

**State of the Parish, 2015**  
**Presented at all Masses November 14-15, 2015**

*I had planned my State of the Parish talk at all the Masses for this weekend, and then as you all did I heard of the terror attacks in France on Friday night. Talking with some people about whether to postpone or proceed, it seemed best just to say a few words about the attacks, then go on as planned.*

*You'll hear a petition in the Universal Prayer today for the victims of the attack, which is of course natural: It's what we do as Catholics when people suffer. You'll also be invited to pray for world leaders, that they be wise in their response; we've all seen the tragic results of foolishness following the 9/11 attacks. Another thing we do as Catholics is to suspect our quite natural emotions, especially any that would foster violence; and we pray for God's guidance that any actions be for the long-term common good of all peoples.*

*We're properly angered and concerned; so we pray. But you and I have no influence on the course of world events as they play out (except perhaps by how we vote next year). But we can influence here and now important things that have to do with our own and our neighbors' lives, and so I want to turn to our parish and how we're doing.*

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We've had a tough few years together. Some of you, I know, are still recovering from Hurricane Sandy; many of you, from the economic downturn that began a few years before that. Some of you have lost jobs, some of you your houses, some of you your families, some your health. Plus, we all face increasing problems with affordability of housing, food, and medical care; and increasing tragedies of addiction, especially but not only in young people. Our parish has tried to be here as a support for you in these tough times, but even at the parish we had to go through a painful reorganization eighteen months ago to bring our services to you into line with our income.

We're not out of the woods with any of those challenges, but at least here in Our Lady of Grace I can tell you that in my judgment things are hopeful – more than hopeful, in fact. We've been able to turn our attention away from mere physical survival toward what most matters: the spiritual health and holiness of the people in the pews – you – and the practical well-being of our members and our neighbors when they face tough times. Let me give you just a few examples of this from recent experience:

- The teen choir has tripled in size, and the children's choir now sings at Mass each week instead of only monthly;
- Our revitalized Youth Group now sees an average of 40 young people coming each week;
- Parish Social Ministry is helping about thirty families – about 95 individuals - through the food pantry;
- Day Care graduated its first class of children last June, and is now paying its own way as a ministry although it's still only about 60% full;

- Angel CARE enrollment is flourishing. We have 45 children receiving care for the morning session and 155 for the afternoon session;
- Parish Social Ministry has been receiving food donations not only from our parishioners, but from the West Babylon Schools, from the Rotary Club, and from Best Market, among others;
- Parish ministries are being transformed by new people in charge: liturgy by Fr. Gius, care for the sick by Fr. Gabriel, Faith Formation for children by Peggy Harnish, PSM by Ann Kristoffersen, and the condition of our campus and buildings by James Pisano. And new and existing volunteers are stepping up to share leadership with them – too many volunteers to name;
- Finally, we've been able to start a new Ministry with Children and Families, which is already hosting after Mass breakfasts and parent-child activities.

In short, I'm more hopeful and confident about the future of Our Lady of Grace than I've been at any time in the ten years since I arrived here. And that's in large measure due to the generosity of the people like you who've stuck together through the tough times, offered the skills and energy and dollars you could, and didn't give up on what we might be able to create together. Your determination is paying off. It might not yet be too evident to you, but I can see it and I want you to know about it and to be excited about it.

I hear from a lot of you that your children or grandchildren, despite your best efforts, no longer practice our faith. Some people have stopped coming because they got divorced and think they're excluded, or because they're gay and feel unwelcome, or because they went to jail, or got hooked on drugs or alcohol – and they think they're not worthy. We know our Holy Father is trying to change that, and we can join with him: We can make Our Lady of Grace a place where everyone is welcome and feels it, where there are life-giving things happening so that, when people visit, they want to become a part of what we're doing here. I can tell you that that's happening – notably in Faith Formation and our other children's programs. People need places and activities that give them hope in this climate – and we're increasingly doing that.

