

State of the Parish Address

St. John Fisher Church

October 10, 2021

Monsignor David A. Sork, Pastor

Solomon, who had all the power at his disposal as King of Israel, knew that it meant nothing if he could not exercise his power wisely. He said: "I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepter and throne, and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her." (Wisdom 7:8-9) To the extent that Solomon allowed the wisdom of God to be his guide, he was successful. Only when he was seduced by power and material pleasure did he become a failure. He had the height of power but lost it all.

In today's Gospel we see a similar failure in the rich man who came to Jesus seeking to inherit eternal life. He seemed to follow everything that was found in the Law of Moses. But, like Solomon, he was imprisoned by his riches. When Jesus challenged him to sell what he had and give to the poor in order to have treasure, his jaw dropped. That was just too much. So, he went away sad, for his possessions possessed him.

This reading makes me uncomfortable. I can't say I am poor. There aren't many in this parish who could say that either. Jesus is calling for detachment. If our obsession is the pursuit of riches and the accumulation of our possessions, then we are not detached. Still, to inherit eternal life, we do not necessarily have to put our house for sale, drop off all our possessions at our parish Thrift Store, and live like the homeless. But we do have to have a sense of stewardship with what we have and use our time and talents in service to others. I know many do. Perhaps you may see how as I speak about our parish today.

Today's annual State of the Parish Address is my 23rd here as your pastor. Even as we adjust to Covid19, I think you will see that so many of you have found ways of serving others with that sense of detachment that Jesus wants in his disciples.

One of the best ways we stayed in contact with you was through the livestreaming of our Masses each day. This has given us a new group of participants at Mass. I call them the church of the diaspora. With people back in church we are still getting about 300 viewers on Sundays and 150 on weekdays. Most of them are from outside the Palos Verdes area. Some are watching us from across the country and even overseas. Moreover, at many of our funerals we have requests for livestreaming, so that friends and relatives may view it from afar. At one funeral there were over 300 viewers from various parts of the country. The favorite overseas location for the viewing of funerals has been the Philippines. I am deeply indebted to Dave Bloodgood, the chair of our video ministry, and all his volunteers who have generously offered their time and talent to make this happen.

As national, state, and county guidelines have changed, we have tried to adapt. When Governor Newsom shut all churches down July of last year but allowed outdoor gatherings, we immediately moved outdoors. Every day we offered Holy Communion for 20-25 minutes after the livestream Masses. Eucharistic adoration was even done outdoors by having the Blessed Sacrament exposed by the window inside the Plaza Room. Chairs were set up outside. With November approaching, I knew that Mass outdoors wouldn't be feasible if it rained. So, we rented two large tents.

In December a Supreme Court ruling allowed indoor worship. Yet I didn't want to open the doors of the church immediately if were unsafe to the worshipers, so I was cautious. I opened the church first to daily Mass and then to Sunday Mass. With our church's sophisticated ventilation system and realizing that people could space themselves better in church, it seemed much safer inside rather than outside. Confessions once again took place in the church.

Despite the pandemic, our sacramental life is still happening. From July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021, there were 55 baptisms, 78 First Communions, 152 Confirmations, 12 weddings, and 46 funerals. The large number of Confirmations was because Covid-19 delayed the May Confirmations of the previous year to September. Our lay parishioners once again can bring Communion to the sick on a regular basis. As I mentioned in my article in today's bulletin, we need more of them because too few are bringing the Eucharist to the many who need this spiritual nourishment. During this past year your priests administered the anointing of the sick and other sacraments to 126 parishioners confined to home.

As I speak, members of the pastoral council are counting you as part of our annual process of finding out how many attend church. You will see them both this weekend and next. I am interested to see how many have returned to Sunday Mass with the waning of Covid-19. I doubt it will be at the level of 2019 but more than last year.

The Pastoral Council launched an event to celebrate our return to activities at the parish. Calling it, "Welcome Forward," it was an invitation for parishioners who had been away during the pandemic to return to Mass and rejoin the community. It took place on the weekend of September 11-12. Under the leadership of Council Chair, Sheila Bloodgood, and Co-chair, David Williams, scores of volunteers worked together to offer various activities: a hike on Saturday morning and a jazz festival that evening; on Sunday donuts and In-and-Out Burgers after Mass, activities and games for the children, and a Luau for Teens and the young at heart. I did not try the rock climbing or even the limbo. All this reminded us what it is like to be a community worshipping together and socializing once again. With the Covid-19 numbers dropping and with more people vaccinated, I hope that more will feel safe in returning to church. When are we going to have donuts at Mass again on a regular basis? When we have enough volunteers to serve them. Let me know if you would like to help. Coffee and donuts or bagels are a great instrument of fellowship after Mass.

