

A.M.D.G.

State of the Parish Address St. John Fisher Church

October 25, 2020

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Nobody knew the Law of Moses better than the Pharisees. Nobody observed them more faithfully than the Pharisees. They took their faith seriously. Jesus was a threat to them, so the Pharisees wanted to entrap him. They chose one of their experts to catch him in the area they knew best. There were 613 commandments in the Torah. So, when this scholar asked Jesus which among those was the greatest, he was in a precarious situation. If he chose one commandment, they might pounce on him because he ignored the other 612. Jesus gave a two-part answer, using two different laws from the Scriptures: one from the Book of Deuteronomy, the other from the Book of Leviticus.

The law from Deuteronomy was part of a prayer that Jews pray several times a day: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. It's the prayer that they wear and that they even display outside their door. The law from Leviticus was not as common: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus was in effect summarizing all 613 laws into these short sayings and at the same time capturing the fundamental message of the prophets. Love becomes the overarching motivation for what we do and why we do it.

Today's annual State of the Parish Address is my 22nd here at St. John Fisher. My address this year will be out of our desire to love one another as we love God. Our parish mission is: Love God. Love one another. Make disciples. I am most grateful to all of you who by your activities and involvement give life to the parish. However, due to the pandemic dubbed Covid19, this year is unlike any year in the history of our parish.

Last March things began to unravel due to this virus coming out of Wuhan, China. At first the Archdiocese told us to practice caution at Mass by restricting Communion to one species and placing the host only on the hand. Then on March 16 we were told to shut down the church to all services. I asked Father Francis and Father Kalu to join me in concelebrating morning Mass in church. We continued this concelebration 7 days a week for the next few months. Providentially, we already had a crew of volunteers who had been livestreaming the 9:00 Sunday Mass for the past several years. I asked them to do it every day, so that the parishioners could take part in Mass from home by viewing Mass through their phones and computers. This crew has been faithfully doing this ever since.

When the governor allowed us to open the churches again, the Archdiocese gave us certainly protocols to follow to enable us to open safely. Many of you volunteered to undergo Covid19 training, so that we could do it effectively. We made a report of how we were prepared to open the church safely and sent it to the regional bishop for approval. This included all the measures we were taking to sterilize the inside of the church after each service. Approval came immediately. We opened the church for weekday Masses at the earliest date allowed. We scheduled services on Saturday and Sunday evening at 5:00 and Sunday morning services at 9:00 and 11:00. Since we were limited to 100 persons, the video crew livestreamed all Masses, so that if we exceeded the limit, more people could view the Mass in the Parish Activity Center and receive Communion.

Then came the July spike of Covid19 cases, and the governor ordered all churches to shut down again. However, we could celebrate Mass outdoors with no limit if people kept their social distance.

Because several hundred people were viewing the Mass via livestream, I decided to keep livestreaming the 9:00 Sunday and 8:00 daily Masses with only the celebrant and essential ministers present. For those watching on livestream, the priest celebrating Mass gave Communion after Mass for the next 20-30 minutes. The outdoor Masses have continued to grow in numbers as people feel more comfortable coming. Faces must still be covered at all these services. With the wet weather approaching we have ordered two large tents. I am hoping they will be installed before next weekend.

At first the parish office was only able to handle phone calls but no visitors. Once plexiglass shields were in place, the parish offices were opened for limited service. The challenge that faced all of us who wish to serve you was how to continue many of things we were doing while maintaining social distancing.

Under the leadership of Margaret Johnson, the Director of Religious Education, weekly Children's Liturgy of the Word were made available on the parish YouTube channel. Lectionary resources for families were added weekly through the parish website and SchoolSpeak. Weekly emails were sent to families with children registered in Religious Education with information and inspiration. Religious Education classes cannot take place here. Instead, parents receive student books and weekly resources and support, so that they can teach their children at home. Once we are permitted to resume in-person classes, we will continue to provide support for families that prefer the at-home format. 53 children made their First Communion either in church when it was still open or outside. The rest chose to wait until next May when out-of-town relatives can come.

The parish school had to close in March and transition to remote learning. I was impressed by how the teachers adapted to this new mode. The school received a grant for 150 iPads for the students along with training for the teachers. The principal and faculty look forward to having the children back in the school, but state and county restrictions keep that from happening. At present there is distance learning for all grades except for the transitional Kindergarten students and a small number of middle school students. The school is applying for a waiver to allow small cohorts of students to attend in-person school. Despite all this, I am happy to report that the school year began with 60 new students, the highest enrollment in many years.