Now let me say a word about our finances: there are no parish activities or welcome or outreach without the money to support it. We're by no means out of the woods, but in the fiscal year that just closed we were able to pay our current bills and also to start paying down our debts. We still have more debt to pay off – about \$54,000 – but we're no longer sinking deeper, we're getting out of the hole. We've cut the amount we owe by more than half, and with your help we'll pay off the rest this year. The Finance Council and I know we've got two big projects looming – work on the paving in our parking lots, and replacing the roofs on the convent and part of the Parish Center. So we'll be needing your generosity for those things over the next few years. Rather than take more of your time here, a full financial report is on the parish website, and I'm happy to answer questions anyone has about our finances.

You know, I've heard expressions of surprise from some people in diocesan leadership about how much financial information we publish. But that's part of my commitment to good stewardship and to you: I give you the information about where we stand and what we do with your offerings with nothing held back, and so I feel free to ask – as I am now – for your

continuing, and even increased, support. We've got some good things going and the trend is positive – if what we do here is worthwhile and you'd like to see more of it, all of us will have to continue to make financial sacrifices to support it. Read my column in the *Bulletin* this week and next to learn more about that.

Now: What's coming in the next few months? First, you know about our plans to distribute copies of Matthew Kelly's *The Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic* to people at Christmas; Our Parish Council wants to get that book into every household in the parish. We've already distributed over 800 copies to people who've been coming to Mass – and we hope to reach another 1500 households at Christmas. People who have read Kelly's book and think this is a good idea have already given over \$2,500 to make that happen. You can still be part of that until December 8 – baskets are at the door, or you can use *WeShare* – and if you haven't gotten the book yet you can pick up a copy in the parish office after Mass. Read it, and then donate what you think it's worth. "Pay it forward" so others can read it and, we hope, be drawn back to our church through it. Kelly shows why it's both important and exciting to be an engaged Catholic. That's a message we need to hear ourselves, and to spread to others.

The recent visit of Pope Francis reminded a lot of us, and a lot of our neighbors, about the good things our church in America does. We want to build on the way the Holy Father has made being Catholic attractive again to many people. You can help with that: Read Kelly's book, recommend it to your friends, tell them they can get it by coming to Mass here at Christmas, and be ready to talk about what your faith means to you with them afterward.

Second, we're planning a Lenten Parish Mission again for the first time in several years. I've been able to connect with the Jesuit Collaborative (who used to offer programs at their retreat house in Manhasset, which closed a few years ago), and they'll be coming to our parish in late February to conduct a Mission. You'll hear more about that around Christmastime and after. Through the tough years we haven't been able to do much for the spiritual growth and spiritual health of adults, but now we can start again. I want to see more of that happening, and I hope this is just a beginning.

Another thing coming up later this winter, again in February, is that the Regional Vicar, Fr. Jim McNamara, will be visiting for the weekend of February 6-7. The diocese had a pattern of these triennial visits to every parish in the past, but it lapsed for a while. (Our last visit, by Bishop Dunne, who's now retired, was in January of 2011.) This is a regular part of parish leadership's accountability to you and to the diocese. Fr. Jim will be preaching at all the Masses that weekend. Again, this is all I know right now; as I find out more about the visit, I'll let you know.

To sum up, here's where we stand as I see it:

- We've been through tough times together, and we've proved our resilience;
- People who have been concerned about the future of our parish should rest easy; we're ok, and on an upward trend;
- Despite the pain, good things are coming out of the changes we had to make, and we're back on track to help people in their practical struggles, and to help everyone to grow in holiness;

- We need to build momentum in this direction, and there's a role for every one of you in that: pray, give, offer encouragement, lend a hand – whatever you can offer;
- We owe one another a debt of gratitude – for sticking together through the tough times, and for what we're creating now.

As I close, I want to thank you for your support of me over these past eighteen months especially; and may God continue to bless you, and all our works together. Thank you.