

## **State of the Parish: 2017**

*Presented at all Masses November 4-5, 2017*

I'd like to call what I have to say the Situation of our Parish, rather than the State of our Parish; and I'll start this way: Do you think we'd be safer and happier as a society if people lied and stole less, turned to violence less, and generally treated other people better than they do now? Do you think our neighborhoods and families would be better off if drugs were less of a temptation to young people, if young people found purpose in life and could find work that let them form families and not worry too much about the future? Do you think we'd all be better off if political leaders talked less about religion and practiced their faith – Christian, Jewish, Islam, Buddhist, or Hindu – more conscientiously, and every day?

I don't have to go on. We all sense, as studies prove, that people and relationships and societies function better when the practice of a religious faith – going to church or synagogue or temple or mosque, and living by a moral code every day – is a vital, stabilizing, and guiding part of people's lives. Religious practice – not just calling oneself religious or spiritual – is good for individuals and for the fabric of society. Do you think our neighborhood is worse off because the pews here are half-empty today? I certainly do.

That's why what you and I do here each Sunday, and even each day, is so vitally important. On-the-ground religious groups – Catholic parishes like Our Lady of Grace, Protestant and Jewish congregations, Islamic centres, Buddhist and Hindu temples – these groups have been very much the glue that holds neighborhoods and families, and so ultimately society, together. There are certainly wonderful, moral non-religious people – and there are some pretty rotten apples in our own barrel. But in general religious practice makes for happier people, more stable families, better-adjusted children, and a better climate in neighborhoods and in society. To us each Sunday, Mass may look like same-old same-old; but just as the daily sameness of putting kids to bed, washing the dishes, and preparing family meals makes for a functioning family, the ordinary things we do here have extraordinary importance, and not just for our own growth in holiness.

I ask you, today especially, to think of this as we look at the situation of our parish. We all wish more people took part in our worship and our work for the Gospel. But religious membership is declining across our culture, and we are not exempt, and we can do little about it. Every religious tradition is looking for ways to bring people back to practice; if one had found it, everybody would be doing it. So far, nothing works. We must focus on what we can do, not what we cannot. God gives us the grace and the talents to do our vital work, for our own sake and for the sake of those around us.

A few years ago the Pastoral Council and I sat down to ask, where should we put our energy and our resources? We must do certain things, as a Catholic parish: We must worship, well and carefully; it is our duty to God and to one another. We must care for the poor as best we can; we meet Christ in the neighbor in need. And given our circumstances and our membership and its needs, we must help families with young children: to help to educate the children in the

faith, to relieve pressure on working parents, and to offer opportunities for families to be together in an atmosphere of faith and religious practice.

So what of this past year? Sunday Mass attendance was down, slightly – from an average of 1439 to 1384 this year so far. But volunteering to help with Mass rose – we added new lectors, new EMHCs, new choir members, and new servers. Faith formation registered over 1,000 children from 751 families; education on levels 3, 4, and 5 have been extended from a half-year to full-year programs, and Sunday Mass attendance is now a 12-month requirement in faith formation. Parish Social Ministry helps about 300 individuals or households per month. Day Care helps over seventy children and their families. Our new Ministry with Families and Children had a slow start, but is seeing increasing attendance at their programs. Our Lenten Mission with Pat Leonard and Jim Philipps was well-received. Youth Ministry is expanding, seeing 30-40 high-school aged participants each week. The Angel Care program is at its highest-attendance yet for this point in the year, with over 30 morning participants and over 170 in the afternoon. These are all parts of the fabric that helps to hold our neighborhood together.

And making possible all of this work is your generosity. Giving per person at Mass has risen over 40% in the dozen years I've been pastor, and our overall income allowed us to finish this past fiscal year with a small surplus while doing some needed repairs and improvements on our campus. For that I, and many people who benefit from your generosity, thank you. The full financial report is on the parish website – every dollar you give is publicly accounted for.

I want to add two practical things about your giving: First, as you may have seen in my column last week the NY State minimum wage law passed last year has a continuing and increasing effect on our parish. I'm truly delighted to pay our employees more fairly; but that pay has to come from tuition and fees and from the Sunday collection. Each year now for five years going forward, as the minimum wage rises, we figure our personnel costs will rise about \$100,000. After five years we will be paying employees an additional half-million dollars a year. They certainly earn it; but I have to ask you, in their name, to support them and their work more generously. Please consider your level of giving, and if you can, make a plan to give more – beginning next weekend. Our vital work depends on you.

Second, if you're not already using electronic giving, please consider switching to *WeShare*. Information is in the *Bulletin*, and there are brochures at the doors. I won't belabor the point because you can read about it, but electronic giving benefits the parish, and (depending on your circumstances) it could well be a benefit to you in your own financial discipleship. Sacrificial giving is a key part of my following Christ; it has to be for everyone, to whatever extent you can.

To close, I thank you for your support for the parish's ministries, and for me. I encourage you to continue to be generous with your talents, your time, and your financial sacrifice; and I particularly encourage you to remember: Simply being here, and doing what we do because it matters not just to us but to God and to our neighbors whether they respond or not, is the work God calls us to and for which He will most certainly reward us.