

State of the Parish Report: January 2010

Many of you know from your own children or grandchildren that our faith isn't as vibrant as it was twenty years ago. That we're in trouble shouldn't be a surprise. Many of the causes of this are cultural shifts that are out of our control, so we have to leave some aspects of our situation to God. But there are some things we can do, if we choose, to keep faith in Jesus Christ alive in Our Lady of Grace as we approach our 50th anniversary. One key thing is described behind me as I speak.

You may remember that last Lent there were banners hanging there asking, What does Jesus ask of us? – and hundreds of you wrote your prayerful answers to that question. Since then our Pastoral Council has worked over what you said, and today I'm speaking for them and I hope for you about the most central thing Jesus asks of us in Our Lady of Grace: We change lives through the Risen Christ. This, as best we can know and say it today, is the mission Christ is giving us.

We change lives. That can sound scary – change can be frightening. But Jesus started his preaching talking about changes, changes that gave life to people: In two weeks we'll hear it in the Gospel: "He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." The heart of Jesus' preaching is the demand that we change course in life: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." With that change in course goes the promise that a better sort of life awaits: liberty to captives; recovery of sight to the blind; freedom from what oppresses. Christ asks us to continue that work: showing people how to change course onto a path to a more abundant life.

We change lives. We, together – not just the priests, or the staff, or the people you see in public on the altar on Sunday. The people from our parish who bring food each week for our food pantry change the lives of people who would otherwise go hungry. The people from our parish who teach in faith formation change the lives of young people who would otherwise perhaps never hear the message of Jesus. The people from our parish who give up other things they could do with their money when they put a check into the collection change lives through their sacrifice.

If we're not in the business of changing lives, there's no reason we should continue to exist. Jesus promised that His church would live forever – but he didn't say, the church in the United States, or the church on Long Island, would. People inside and outside the church – young and not-so-young – very legitimately ask, "What does the church have to offer to me? What is it doing to make our society more just? What is it doing to care for the poor? What is it doing to put into practice the message of Jesus?" If we can't give good answers to those questions, people very legitimately wonder why they should join, or stay. If we can tell people, and show people, how Christ changes lives through us, we can trust that not a few people will want to sign on to join in that work.

In some ways the job of changing lives is one we share with others in our society – with schools, with health-care and social-welfare agencies, with community groups from the fire department to the Kiwanis Club. But there's one way in which we're different from any of them, and that's the second part of Jesus'

charge to us: We are not only called to change lives, but to change lives *through the Risen Christ*. What does that mean?

Today in the Gospel we hear God the Father say to Jesus, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.” We believe that God is always saying that to every human being: You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter. There is no power more profound than God’s love to change people’s lives – and that power is ours to use, through our shared life as a Catholic parish. Right now God is saying that to me, and saying that to you: You are my beloved; with you I am well pleased. We have to ask, do we trust the power that God’s love for us gives us, and do we call on it? Do we use it to do good where we’re most needed?

You could describe our job in different ways – but exactly because it’s so important that we work together, I’m asking every parish ministry, every parish society, and every parish member from now on to use a common way of talking about what Christ asks us to do: We change lives through the Risen Christ. As part of our 50th anniversary renewal one task force is going to be meeting with the leadership of parish societies and ministries to help each of them to focus on this shared goal. And I want to say a word today about how our parish mission comes home to families and to every individual.

Why did God put you on this planet? We believe that God created us to “know, love, and serve Him” – to do God’s work as part of the body of the Risen Christ. Each of us has a mission given to us by God, who tells each of us that we are a beloved son or daughter. It’s tremendously sad for a person not to know why God put him or her here – and tremendously powerful to know what our personal mission from God is.

We’re accustomed to say that priests, deacons, and religious have a “vocation” from God. But we believe that every baptized person has a vocation. Just as Jesus was given his commission at his baptism (as we heard in today’s Gospel), we were also given ours when we were baptized and God said to us, “You are my beloved; I am delighted with you.” All of discipleship is a response to God’s delight.

Why did God lead you to live here, and to become a member of this parish? Was it an accident? Or was it God’s providence? Can you believe that God wants you here, to share in His work with the people you see around you? That’s what trust in God’s providence involves: trusting that where we are, and who we’re with, is no accident.

So this is the question I leave you with: How does your personal vocation connect to our parish’s mission? By God’s providence and because our statement of mission came from listening to parishioners, we can each trust that there’s already a link: Each of you is an irreplaceable part of the Body of Christ which is Our Lady of Grace. How is God asking you to change lives – your own first, perhaps, with our help? Perhaps your spouse’s? Your children’s, or your parents? How is God asking you to change lives in your neighborhood, school, or workplace? In every case it’s through good example; but God is also giving you gifts and talents to make a unique contribution to the lives of other people – what

are those gifts, and what is that contribution that, if you don't do it, no one else will?

And how focused are you on making a contribution through Our Lady of Grace? Do you see our shared life, and fellow-parishioners, as gifts to you, to help you to give your own gifts and to fulfill your vocation? I invite you to focus on this: Where do you see our parish changing lives? If you don't know how we're doing it right now, I invite you to learn; ask questions, search out what we do. How would you like to contribute to our changing lives more effectively and more widely? If you'd like to learn how to apply your gifts through our parish, commit yourself to learning about that over the next few months.

A final word about Our Lady of Grace: not the parish, but our Patron. Our church understands Mary as the ideal disciple of her Son, the one whose personal mission in life was most closely connected to His own work. We are invited to imitate her, connecting our personal vocation to the work of Christ. "Grace" is the gift of God that joins us to the Trinity, that lets us hear, "You are my beloved" at every moment. Mary constantly points us to Christ. When you think of her, or pray to her, remember that we are called to imitate her connection of her own life to Christ's work.

This coming Lent our special Lenten program will focus on deepening our discipleship – on imitating Mary our patron more fully in her dedication to Christ's work. In preparation I invite you – each time you see the new parish logo and mission, and at other times as well – to think and pray about your own vocation from Christ: to search out how you, too, are asked to change lives through the Risen Christ; and how you can do so more effectively as part of his Risen Body, our parish of Our Lady of Grace. And may God help us to do what He asks of us.