

## State of the Parish Report

November 3-4, 2018

I am going to start my *State of the Parish Report* this year on a personal note.

A few weeks ago Bishop Barres accepted my request to retire as pastor here effective this coming June. I have been talking with him about this for almost two years, and it's time to act. I do this now with two things in mind:

First, the parish is in good shape. The leadership of the parish – Pastoral Council, Trustees, Finance Council, ministry leaders – have proven themselves dedicated and knowledgeable and skillful in taking us through some hard times; and parishioners are likewise stepping up to do what each can. The current team of employees is competent, friendly, and dedicated. Our finances, while always precarious, are stable; we have money in the bank; and our buildings have, thanks to your generosity, seen considerable refurbishment during my term of service. Despite the problems in the larger church, our parish communion is generally united; committed to our Catholic faith; and generous to the parish, to one another, and to the needy. I am confident that I leave the Our Lady of Grace in good shape for you and for the priest who will be named to serve you in my place.

There is no doubt that our parish rides the wave of a larger cultural tide— people leaving the practice of religion in droves, made much worse for us Catholics by the malfeasance of the hierarchy in response to the abuse scandals. Our dwindling numbers will probably continue for years if not decades due to this force we cannot control. It is tragic, but our job is to be, as Saint Theresa of Calcutta said, not successful but faithful. That we have been, and are today, and I am confident will be in the future.

In that context I want to take just a moment to talk directly about the sex-abuse and cover-up scandal that is devouring our church and its mission. As I've written over these past months, the scandal has destroyed the trust people have in church leadership, and that has done terrible damage to our mission and to our parish. So far, we have seen some drop-off in people attending Mass, and in collections, beyond the larger-scale trends; but I fear for the future effects, especially on young people's desire to become a part of what they properly see as a very compromised Church. Their reluctance will be a part of our parish's future. We will likely continue to shrink in size. The trust that has been lost will take decades to rebuild, and our church everywhere, not just our parish, will suffer from that.

Here in Our Lady of Grace we can do some things to start rebuilding trust – primarily by being forthright about the scandal and its effects, by being transparent in our own doings, and by ending tale-telling and gossip. I became pastor here toward the end of the first phase of this ongoing scandal in 2005, and I realized then that the integrity of the way we deal with one another must be the foundation of our parish's life. I have tried to make truth-telling, transparency, and respect for people's confidences hallmarks of my service here, and have consistently pointed out that gossip and the betrayal of confidences are serious sins and do unimaginable damage. Those virtues will be vital in the entire church, its leaders and its people, as we face the future, if our church is to have a future at all

Back to my decision for a bit.

Personally, I know I no longer have the stamina to serve you as well as I'd like. I'm blessed with quite good physical health for my age, but serving as pastor here is demanding work and it's time for a younger person to assume it. I intend, after my appointment here ends, to offer limited services in the diocese, especially in some types of ministry I trained for but had to set aside while I served here: the training and coaching other parish leaders, and writing. I'll be working out the details of that service with the diocese and with various parishes later on. I won't be disappearing – you'll no doubt see me around on occasion, just as you continue to see other priests who have moved on to other ministries.

So back to the parish: Let's look for just a few minutes at the complexity of our ministries and what we've accomplished over the last few years.

The core of our life together is threefold: Worship: to give praise to God for God's goodness; education, to grow in wisdom about how to live and become holy; and care for the poor; to grow in holiness through closeness to Christ in His poor.

Our worship is excellently done, thanks to the generosity of so many volunteers and their families: servers, choir members, lectors, ushers, song leaders, EMHCs, and the leaders who create the church environment and who make sure all the pieces flow together. But it's a challenge, as many of you know from your own families, to convince young people to continue to worship as they grow older. This is a problem for the whole church, and for every flavor of religion; and it affects us. You see it looking around. This past year average Mass attendance on Sunday dropped by about 250 people, and attendance at Easter and Christmas Masses fell even more. When I speak to other pastors, it's a similar, tragic story everywhere.

I have a great deal of confidence in our worship team and in the people who educate our young people in the faith; but this is a challenge that needs vigorous leadership and perhaps new ideas. We have set faith formation on what I think is a fine course; I am delighted with our Faith Formation coordinator and her team; perhaps a new pastor can offer them even more opportunities to have an effect for good.

The day care we opened a half-dozen years ago continues to develop and to serve families with young children. It's not as full as we'd like, and it's a wonderful program – spread the word if people are looking for high-quality, religion-infused, day care. It complements our offerings to children before and after school through Angel Care – 57 children each morning, 153 each afternoon at last count – and during the summer through Kids of the Kingdom and our Vacation Bible School, both of which are also well-subscribed. Along with our Family Mass, our Ministry with Families and Children, and our revitalized Youth Ministry, we've developed an array of services and activities for parents and for children and teens from age six weeks through the time they graduate from high school. I know of no other parish on Long Island that can do that.

