

State of the Parish Address

St. John Fisher Church

October 15, 2023

Monsignor David A. Sork, Pastor

Today's parable about the wedding feast reminds us of the centrality of the Eucharist in the lives of our parishioners. Without the Eucharist there is no church. The Lord has invited us all to this special banquet and he wants all to answer that invitation.

Today's annual State of the Parish Address is my 25th here as your pastor. I have done this to keep you apprised of what is going on in your parish. All our activities and ministries flow from the Eucharist. The bishops of the U.S. have challenged us all to Eucharistic renewal. Now that we have recovered from the devastation of the Covid pandemic, we need to focus on bringing people back to Sunday Eucharist. Our number of Sunday participants has gone down by almost one third from pre-pandemic levels. You could help us by inviting people you know back to Sunday Mass.

The pastoral council has been focusing on different ways to bring people back by bringing people together. It helped host three welcoming events over the year to build our parish community: a jazz concert, an Easter Egg hunt, and an outdoor rock concert. It is my hope that similar activities will continue. As I speak, members of the pastoral council are counting you as part of our annual process of determining how many people attend church. You will see them next weekend as well. Last year we saw a slight increase. I hope we continue to see an upward trend.

Due to the pandemic, we increased the frequency of livestream Masses from every Sunday to every day. This could not have happened without the commitment of the video ministry under the leadership of Dave Bloodgood. Some families requested that their funerals be livestreamed because of friends and relatives who lived far away. This enabled people from across the country and all over the world to witness the funeral.

From July 1, 2022, to June 30, 2023, there were 45 baptisms including 12 adults, 65 First Communions, 53 Confirmations, 14 weddings, and 57 funerals. Your priests administered the anointing of the sick and other sacraments to 185 parishioners confined to home, or in a hospital or special care facility. Our parish is unique in offering people multiple opportunities for the sacrament of reconciliation: six days a week. This past year your priests have noted an increase of those coming to Confession. We are more than happy to be busy.

Our parish puts a priority on the quality of our Sunday Masses. Under the leadership of Grant Hungerford, our music is superb. He carefully prepares music appropriate for the theme of the Mass and gets the finest musicians. Choirs lead the singing at 3 of our weekend Masses, and well-prepared, talented cantors lead it at the other two. A liturgy team meets with the priests every week to offer suggestions for their homilies and to evaluate the quality of the previous Sunday's celebrations. What you experience at Mass is the result of much preparation.

This past summer Archbishop Gomez announced that, with the worst of Covid behind us, parishes could return to offering parishioners both the host and the chalice for Holy Communion and to provide the option of Communion on the tongue. Although over 90% of our parishioners receive Communion the traditional way on the hand, we offer the opportunity for those who wish to receive it on the tongue by designating a line for that practice. It is the left line up the central aisle. To minimize the possibility of the spread of germs, the Eucharistic minister sanitizes his or her hands after placing it on the communicant's tongue. Remember that when the minister holds up the host and says: "the body of Christ," you bow your head and respond, "Amen." He or she then places it on your hand or tongue. In accordance with the directives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, all communicants are to receive the Eucharist standing. We presently offer the chalice only at daily Mass. We do not have another Eucharistic Ministers to offer it to you at Sunday Mass. At last night's Mass we

installed 12 parishioners as Eucharistic ministers. We will continue to offer training opportunities until we have enough Eucharistic ministers, so please consider serving your fellow parishioners as a Eucharistic minister.

This past year witnessed a significant turnover in pastoral personnel. Father Bernard Kalu, the associate pastor, left for a new assignment from his bishop in Nigeria. Father Alejandro Enriquez replaced him as associate pastor. Katie Dante, the coordinator of Confirmation and Youth Ministry, left after 12 years. Her assistant, Richardo Mata, took her place. The principal, Mrs. Anne-Marie Hudani, went on sick leave. Mrs. Tina Gurrola, who served as the interim principal, did a remarkable job in leading the school through the accreditation process. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges granted our school accreditation for the maximum term of 6 years. In January I appointed a search committee to help us find a permanent principal. They reviewed 9 applicants. This led me to choose Mrs. Colleen Guenther as the new principal. She had been on the faculty for 20 years and had been groomed by Mrs. Hudani for school leadership. This past June at Sunday Mass and the reception that followed we publicly thanked Mrs. Hudani for her 20 years of leadership.

The enrollment has risen slightly to 175 students. Mrs. Guenther hired 3 new highly qualified and enthusiastic teachers for kindergarten, second, and fourth grade. The school is dedicated to teaching the Catholic faith, promoting academic excellence, and producing caring community builders.

