

Provincial Minister

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Dear Brothers:

The December 7th issue of *Time* magazine contained an article entitled "The Decade from Hell." The article reviewed the events of the last ten years and urged readers to give thanks that the decade is nearly over.

Here is just a sampling of the events that the *Time* article listed in its review. The presidential election of 2000 ended chaos that was finally resolved by the Supreme Court. On September 11, 2001 the World Trade Center was attacked, killing 3,000 people. In 2002, the clergy sexual abuse scandal was brought to light. In 2003, the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated upon re-entry, killing all seven astronauts aboard. A *tsunami* killed 200,000 people in a dozen countries in southeast Asia and Africa at the end of 2004. Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005. American combat deaths in Iraq reached three thousand in 2006. In 2007, a student at Virginia Tech gunned down thirty-two people before killing himself. The stock market plunged in 2008. People lost their homes, jobs and pensions after the worst decline in stock prices since 1931. This year the World Health Organization declared HINI flu a global pandemic. It really was a decade from hell.

This article started me thinking about the last ten years in the life of our fraternity. Lack of personnel led to the ending of our service in the dioceses of Gaylord, Saginaw, and Joliet. St. Francis Retreat Center ceased operation and the friary has been shuttered. The Province was touched by the clergy sexual abuse scandal. We concluded our service at Archbishop Ryan High School in Philadelphia. Franciscan Publishers closed and the printery stands empty. Sister Death has not been kind to us—especially in the way William Gulas was taken from us. Three of our brothers were convicted of felonies and were imprisoned. The Province's investments lost approximately \$1.5 million in value because of Wall Street's problems. The collapse of the housing market prevented us from selling the last bit of the West Chicago property and from developing portions of the Pulaski and Green Bay properties. We returned the pastoral care St. Anthony Parish in Milwaukee to the Archdiocese. Deferred maintenance on the exterior of St. Mary of the Angels Church and Friary in Green Bay will cost the Province hundreds of thousands of dollars. Several of our brothers had to deal with very serious personal and health-related issues. Indeed, the years from 2000 to 2009 have not been good to the Province.

The full title of the *Time* article was "The Decade from Hell and How the Next One Can Be Better." The author described the fundamental strengths of our country: we have the strongest military, we are leaders in technological innovation, and we are still the nation that most others emulate. These strengths bode well for the future of the country. What are our fraternity's strengths? What gives us hope that the Province's next ten years will be better than the last ten?

First, I point to our formation program. We have not been blessed with many vocations in the last decade, but those we get tend to stay. While the retention rate by all religious communities in the U.S. is 50 percent, we have been able to keep better than 70 percent of new vocations over the last ten years. We have to continue nourishing and encouraging our younger brothers. They are the future.

Second, the Province has always been marked by a very good work ethic. We are committed to our ministries-and sometimes over-committed. We have come to serve the People of God and so we do. We begin each day by together praising God in the psalms. We then begin our day of service. We gather strength for our ministry as we celebrate the Eucharist together and find support in our fraternal communion. Prayer and fraternal support give our ministry its effectiveness and authenticity.

The lay people who minister along with us are a third source of hope for our future. Some lay folk work alongside of us in our friaries, filling jobs that we used to handle ourselves. They help create a positive climate in our fraternities and we could not get along without them. Almost all friars today collaborate with lay people in their ministries. They work with us, support us, challenge us. They are committed to the service of God's People. They are the kind of co-worker that Paul writes about in his letters.

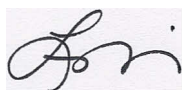
A fourth source of confidence about our future is the Provincial Administration. John Puodziunas, the Provincial Vicar, and the members of the Provincial Definitorium are a talented and insightful group of friars who bring their experience, their Franciscan idealism, and their love of the Province to bear on the issues that challenge our fraternity today. Also, the Guardians are doing all that they can to animate their brothers into making our local fraternities places where the Franciscan life flourishes.

Finally, if we want the next decade to be a lot better than the last one, we need to become who we are: Lesser Brothers. As "brothers," our commitment to fraternity is not made for practical or even canonical reasons. It makes possible service that, as Franciscans, we have promised to give to the Church. The witness of our fraternity is a gift that only we can give. It shows that it is possible to break down the barriers that prevent genuine reconciliation. It is a model of the community that the Church is called to be. As "Lesser" Brothers, we are called to serve where no one else wishes to serve and to go where we are needed the most. We do not become proprietors of our ministries, but we are disposable and itinerant. We are ready to answer the call that comes to us, urging us to take the Good News to people and places that need to hear the Gospel in distinctive Franciscan tones.

Will the next decade be better than the last one? If we remember who we are and to what we have been called, if we can move beyond anger and hurt feelings, and if we use our gifts for service, God will honor our efforts.

Happy New Year ... Happy New Decade!

Fraternally yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Hoppe', written on a light-colored rectangular background.

Leslie J. Hoppe, OFM