some cases failed, to shelter people with dignity. Camps sprung up outside our doors, creating disorder and, in a few cases, violence.

We know that for every child like Maleek at Northside who started kindergarten ready to learn, there are many more who are unprepared, who won't likely read well by third grade, graduate high school, get a decent job, and are at risk of ending up in our shelters and jails.

For every one like Shawn who now has a home and a job, there are those like the 55 year old woman we know, "who did everything right" but was laid off, denied disability benefits, depleted her 401k, and is wondering, what's next, where can I go?

This hardship and turmoil is costly to everyone. Study after study demonstrates the very real costs of poverty— emergency and chronic healthcare that could be avoided; expensive welfare, jail, and detox; lower worker productivity and taxes foregone.

Poverty is expensive, bad fiscal policy, and hinders economic vitality. It makes no sense. But we do know what makes sense and what works.

The combination of a growing economy and investments in smart anti-poverty, pro-opportunity strategies are effective. Study after study also demonstrate the high return on investments in early education, child care, housing, health care access, employment and job training. Our principal challenge is not "knowing what to do or how to do it."

Let's face it, our principal challenge is one of will—will we choose, as a society, to make solving poverty and creating opportunity for everyone a priority?

Catholic Charities has made this choice and we will do our part.

We will continue to respond to those most in need. This is our strength. We will not shirk from it.

We will continue to respond to emerging challenges. This is our tradition. We will honor it.

We will continue to respect those we serve by meeting them where they are, no matter who they are. This is a core value. We will uphold it.

We will respect, as well, our role; both our capacity and our limitations—and when we must call on the broader community, we will.

And now is such a time, because we cannot "serve" our way out of poverty.

Shelters and soup kitchens are temporary band aids that cover wounds but don't heal them. If we rely on them, the wounds will worsen, and we will just need more.

We need permanent solutions. Permanent homes. Good jobs that can put healthy food on the table so workers can produce and hungry minds can learn.

Our economy, politics, and laws, as well as our attitudes and behaviors must change--*All* so that our work becomes less necessary. This will require focused effort and challenge everyone.

Catholic Social Teaching does not rest on any "wing" of an ideological spectrum. It is very practical—if what we are doing is not working for people, then there must be change. The evidence is unambiguous. We are leaving too many people behind. Change is imperative.

Change is Possible—Getting to Higher Ground by Establishing Common Ground

But take heart. Change is possible. Today, Catholic Charities and the community are working together making progress.

One example is our new housing development, Higher Ground, which will open next June. It will provide shelter and homes to over 330 people, a new model that the state of Minnesota has called its "signature project to end long-term homelessness."

We are able to build Higher Ground because political leaders in both parties put partisanship aside to achieve *common ground*—and business leaders recognized that our ability to tackle poverty provides us a competitive advantage.

There is much, much more to do to establish *enough* common ground so that the entire community, can reach that *even* higher ground on which there is poverty for no one and opportunity for everyone.

And I know we can get there.

We can get there because of the incredibly hard working staff of Catholic Charities. Would all of our staff who are here please stand or raise your hand and stay standing. We thank you and all of your colleagues.

We can get there because of our dedicated Board Chairs and Board of Directors, past, present, and incoming. All of you please stand or raise your hand and stay standing. We thank you.

We can get there because of the Faith leaders and Faith communities on whose prayers and partnership we rely, like the Basilica of St. Mary which we honor tonight. All of you please stand or raise your hand and stay standing. We thank you.

We can get there because of our strong community partners--private, nonprofit, and public leaders like St. Paul Council member Pat Harris who we also honor tonight. All of you please stand or raise your hand and stay standing. We thank you.

We can get there because of our generous donors and investors, and everyone who came this evening to support the work of solving poverty and creating opportunity. All of you please stand or raise your hand and stay standing.

If all of us continue to “stand up” and call upon others to “stand up” as well, we will achieve higher ground.

There is a Gospel Song that speaks for all of us:

Our hearts have no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay
Tho’ some may dwell where these abound
Our prayer, our aim, is Higher Ground.

Have a merry and blessed Christmas.

We will see you in the New Year—on and at Higher Ground.