

State of the Parish Address

St. John Fisher Church

October 13, 2024

Monsignor David A. Sork, Pastor

Today's Gospel can make us feel a bit uneasy as we think of the wealth we have. At the same time it provides us the opportunity to utilize what we possess to help others not so blessed. Our task to build the kingdom of God involves all of us sacrificing ourselves and utilizing our gifts in support of one another for the glory of God.

Today's annual State of the Parish Address is my 26th here as your pastor. I do this to keep you informed of what is going on in your parish. What you see on Sunday is only a small part. Our work here as disciples of Jesus takes place every day of the week and involves hundreds of volunteers along with our salaried employees. Their focus is service, and they do so out of love of God. This includes those who greet you at the front office, those who maintain this beautiful campus, those who assist in the worship services, those who assist at weddings and funerals, those who teach our children in the school and religious education program, those who reach out to the poor and needy, and the hundreds of volunteers who serve in myriads of ways.

The pastoral council is established by canon law to provide me with advice on issues that involve the pastoral life of the parish. 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 13% increase in attendance. I hope we continue to see an upward trend. Our attendance is still 28% lower than it was when Covid19 struck the world. The effects of that pandemic are still with us.

The process of discernment and advice that the pastoral council offers parallels what has been going on in Rome with the Synod of Bishops. It's called synodality. This synod involves not only bishops but priests and lay people as well. This past September members of our pastoral council read a book by Cardinal-Elect Timothy Radcliffe on the Synod of Bishops. He had been retreat master last year at the synod in Rome and offered unique insights. Council members had a most productive session on understanding what synodality means and how that applies to issues we face at our parish. I expect that we will learn more after the Synod is complete.

Compared to other parishes, our parish is doing quite well. Just look at the parish bulletin, and you will see all the activities happening. Our facilities are being utilized. It is a rare night when you don't see cars in the parking lot and lights on in meeting rooms and classrooms. In a few weeks a representative of the finance council will show you our financials for the last year and the challenges we face.

Last October, at the recommendation of the Pastoral Council, we began sending a monthly *Flocknote* newsletter via email to all parishioners with email addresses. The feedback from parishioners was very positive. If you aren't receiving it and would like to, you can sign up on the parish website or contact the parish office.

In July, we began converting our ageing, standalone parish software systems to a single, integrated system. This includes an online facilities scheduling system, parishioner database, and Pushpay electronic giving. It's a tedious process, but our administrative staff is up to the challenge. This will help us serve you the parishioners more effectively.

From July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, there were 52 baptisms including 6 adults, 60 First Communions, 52 Confirmations, 18 weddings, and 69 funerals. Your priests administered the anointing of the sick and other sacraments to 160 parishioners confined to home, or in a hospital or special care facility. Our priests make themselves available for confessions six days a week. Last year I had reported that your priests have noted an increase of Confessions. There were even more Confessions this year. We are more than happy to be busy.

Our parish gives priority to the quality of our Sunday Masses. What you experience at church is the result of much preparation. It involves not only the musicians but sacristans, lectors, and Eucharistic ministers. I would be remiss if I didn't add that we have a shortage. We offer the host and the cup at all daily Masses and the first two Sunday morning Masses. If we had more Eucharistic ministers, we could offer it at the other weekend Masses. Please give volunteering for this. On the first Sunday of next month, we will be seeking volunteers and be offering a class later that month to prepare parishioners for this ministry.

There are several devotional practices that have been offered over the years. Just look in the bulletin, and you will see. This last year another one was added: Devotion to our Lady of Perpetual Help. It takes place every Wednesday after the evening Mass.

This past year we witnessed another change in the pastoral staff. Justin Fontenot left here for a theology teaching assignment at his alma mater, St. John Bosco High School. I was very concerned about finding a replacement at this late date. Fortunately, our search was successful. The new Director of Religious Education, Kimberly St. Romain, came here from a similar part-time position at Our Lady of Malibu Church. With a Master of Arts in Pastoral Theology from Loyola Marymount University and several years of experience of teaching religion on various grade levels, she seemed the right person to lead our program.