On the other hand, our ability to offer good adult faith formation has, unfortunately, been limited. But the new FORMED web site subscription – which I hope you're aware of and are using (if not, you can get connected through our parish website – directions on the lower-right of the home page will tell you how to "Get FORMED") – provides a tremendous opportunity now. It will take a great deal of vision and energy to move that along so it helps parishioners as

it has the potential to. I believe the vision is there, and our staff is energetic. I look forward to seeing what they, and a new pastor, can make of that.

Our care for the poor is, I believe, where our parish shows most clearly the presence of Christ and His power to change lives. Few people in our parish are wealthy – that’s just a fact of our neighborhood. And many are in need. But I am consistently amazed by how our parishioners give from what they have to help those who have even less. And Parish Social Ministry workers make those donations go far. Over 3300 times this past year families received food aid, to take just one vivid example. A lot of people did not go hungry because we were there for them in their need. We can be truly proud of what we, together, have accomplished in care for God’s poor in our midst.

Our accomplishments are only possible because of your continuing generosity. The complete financial report for the fiscal year we just ended is on the parish website; in short, we ended the year with a surplus of about \$120,000, and had just over \$1.2 million in the bank. The present fiscal year looks more dicey: the projected surplus for this year, due to rising costs, the increase in the NY State minimum-wage, and, frankly, to declining attendance and thus contributions, is under \$2,000. Your good stewardship and your generosity are vitally important to the spiritual health of many, many people. And so many people are generous: giving per person in the Sunday collection this past year went up from last year - \$483 to \$507 - so thank you, and please continue to be generous!

Three things, now, about the future.

The project of exploring turning the convent building into a retreat center is making progress; the feasibility study is almost complete, thanks to the volunteers who came forward when I asked last spring; they’re doing a wonderful job. Their next step for them will be to formulate a business plan to see if the finances can be made to work, so that the parish would not have to subsidize a retreat ministry there. But there would still be some investment on the part of the parish to get the building into shape; just this past week I asked the diocese for permission to spend almost \$35,000 to replace the building’s roof, a vital repair no matter what use the building is eventually put to. Again, your generosity will be key in making a retreat ministry possible here. I will continue to give you updates as planning progresses.

Regarding my departure this coming June: If the past process is a guide, diocesan officials will visit later this winter or spring to get a sense of Our Lady of Grace; what they hear from you then will shape the recommendations that the Priests’ Personnel Board will make to Bishop Barres for the assignment of a new pastor here. You’ll hear more about that as the details are announced to me, most likely some time after Christmas.

Third, our ministries (and my service) will continue through June just as they do now. I believe that what’s been put in place here over the years has laid an excellent foundation for our parish to continue to flourish, and we will continue to work on that together.

When I came to Our Lady of Grace in 2005 I announced that I hoped to serve two full terms (twelve years) before leaving, so that I could offer the parish some stable service and consistent guidance after a time of turmoil. It turns out that Bishop Murphy and then Bishop Barres have appointed me to serve two years beyond my target, and now I believe that my hope at the start

of my tenure is substantially accomplished. Our continuing work is to continue to *change lives through the Risen Christ* by what we've just heard in today's Gospel: wholehearted love of God and neighbor; nourished and demonstrated by what Matthew Kelly describes as the *four signs of a dynamic Catholic*: daily prayer, study of the wisdom of our tradition; good stewardship; and inviting others to discover the life-giving gift of faith lived in the parish community that God has given to us.

Between now and June we have the Lord's work to do, and we need to continue to do it. I don't want you to walk out after Mass focused on me, or on who might replace me. What matters is the mission Christ gave us, to change lives through His power, a mission which must continue to command our shared attention and energy, especially in this time of difficulty for our church. The young people of our community need it; our neighborhood needs it; and too many lost and confused souls of all ages among us need it.

Forty-six years ago the invitation to my ordination as a priest quoted Saint Paul writing to the church in Corinth: it said,

*This is how one should regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mystery of God.*

I hope I've done that. But my and your primary attention has to remain on what Saint Paul says about his own ministry earlier in that same letter to the Corinthian Church. There Paul says:

*I did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but God gave the growth. In this, neither the planter nor the waterer counts for anything, only God.*

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Thank you, and may God continue to bless us all in our life together in Our Lady of Grace.

*F. Vin*