Fortunately, we had completed the weekend retreats for the Confirmation students just before the pandemic hit. Since the church was closed, we could not have our scheduled May Confirmation. However, we were able to reschedule to Confirmations outside in August and September. Bishop Trudeau confirmed 58 youths. This year the Confirmation candidates will be taking the classes via video and submit their assignments from that class. The *Life Teen* program for our high school youth will be offered differently considering Covid19. Thirteen students attended an online retreat last weekend for Teen Leadership Training. Virtual *Life Nights* are being posted every Sunday and Bible study every Thursday for all high school students.

In adjusting to Covid19, our Director of Evangelization, Misty Jesse has initiated many changes to meet people's needs for a safe environment. The common platform has been Zoom in which people can see one another and interact with them through their computer. Zoom has been utilized for several Bible study series, small faith groups, book club, inquiry and formation classes for those planning to become Catholic, and prebaptismal classes for parents. I have utilized Zoom for meetings with the pastoral staff, the pastoral council, the Finance Council, and the executive committee of the capital campaign. Some of these probably will continue even after the Covid19 pandemic is over. Although the priests meet individually with couples planning to get married, their counseling and formation sessions are now taking place remotely.

During this past year the pandemic has slowed down our sacramental ministry but not totally shut it down. There were 40 baptisms, 53 First Communions, 58 Confirmations, 17 weddings, and 37 funerals. We

have had to hear confessions outside since July, but your priests are still hearing confessions on a regular basis. The Archbishop has not allowed the lay parishioners to bring Communion to the sick on a regular basis since the pandemic broke out, but your priests are still available for that as well as for anointing of the sick. During this past year we administered the anointing of the sick and other sacraments to 139 parishioners who were shut in.

While the facilities were shut down, we took advantage of that to perform some much-needed facilities updates. Barrett Hall was completely remodeled. Bathrooms were totally gutted and replaced with new tiles on the walls and floors, new toilets, stalls, sinks, and LED lighting. The interior was painted throughout including the stage. New tiles were installed throughout Barrett Hall, the Cityside and Seaside Rooms, and the entry area. The entire parking lot was paved and restriped. A new tile floor was laid in the Plaza Room replacing the carpet. Painting was done throughout the classrooms. A new tile floor was installed in the computer lab.

Last year I said that we had done preliminary work on a capital campaign to complete the parish master plan. An executive committee had been meeting weekly in preparation for a parish-wide campaign in March. Our goal was \$8 million. We had passed \$5 million in pledges and were prepared to announce it to the parish when Covid19 hit. The committee decided to put this campaign on hold for now. I am grateful that those who had already pledged are making regular payments. The committee is still meeting regularly and will advise when it is appropriate to resume the campaign.

A highlight for me this past May 23rd was celebrating my golden jubilee as a priest. Since Mass was being live streamed, I presided at the Masses on Saturday, the actual date of my ordination, and Sunday, the date of my first Mass. The musicians even arranged to have some of the same music that was sung on that day 50 years ago at St. Albert the Great Church in Compton. Probably more people saw this than if we had had a live celebration. I am grateful to so many of the parishioners who sent me cards and even gifts. It's not something I sought or deserve. I am grateful that God called me to be a priest and that I have been able to serve his people for 50 years and particularly the people of St. John Fisher for these past 21 years.

Last spring the Archdiocese asked me to accept a newly ordained priest as associate pastor to replace Father Francis Aguilar. This was supposed to take place on the traditional date for assignment changes: July 1. However, since the Cathedral was closed, the usual May ordinations could not take place. So, the date for assignments was delayed from July 1 to September 1. The ordinations took place in August outside the Cathedral in the plaza, and one of the newly ordained, Father Thomas Park, came here in September. I felt bad that Covid19 prevented us from having a formal reception for Father Francis that would allow the parish to express our gratitude to him for his four years of service. He did speak at all the Masses on his last weekend here, and people were encouraged to greet him afterwards.

Despite this unprecedented crisis, we have not shut down. Our staff has not folded but has doubled their efforts to adapt. Hundreds of volunteers have stepped up to the plate to help. We are still reaching out to the needy in our community. 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*. We are not thriving, but we aren't collapsing either. You'll hear more about the financial side next week when members of the Finance Council give their report.

Even during Covid19, our mission has not change: Love God. Love one another. Make disciples. We will continue to do that no matter the crisis. Thank you for your presence and support. Together we will prevail.