

State of the Parish Address St. John Fisher Church

October 8, 2016

Monsignor David A. Sork, Pastor

About 7 years ago we began construction on the project that would eventually give us a new church and remodeling of the old church into the parish activity center. The first step of this process was site preparation that involved re-grading the parking lot to maximize parking and at the same time provide a playing field for the parish school. There were some major obstacles, namely huge boulders in the ground that had to be smashed up or removed. It wasn't easy, but the efforts brought success.

As members of the faith community of St. John Fisher we are to prepare the vineyard the Lord has given us and to cultivate it, so that it might produce much fruit. There are obstacles that we may encounter, but we have the potential of producing fertile soil. If we utilize our gifts generously, we can produce much fruit. In today's Gospel the tenants took ownership of the land as if it were theirs. Instead of being grateful for what the Lord had done for them, they felt they were entitled to it all and destroyed anyone who would come in their way.

We are stewards, not owners. Working together in a spirit of selflessness and sacrifice, we can produce fertile soil. If we don't use our gifts, we lose them. Our parish mission is: Love God. Love all people. Make disciples. Today's annual State of the Parish Address is my 19th here at St. John Fisher. My address this year will be through the lens of how our parish cultivates the vineyard that Lord has given us. To include everything the parish has done would keep us here until tomorrow. I will try to highlight those of particular interest this past year.

The new church's prominence on the corner of Crest and Crenshaw had been attracting more people here. However, when we took a census count last October, we found that our attendance had decreased 4% from the previous year. Pastoral Council members are counting at the Masses this weekend and next, so we'll see if the trend continues. I hope not.

The numbers for sacramental services from July 1, 2016, to June 30, 2017, were as follows: 49 infant Baptisms, 87 1st Communions, 81 Confirmations, 18 Weddings, and 51 Funerals. Infant baptisms were up, and funerals were down. Weddings were down from the previous year, which were up 37% from the previous year. Each of those sacramental numbers represent hours of dedicated work on the part of our parishioners. For example, each of those 51 funerals represents the commitment of bereavement ministers who help the family through their difficult ordeal. Although I can't give statistics for confessions, I know that the Penance Services are very well attended and draw more people than the neighboring parishes that we assist: Holy Trinity and Mary Star. Although we offer confessions every day, we are consistently busy.

This past year Pope Francis honored two of our parishioners, Dr. Richard Meehan and Mrs. Lucie Traxler, with a special award. At the Cathedral, Archbishop Gomez presented them with the medals, and the following weekend at our parish I presented them with the certificate.

These two individuals with their selfless commitment over the years epitomize what it means to be a disciple of the Lord who serves rather than is served.

A few years ago a parishioner asked how the parish could support St. Bernadette's Mission in Peru to which he became aware and wanted to help. I suggested establishing a mission circle. I gave him the guidelines of the Archdiocesan Mission Office. He followed them methodically and recruited others to be a part of this circle. It established a web page to make others aware of it. It also sends out newsletters regularly. This past year the circle was able to send more than \$40,000 to St. Bernadette's in Peru. All donations are channeled through the Archdiocesan Mission Office to assure that they arrive at their intended recipient.

Our parish school offers Catholic education and formation through 8th grade. The Transitional Kindergarten program just began this year, so it is not part of my report. I'm proud to say that our school is in the top 1-2% of the 260 Archdiocesan schools for reading and math. In the areas of science 13 students were sent to the Los Angeles County Science Fair, and six were selected for the State Science Fair. Three of them won prizes. Two students were then eligible to participate in the National Broad Masters Science Fair. This past year every student in the eighth grade who applied to private and Catholic schools was accepted. Last year I said that my main concern is that we are not fully enrolled. With 40 students graduating to high school this past year, our enrollment dropped even further. I would be less than honest to say that I am even more concerned than last year. As successful as the school is in all measures of academics and religious formation, low enrollment continues to perplex me. Working with the school principal, school board, and parish finance council, I am looking for a long-term plan to increase enrollment.

Our Religious Education classes offer an ongoing graded-level program for as long as the children are in school. I encourage parents to accompany their children to the 9:00 Mass and, after a serving of donut holes and orange juice to bring them to their 10:30 class. This past year we had an added incentive. The Director of Religious Education, Margaret Johnson, provides special gifts for the children as they leave the 9:00 Mass. The gifts usually have some relationship to the theme of the Mass. This gesture has been well received.