In the religious education program 200 children were enrolled from preschool through 8th grade. This past year the parish coordinator of religious education, Justin Fontenot, developed Edge Ministry for young people in grades 6-8. It met one Friday a month for faith formation and fellowship. This was open to all youths of our parish, including those in our parish school. One highlight of the year was the Mardi Gras themed Edge Night. About 20 young people were in attendance where they learned the Catholic origins of Mardi Gras. This past summer we hosted our first Vacation Bible School in over 20 years: Camp Fisher. Several teens and young adults served as camp counselors for 45 children in preschool through 6th grade. The camp was so successful that it will be extended from one week to two!

There were several service projects for our young people: family sandwich ministry; Box of Joy program to ship boxes of toys, clothing school supplies, and hygiene items to Haiti, Guatemala, and other developing countries; Adopt-a-Family program to provide gifts for needy families at Sagrado Corazon Parish in Cudahy; and the Halloween Trunk-or-Treat, to provide treats for the children.

In the Confirmation program, Katie Dante reintroduced the Living Stations after four years of pause due to Covid. Life Teen was also brought back to the parish, although there were not as many life nights as was hoped. At the event known as Inspiration at Magic Mountain, 30 teens attended. This August we sent 16 teens to the City of Saints at UCLA, a weekend event sponsored by the Archdiocese. This was the largest group we have ever sent.

We had two weekend retreats for our second-year Confirmation students. The first took place at St. Edward's Center in Wrightwood. Due to excessive snow in Wrightwood, at the last minute we had to move the second retreat next door to the Mary and Joseph Retreat Center. I consider the weekend retreat to be the defining moment for our teens in their 2-year Confirmation preparation.

Our parish was one of the first in the Archdiocese to offer a panel on racism and the Catholic response. The Archdiocesan Office of Life, Justice, and Peace brought out a display of saints of various cultures, races, and ethnicities. The parish extended an invitation to neighboring parishes to come that evening to hear the panel. Misty Jesse, our Director of Evangelization, is continuing her successful Scripture classes and has expanded the adult education programs. There are three Bible studies, two men's faith formation groups, and a women's Bible study. Father Kalu and I each offered a Fireside chat.

Janet Whitaker conducted our Lenten Mission. As a composer of church music, her combining music and speaking made a powerful impact. This past year we moved the venue of the Friday Lenten Soup suppers from the auditorium to Barrett Hall with each group providing a different menu.

Together in Mission is an Archdiocesan program designed to help the neediest parishes and schools in the Archdiocese. Each parish is asked to contribute its share, based on its financial capability. We exceeded our goal last year. Looking at the response so far, I am concerned that we might not make our goal for this coming year. We must not forget the neediest in our midst.

When I first came to the parish, I found a confusing office arrangement with three separate reception areas. This made it difficult for parishioners to find the right place to go when they wanted to get their child baptized, enroll in sacrament preparation, enroll in the parish school, or plan a wedding or funeral. It was also an inefficient use of parish resources, with duplication of staff, equipment, and office materials. In addition, it separated our parishioners and staff, making it harder to build community and work together as a team. This same situation persists today.

Over these years, we came together as a parish to build a beautiful new church and to create a parish activity center and grass field for our youth. We have completed all the pieces of our 2006 Master Plan except one, the Monsignor Gilb Welcome Center. This is the keystone from which the rest of the campus plan emanates. It provides a single, central, accessible space where parishioners can go for anything they need at our Parish. The spacious reception area will be a parish family room where parishioners of all ages will cross paths and connect with one another.

As I approach my retirement within a few years, I would like to leave St. John Fisher in the best possible shape for my successor. Even though I will never inhabit it, I would like to build this vital center for our parish. Our current office areas were built in the 1960s and remodeled in the 1980s. Anyone here who resides in Palos Verdes knows what that means. Our roofs leak, our plumbing breaks, and our air conditioning and heating function only partially. Rather than sinking more money into an inadequate space, we can build the space our parish needs. The current area will then be utilized for much-needed storage space.

More than five hundred parish families have already pledged over \$9 million to build the Monsignor Gilb Welcome Center, \$1.4 million of which is directed to needy parishes in the archdiocese for their capital needs. However, the inflation of the past few years has caused the price of construction to skyrocket, and we now need to seek additional support. I am hoping to begin construction after school gets out. Construction should take about a year and a half. To begin the project, I still need over a million dollars more in pledges. It's doable if you can help.

We are blessed to have dedicated workers in our pastoral and support staff who make happen what I just described. I am grateful to them for their tireless efforts and for the hundreds of volunteers who give life to our parish community. I want to acknowledge the work of the members of the Parish Pastoral Council, of the Finance Council, of the Executive Committee of the Capital Campaign, and of the Building Committee. Alone I can do nothing. When all of us work together in harmony for a common vision of what this parish can be, the possibilities are unlimited. And I thank you for your presence and support.