

# State of the Parish Address

## St. John Fisher Church

October 23, 2022

Monsignor David A. Sork, Pastor

Whenever I come to a parish meeting or teach a class to parishioners, I notice that people are bunched up in the back and the front row is empty. I sometimes wonder if this is a reaction to what people have heard in the parable in today's Gospel. Two people came to pray: the holy Pharisee and the despised tax collector. Jesus does not say that the Pharisee was in front and the tax collector in the back. He said that the Pharisee took up his position, and the tax collector stood off at a distance. The Pharisee really was praying to himself when he recited all the wonderful things he had done. All the tax collector did was acknowledge his sinfulness. Yet Jesus said that only he went home justified. The key to effective prayer is recognizing our sinfulness. Jesus calls us to humility recognizing ourselves as sinners but open to his grace in serving him and building our parish.

Today's annual State of the Parish Address is my 24<sup>th</sup> here as your pastor. As this waning pandemic evolves into an endemic, your parish has made the necessary adaptations this past year to make people feel more comfortable into returning to this new normalcy.

This past year the pastoral council made it a priority to draw people back to the life and activities of the parish. Just 13 months ago, 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. To lure people back to Sunday Mass, we offered a variety of opportunities. After the Saturday evening Mass, there was a concert with a box dinner and wine. After Sunday Mass, there were various games, a petting zoo, rock climbing, and even a luau. Coffee and donuts came back. After the 11:00 Mass we even offered In-and-out burgers. To kick off this year, we did something similar but on a more modest level.

One of the objectives for last year read: the Pastoral Council will host three "family fun nights" over the year to continue to draw parishioners back to the parish. One of them was a drive-in movie in the parish parking lot. A second was a family barbecue. A third one was an Easter Egg hunt. These events drew the people we wanted, and it is my hope that similar activities will continue.

The parish choir returned at the 11:00 Mass and later in the year a small choir at the 9:00 Mass. There was singing at all Masses. The children's choir returned as well. Although some teens played instruments at the 5:00 Mass, the teen choir has not yet come back after Covid.

Despite the pandemic, our sacramental life is still happening. From July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, there were 43 baptisms including 11 adults, 58 First Communions, 53 Confirmations, 23 weddings, and 53 funerals. During this past year, your priests administered the anointing of the sick and other sacraments to 161 parishioners confined to home, or in a hospital or special care facility.

As I speak, members of the pastoral council are counting you as part of our annual process of finding out how many people attend church. You saw them last weekend as well. I am interested to see how many have returned to Sunday Mass with the waning of the pandemic. I hope we see an upward trend.

Each year the Pastoral Council sets forth pastoral objectives for the year. This year is no exception. They approved the objectives at their meeting this past summer. Copies were handed out last month and are available for you in the information rack. Please take a copy and read these objectives to know what we plan to do for the coming year.

In September of last year, the parish school opened with in-person teaching; it had gradually opened the previous year. The school had adapted so successfully to virtual learning that many parents dissatisfied with the

learning in the public schools enrolled in our school. Seeing our enrollment numbers surge gave us cause for rejoicing. Unfortunately, many returned to public school once the school district returned to in-person teaching. So, our enrollment dropped. One of the challenges this year is to do more aggressive marketing to encourage people to enroll in our school. Its academic success makes it an easy product to sell.

The religious education program returned to in-person instruction on Sundays and Tuesdays. Many of the families were excited to be back in person again, and several new families have since joined our community. Although enrollment is larger than the previous year, it has not yet reached pre-pandemic levels. This past year was the first for Justin Fontenot as the new Coordinator of Religious Education. A big challenge this year has been getting volunteers for Religious Education. We are still in need of individuals to assist as catechists in the classrooms and as lectors for the Liturgy of the Word for Children.

Another objective this past year was: The pastoral council will directly support Youth Ministry in the implementation and growth of LifeTeen, including the development of an Edge (junior high program). Working with each other collaboratively, Justin Fontenot and Katie Dante were able to launch Edge and resurrect LifeTeen. The beginnings were humble, but I am hopeful that this year it will grow little by little. I appreciate the support of members of the pastoral council.