Each year the Pastoral Council sets forth pastoral objectives for the year. This year is no exception. The objectives were approved at their meeting this past summer. Copies are available for you after Mass. Feel free to take a copy from them on your way to the parking lot.

In September of last year, the parish school opened with distance learning for all grades except Transitional Kindergarten. Gradually through the year through following an extremely elaborate process set up by the County to get exemptions, the grades began to open for in-class instruction beginning with the lower grades and working their way up. This year they're all back.

Last year our director of religious education, Margaret Johnson, worked with the parents in teaching their children at home. It is no substitute for in-person learning. This year we are back to in-person classes. However, the enrollment is down significantly. Mrs. Johnson has retired as Director of Religious Education. I understood her reasons but was sad to lose her, nonetheless. I am grateful for what she has done these past 12 years. Giving me sufficient notice allowed a systematic search process for her replacement. It paid off, for I was pleased to hire Justin Fontenot. He has a huge task to rebuild a program devastated by this pandemic. However, with his enthusiasm and youth, I am confident that he will meet the task.

The parish and the children's choirs have been reactivated. The parish choir began on September 12, and we will be seeing the children's choir at Mass soon.

Our youth and Confirmation programs were affected by Covid19, so through the leadership of Katie Dante along with Zach Zuvich, they adapted. Though the youths couldn't meet in person, they took part in the talks through You Tube and were given assignments to turn in. I felt bad that they couldn't have the weekend retreats as before. Unlike the previous year's class this year's class was able to celebrate Confirmation indoors in the church. Bishop Trudeau agreed to preside at two ceremonies on the same day. This coming year we will have classes on site and the usual weekend retreats.

Misty Jesse, our Director of Evangelization, has provided on-line Zoom Scripture classes, along with recorded Bible studies on the website reaching a Covid-bound, homebound, and a senior audience with limited mobility for travel, particularly in the evening. Our Lenten Mission this past March was offered both in person and via live stream.

Though Covid-19 put restraints on how food is served to the needy, our volunteers increased their output providing sandwiches, lunches, and dinners to local charities serving the poor both in the South Bay and in Long Beach. I was happy to see that the volunteers at Palos Verdes Resale Thrift Shop were able to open again and provide much needed service to the poor both through the items made available and through the proceeds of the sales.

Together in Mission is an Archdiocesan program designed to help the neediest parishes and schools in the Archdiocese. Each parish is asked to contribute their share, based on their financial capability. Ever since I came here, the parishioners have generously given, so that we have always exceeded our goal. This year sadly, it is not the case. We have only reached half of our goal in pledges. The poorest parishes have been the most affected by this pandemic. They need our help more than ever. Due to the pandemic, the Archdiocese postponed the campaign from February to May. It was not publicized as it was in the past. There was no talk at Mass to awaken people's awareness. There were fewer people attending Mass. I ask you please to consider making a pledge now. There are *Together in Mission* envelopes in the pews. Let's be mindful of Jesus' challenge to the man in today's Gospel. Unlike him, I hope you will respond and give what you can to the poor.

Three years ago, The Archdiocese launched a 5-year, capital campaign titled: *Called to Renew*, designed to strengthen every parish and center in the Archdiocese. The poorest parishes generally have the oldest buildings and are most in need of repair. The Archdiocese is encouraging all parishes to upgrade their facilities, so 50% of their goal is returned to them for that very purpose. Two years ago, we decided that this provided us the opportunity to complete our master building plan. To complete that plan and to help the poorest parishes as well, we needed to raise \$8 million.

Last year we had passed \$5 million in pledges and were prepared to announce it to the parish when Covid19 hit. So we put this campaign on hold. Now that Covid-19 is waning and more people are returning to church, the committee said that it is time to reopen that campaign. Some may be hearing from us soon, and we begin in full swing in January. The major portion of that project will be directed at the Monsignor Gilb Pastoral Center. Stay in touch.

We as a community have been resilient. So many of you have continued your financial support through the mail, through the bins at Mass, and particularly through on-line giving using *Faith Direct*. I am pleased to see the high rate of vaccinations in our community and plunging rates of Covid. I had my booster shot and hope many of you will as well. Perhaps even our younger children will be able to get the vaccine. I hope that soon I will be able to see you here without those masks.

Thank you for your presence and support. It is my joy to serve you as your pastor.