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November 14, 2017

To the Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Baton Rouge

Re: Special Collection for St. Joseph Seminary College (St. Ben's) Weekend of December 9-10, 2017

St. Joseph Abbey and Seminary College in Covington, Louisiana, have had a profound influence on the life of the Catholic Church in the Deep South. For over 125 years the monks of the abbey have been educating and forming young men as candidates for the priesthood. This has been their primary mission and their lasting legacy. Most of our own diocesan priests studied there.

The monks began this ministry in 1889 at the invitation of the newly installed Archbishop of New Orleans, Francis Janssens. Within his first year as archbishop, he recognized that, for the archdiocese to flourish, it needed to develop a native clergy. He reached out to St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana, which sent four monks to establish and staff the abbey and seminary.

Following the Benedictine tradition of balancing prayer and work, the monks instilled in the young seminarians intentional personal formation, a prayerful spirit, a love for the liturgy, a thirst for knowledge, and a respect for manual labor. As a result, the influence of the monks has been felt throughout the Dioceses of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama through the dedicated service of the 900 priests that have since been ordained after seminary formation.

Today St. Joseph Seminary College is the largest Catholic seminary college in the United States with over 140 students from 22 dioceses in seven states. Given the urgent need for priests, the continued contribution of the monks of the abbey is invaluable.

Now, however, it is the monks who are in need. In March 2016, a disastrous flood overwhelmed the abbey and seminary. The library lost many of its treasured volumes. The ground floor of the monastery sustained significant damage. The gym floor was ruined. And all the air-conditioning and plumbing systems beneath the abbey church were destroyed. In all, 30 buildings on the campus received at least two feet of water. The damage is estimated in the millions of dollars. In order for the monks of the abbey to continue their mission of forming seminarians for the priesthood, they will need the generous help of the people of the Dioceses of Louisiana.

This year, after consultation with the Diocesan Presbyteral Council, I have authorized a special collection to benefit the abbey and seminary. This collection will be taken up in all churches of the diocese on the weekend of December 9th and 10th. (This special collection will take the place this year of the annual collection for retired religious, which our diocese has always been extremely generous in its response.)

Please visit the following link for additional information about this important endeavor:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zaoanvXySVXHfgh9W7s9XY5PTPURuP00/view>

Special envelopes are available for this collection. I strongly urge the people of the diocese to join me in expressing our gratitude to the monks of the abbey by generously helping them to continue their mission of preparing candidates for the priesthood to serve our diocese and the church of the south.

Yours in Jesus, the Good Shepherd,

+ *Robert W Muench*
Robert W. Muench
Bishop of Baton Rouge