

State of the Parish, November 2016

[Delivered at all Masses of 5-6 November, 2016]

This year's State of the Parish talk is going to be a little different. I want to focus on just how important you are, how important your daily discipleship is, and how important your being a regular part of Our Lady of Grace is. Important to what? Not only to your salvation and the good of your family and friends, but to the well-being of our neighborhood and of our whole society. The election campaign we're now mercifully coming to the end of has demonstrated just how coarse and immoral much of our public culture is. Closer to home, I read recently that Suffolk County has the highest number of heroin-related deaths in New York State. Too many of our funerals here are result of the violence and drugs in our culture – suicides, overdoses – and you and I know of too many living people who are lost: too many broken families, too many lives caught in addictions, and too many abandoned elders and abandoned children. Our wider society has lost its bearings – and church congregations like Our Lady of Grace, and people like you and me, have to be a lifeline for the lost amid the moral and cultural rot. We are, simply, irreplaceable.

We all know that churches have less influence than they used to – on how young people grow up, how families form and stay together, how people make ethical decisions; and that loss of influence flows through to affect how society as a whole works. Churches may be smaller, and less influential – but that makes us even more important. The ocean-liner of a Christian or at least a morally-sane culture that some of us may remember carrying us through childhood has hit the iceberg; so people like us, who know how to run the lifeboats of a morally-guided life in the resulting chaos are, literally, lifesavers. That's you and me; even if we didn't sign up for the job, God has put us here for His purposes – to seek out and save the lost. That's why the state of our parish is so important; without us, more people drown. Let's look at how that's worked out this past year.

Parish Social Ministry is the most obvious place we help people to not drown: Each month we help over 250 people with food, and we keep the lights or heat on, or a roof over their heads, for another dozen or so households. It's emergency and it's short-term, but if you're about to be tossed onto the street or to go hungry, or if a tank of gas lets you get to your job and not be fired, that short-term help is a lifeboat in a winner-take-all world. It's a light of generosity in a world of self-interest, and it gives struggling people hope. We've got to keep doing it.

Let's look at families trying to pay the bills and raise their kids at the same time: We offer day care for over 60 families, our before school and after school Angel Care helps another 125 or so. Those families would have a much tougher time without Our Lady of Grace – without you and me.

How about families trying to raise young people with a moral compass in the midst of all the moral rot around them? This past year we had 140 children make their first Confession and First Communion, and about 150 receive Confirmation. The sacraments alone won't protect those young people, but our Faith Formation program helps families to give guidance and to teach values every day to those children. Without Faith Formation, over 800 families in our

neighborhood would have a much tougher job raising their kids well, and those kids would suffer for it.

Our revitalized youth ministry is another light in the darkness for teenagers. It's grown from almost nothing to having 50 or 60 young people gather each week for learning, community service, fun, and prayer. That beats a lot of other kinds of activities for young people. And the same with our sports leagues.

And what about the most important thing, knowing that this world isn't everything and that God is a reliable friend in good times and bad? This seems to me the heart of it, and the signs aren't good. Throughout the Western world, and especially in our part of it, churches – not just Catholic churches – are shrinking and closing. Back twenty years ago, in 1997, about twice as many people came to Mass here on Sunday as do today. That's tragic, but it's one of the results of the iceberg that Christian culture has hit. (Plus, of course, it's due to damage that the church has done to itself over these past years.) Anybody who thinks society as a whole will change back to what life was like in the 1950s is whistling past the graveyard; we're in a new situation where we have to, in Jesus' words, seek out and save the lost, be a light in the darkness. We may be smaller, but we're even more vital.

And for that work we need engaged parishioners – people who, to borrow Matthew Kelly's four signs, pray, study, give, and evangelize. You need to be that sort of person, and I need to be that sort of person, and the person next to you in the pew needs to be that sort of person – or else we have no hope of turning around the personal, family, and societal decay we see around us – or even of being a "light in the darkness," offering rescue to people who are looking for something better than they see on tv. So let me talk about growing and sustaining engagement for just a bit.

To start with how we teach and encourage prayer: The Kelly book we gave out at Christmas includes simple instructions on how to pray. We've started making *The Word Among Us* available so people can pray over the daily Scriptures. (A booklet for Advent will be available around Thanksgiving.) We had our first Lenten retreat in several years this past year, and have another planned for this year. There's daily Mass here, every day; and the church is open all day for prayer – two things many parishes can no longer offer, but they're right here in your backyard. Take advantage of them!

Engagement also grows with generosity. We sacrifice for those we love, and love grows with sacrifice. We have over 200 people giving time and talent in Our Lady of Grace – and we couldn't do what we now do without them – without you, since many of you volunteers are here in the assembly. You know love and sacrifice reinforce each other. And also, many of you are financially generous – so much so this past year that we've been able to pay our past-due bills and fix the parking lots without dipping into savings. (A full financial report is on the parish website.) But as you can see from the *Bulletin*, collections since the summer aren't keeping pace with our budget; in fact, since September 1 we're about \$9,000 behind where we want to be. Your generous giving, frankly, is vital if we're going to continue to save lives and souls, to offer hope to hopeless and lost people. To see a change for the better in the world, we all have to invest in making it happen. Being a force for good in this day and age takes sacrifice.

Please: examine your giving, and if you can, increase it. You can see all around you – it goes to good use. Together, we give people hope and direction. Remember that each time you give.

Now I have a request from our Pastoral Council. They're considering giving out a book again at Christmas – a different book by the same Michael Kelly – but want your feedback about last fall's gift of *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic* first. So please; if you're at the end of a pew, send those papers down your row to other people (and pencils for whoever needs them).

(People fill out survey, ushers collect)

Here's a thought for while the ushers collect the survey forms. Monday, the day before Election Day, we can contribute to the betterment of society by praying that we and all our fellow-citizens make wise choices that will truly serve the common good. The church is open all day until 9pm, and Monday we have Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament from 2pm to 9pm. Why not stop by to pray? Or at least, set aside some time to pray at home. Or come to daily Mass Monday and/or Tuesday. And, of course, on Tuesday vote your conscience in every race on the ballot, not just the top line.

Now in closing: The key things I'd like you to take home about the state of Our Lady of Grace this year are these;

- We're smaller, but we're more vital than ever for so many people damaged by the culture around us, like a lifeboat after shipwreck;
- Living our own faith and hope well and together is a point of light for people who otherwise would be lost in darkness; we can't sell that short or do it half-heartedly;
- The closeness of each of us to God through daily prayer and weekly Mass and Communion is the best antidote to the coarseness and moral rot we've seen in this presidential campaign and which seems pervasive in the wider culture generally;
- To continue our vital work as a parish, we need your sacrifice – in daily love, and truth-telling, and kindness to others; in generosity with your time (whether in organized volunteering or simply in neighborly care for the needy), and in financial sacrifice to support Our Lady of Grace.

Thank you, and may God continue to bless our parish and all of you.