Confirmation returned to in-person classes. I was pleased that once again we could have the weekend retreats. They took place at St. Edward's Center in Wrightwood. Under new ownership, the facilities have been upgraded. As I had done before with my associate pastors, we went up for an open forum with the youths of questions and answers followed by confessions. I returned the same night, but Father Park spent the night, celebrated Mass for the youths the next day, and returned with them back to the parish. I consider the retreat to be the defining moment for them in their 2-year formation process. As in the elementary level, the number of students enrolled for Confirmation has grown but is still not at pre-pandemic levels.

Misty Jesse, our Director of Evangelization, has resumed her in-person Scripture classes and expanded the adult education programs. Bishop Barron's series has been particularly popular. Father Edward Beck, a Passionist Priest, conducted our Lenten Mission this past March. His evaluations were very positive. The best measure is that the attendance increased each night.

In preparation for next year's Synod of Bishops in Rome, Pope Francis has asked input from Catholics all over the world. He calls this process "synodality." Our parish actively participated in the process with almost 100 parishioners involved. Sheila Bloodgood, the chair of the pastoral council, collated all the suggestions of the participants at the synod sessions and send them to the San Pedro regional office. The suggestions of all parishes in the region were collated, and a report was sent to the archbishop along with those of the other four pastoral regions. Out of that came the Archdiocesan report that was sent to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C. The reports of all the dioceses of the United States were then collated, edited, and sent to Rome. This level of participation and collaboration is unprecedented in the church.

*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. Although we fell short the previous year for the first time, this past year we exceeded our goal. I hope we do the same this coming year. We must not forget the neediest in our midst.

Four years ago, The Archdiocese launched a 5-year, capital campaign titled: *Called to Renew*, designed to strengthen every parish and center in the Archdiocese. Three years ago, we decided that this provided us the opportunity to complete our master building plan that was conceived in 2004. To complete that plan and to help the poorest parishes as well, we needed to raise \$8 million. Covid19 caused us to put the campaign on hold, but this past year we began it again. We are within a few thousand dollars of our original goal. However, the inflation that has hit us means that this will not be enough. So, the campaign committee is continuing to work to

seek new pledges. If you have not made a pledge, I ask that you be a part of *Campaign 21, Completing the Vision*.

The major portion of that project will build the Monsignor Gilb Welcome Center. This past year I formed a building committee to advise me and the architect on the building plans. We have met with the architect several times. The overall design has been finalized, but we need to design the building in a way that meets our budget. After meeting on site with representatives of the City of Rancho Palos Verdes and having them review our conditional use permit, those present are confident that should get through the planning process easily. The sooner we can get started, the happier I will be.

This past Spring Father Park told me that to be closer to his parents who are in their nineties, he was requesting a transfer. I was sad to hear that but understood his reasoning and supported his decision. He is now associate pastor at St. Monica, which is just 15 minutes away from his parents. I had heard that Monsignor Chaffman was returning to the Archdiocese from Texas after working for the Archdiocese of San Antonio. So, I requested their considering assigning him here. After he and I talked, we both requested the transfer, and his assignment here was confirmed.

On a personal level, I was confined to the hospital for several days for the first time in my life. Due to a reaction to an antibiotic, I developed vertigo while out jogging early in the morning. I fell and cracked several ribs, which in turn punctured my lungs. The hospital would not release me until my lungs had sufficiently healed. The lungs are fine, but that incident caused me to postpone a ski trip to Mammoth. The pulmonologist thought the altitude too high for my lungs.

We as a community have been resilient. So many of you have continued your financial support through the mail, through the baskets at Mass, and particularly through on-line giving using *Faith Direct*. However, our attendance at Mass has not increased enough to bring our income to pre-pandemic levels. I know Covid is still with us, though not as severe. I contracted it myself this past summer but was never seriously ill. I did have to isolate myself and was noticeably absent at Mass for two Sundays. As you heard at the beginning of Mass, Archbishop Gomez has lifted some of the restrictions at Mass due to the county-wide loosening of requirements at public gatherings. Masks are now optional.

On today's World Mission Sunday, we need to be mindful of our need to evangelize throughout the world. As many missionaries are making sacrifices to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, we can help them through our prayers and financial support. There are special envelopes in the pews to designate your support.

You are blessed to have dedicated workers employed at this parish who make me look good. They consider what they are doing a ministry and a calling. I am grateful to them for their tireless efforts and for the hundreds of volunteers who give life to our parish community. And I thank you for your presence and support. I feel blessed to serve you as your pastor.