Our parish school is thriving and remains focused on its mission. In partnership with parents, it is dedicated to teaching the Catholic faith, promoting academic excellence, and producing caring community builders. The enrollment has risen slightly to 179 students. Of our 28 graduates from this past year, 21 of them are attending Catholic high schools. In fact, our eighth graders had a 100% acceptance rate at both Loyola and Bishop Montgomery High Schools. Furthermore, 85% of our Bishop Montgomery students are taking honors classes. Our school participated in a pilot program for the assessment of religion knowledge and beliefs. Our students placed first among all participating schools in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

Students participated in many service activities last year, including donating supplies to schools in need, donating money to Sacred Heart School in Lahaina after they suffered damage from the Hawaii fires, donating pairs of pajamas to families in need, hosting a Lenten Soup Supper, donating proceeds from an Earth Day Resale to Palos Verdes Land Conservancy, and donating baby clothes to Casa de los Angelitos.

In the religious education program 156 children were enrolled from preschool through 8th grade. I am concerned that the numbers aren't higher. Again, the decline is the result of Covid19. This past year Justin Fontenot continued offering *Edge* Ministry for young people in grades 6-8. This past summer we hosted once again our Vacation Bible School, Camp Fisher. It was so successful in its first year that this past year it went from one week to two. 24 teens served as camp counselors for 40 children in preschool through 6th grade.

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 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.

There were two weekend retreats in Wrightwood for our second-year Confirmation students. Father Al and I went up there on Saturday evening for confessions followed by a Q and A session with the youths. Father Al remained there for the night and celebrated Mass for them on Sunday. I consider the weekend retreat to be the defining moment for our teens in their 2-year Confirmation preparation. 52 high school students were confirmed, and 22 have returned to volunteer their time as peer leaders or ushers at the 5:00 Teen Mass.

Life Nights were offered once a month to all the Youth of the parish. Other *Lifeteen* events included Inspiration at Magic Mountain and Knotts Scary farm.

Many Catholics who had been sponsors in the RCIA expressed a need for something that our catechumens had been learning for those who had been Catholics all their life but needed a brush up on what they knew. Hence, a new program called Catholicism 101. It is offered on the 4th Sunday of the month and

provides learning opportunities for Catholics to re-acquaint themselves with the sacraments, history, and rituals of the Catholic church.

This past year we had our first Cornerstone men's retreat, and this year we will be adding our first Cornerstone women's retreat. The retreat takes place on the parish grounds. We are focusing particularly on parishioners in their 30s through 50s who often don't participate in so many of the activities we offer. Both retreats provide faith sharing and outreach opportunities for a new generation of parishioners.

Together in Mission is an archdiocesan program designed to help our neediest parishes and schools. 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 worry that we might not make our goal for this coming year. Let's not forget the neediest in our midst.

In 2006 we developed a master plan for a parish of the 21st century. Although the church was the most visible part of it, a pastoral center was also in the plan. But at the time the church was built, we did not have the funds to build it. Five years ago, I announced a capital campaign to complete the master plan. Covid19 delayed it for a few years, but I never lost sight of what we are trying to do. Thanks to your generosity, we reached our goal.

This past year, our architect completed construction documents for the Monsignor Gilb Welcome Center. The Gilb Center will be a single, easy-to-find, accessible location for all parishioner needs. Look at today's bulletin for further information on the building project and a rendering of what this center will look like. Many people have been asking me when we will begin construction on it. Finally, I have an answer. The building plans are currently in the review and permitting process at the City of Rancho Palos Verdes. This summer we completed the site preparation phase, and we hope to break ground before Christmas. We have a wonderful building committee composed of your fellow parishioners whose expertise has been guiding us through the process. Construction will take about 14 months to complete. Del Amo Construction will be the general contractor.

Meanwhile, we have temporary quarters. Because constructing the Gilb center would involve tearing down the present transitional kindergarten classroom, we had to build a new classroom for them before we even began construction. This past summer many offices were moved to enable us to build a new classroom. The administrative staff is in the area near where you get your coffee and donuts. Father Al and I are sharing an office next to Barrett Hall. The offices of faith formation have been adjusted to share with the school office. The school will probably move its office around Christmas. All these moves remind me of a chess game.

We are blessed to have dedicated workers in our pastoral and support staff who make what I just described happen. I am grateful to them for their tireless efforts and for the hundreds of volunteers who give life to our parish community. 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.