This past year was the first year of Father Francis Aguilar with us. He is committed to working in the Confirmation Program with our Coordinator of Youth Ministry, Katie Dante. They have taken a look of the present program and are revamping it. As he gets to know the youth better and they him, I know he has much to offer them. I was pleased that he chose to go join our youth at the annual Youth Conference, "City of Saints."

A few months ago the Archdiocese assigned to us Father Bernard Kalu as associate pastor. Previously he was a student in residence. He will be with us full time until March of 2019.

Our parish administrator, Gayle Plecha, has been working with the Communication Committee to seek continually better ways of communicating with the parishioners. You may have noticed one of their projects: a new format of the parish weekly bulletin with a cover changing each week. It is also involved in the editing and publishing of *Impact*, the parish magazine. Finally, the committee works with the staff on the parish web site.

With construction complete for the church and parish activity center, we are close to paying off the loan. I am grateful to all of you who have been faithfully fulfilling your pledges. Since our parish began *Campaign 21*, it has committed itself to support the parish of Sagrado Corazón in Cudahy in their efforts to build a church. I attended the ground breaking ceremony for their church last fall. The people there are so grateful for our support. As we speak, the church is close to completion. On December 16 Archbishop Gomez will dedicate their new church. I plan to be there to celebrate with the people of Cudahy that special day.

I would like to comment on a couple building projects that took place this past summer. One was the expansion of the columbarium walls. After less than 4 years, the parish had already sold almost 50% of the niches. It has proven to be a wonderful addition. The architect of the church, who designed the original columbarium walls, designed the new walls in a way that would be consistent with the original walls. We almost doubled the capacity.

Another project was laying paving stones in the school quad where the children have lunch. This was possible through the generosity and insight of one of our parishioners. With stones rather than mud underneath the lunch tables, the children can return to class without tracking in the mud.

A third project was laying new tile on the kitchen floor of the auditorium underneath the parish activity center. It makes the kitchen itself much more attractive and desirable for those who want to serve food there.

While I was leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land toward the end of October, a truck showed up on our premises with thousands of pipes. When I returned from the Holy Land, I saw the finished product. On December 11 Bishop Oscar Solis came to our parish to bless and dedicate the new organ. The ceremony was followed by a concert with several hundred people attending. With over 2000 pipes, it is an impressive addition to our church. Having this organ enhances weddings, funerals, and, of course our Sunday Masses. As I mentioned in my talk last year, our music director, Grant Hungerford, deserves the credit for his leadership in the organ project.

For the past four years St. John Fisher Church, under the sponsorship of our pastoral council, has had a booth at the Street Fair at Peninsula Center. This past June we tried to focus on spreading the word on our parish school. It is a way of reaching out to the community who might not otherwise know who we are. The council has agreed to continue having this booth, for they see it as a great tool of evangelization.

Much of our evangelization efforts have been coordinated under the leadership of Misty Jesse, our director of evangelization. The Catholic Jewish Women's Dialogue of the South Bay had their first annual South Bay event help at St. John Fisher. There were over 160 attendees. I was one of the few males present. We introduced two new outreach ministries. One is called "Awakening Faith—Welcome Back," and is directed to Catholics who for whatever reason have drifted away from the practice of the faith. Another is "Divorce and Beyond," and is focused specifically on divorced and separated Catholics who have had to adjust their lives.

This past May we honored Monsignor Gilb on the 60th anniversary of his ordination as a priest. He has been ministering to us since 1985 first as pastor and since 1999 as pastor emeritus. It is rare that a priest is in ministry for so long. I was honored to concelebrate the Mass with

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him. A lot of his family was present. I received a letter from his close friend and classmate, Bishop Sylvester Ryan, expressing how grateful Monsignor Gilb was for that day. As we say in Latin, “Ad Multos Annos.” It means may he continue to minister for many years.

This Sunday we will be celebrating our call to stewardship at the parish life fair. In my brief address it is impossible to list all the activities that take place here. So I strongly urge you after Mass to stop by the Parish Activity Center. Once inside visit the many tables and discover how many and varied are our ministries. Over 80 ministries and organizations exist in our parish. You may find one that suits you. At the same time enjoy the refreshments inside.

I hope we will continue to be faithful stewards and dedicated disciples and work in his service. Let us be ever mindful of our mission: “Love God. Love all people. Make disciples.” As I go into my 19th year as your pastor, I am grateful for the opportunity to minister to you, and I know that you will continue to utilize your gifts in gratitude for what you have received and in service of your brothers and sisters. We will thus find ourselves ministering in a fertile vineyard.