

Both parishes have published their yearly financial statements which means it's time for the state of the parish talk. The state of the parish is difficult to figure at this time, and you can probably guess at the reasons. First of all, financially, the state of the parish was good until early summer when we all got a dose of reality. We realized covid and all its problems were not going to go away quickly. For whatever reason the contributions that were more steady before the reopening of the churches began to fall off. See the financial statements for the exact numbers, but they dropped proportionally the same for both parishes. Weekly attendance was and remains down by two-thirds in each parish. That, by the way, is nearly universal for our part of the Archdiocese, even for parishes who offer the full complement of pre-covid Masses. Another reality that hit us squarely in the face was and is the priest shortage. Fr. Stephen was recalled to his order and there were not, are not and will not be any plans to send a second priest to assist in our two parishes. Those two factors make the state of the parish a little uncertain at the moment.

We can do nothing about covid and the way it's restrictions constrain the way we celebrate Masses. I spoke with the Archbishop recently and he assured me the we are pretty much finished with lockdowns of the church even if the Governor should ask. Christmas Masses will happen even with social distancing, overflow seating and video feeds.

The subject of the priest shortage is something that we all wish we didn't have to deal with. We are part of the pastoral region that consists of Holy Name of Jesus in Trenton, Our Lady of Sorrows in Monroe and Holy Family in Middletown. We have been content to allow the sleeping dogs to lie as long as we had priests to cover a

“normal” set of Sunday Masses for each parish. Fr. Stephen’s departure awoke one of those sleeping dogs. Such a transition is difficult. Covid has made it all the worse because there was no way to bring large groups of people together to discuss the situation. Fr. Stephen had also asked that the news of his departure not be announced until the latest possible date. This left almost no time for preparations. Under the covid restrictions, there wasn’t much that could have been done to prepare, so maybe it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

For all of us, our parish world changed. It changed dramatically, and it changed with an unwanted sense that there is no going back. For those of us who are very invested in our parishes that hurts and we are left to grieve what we feel we have lost; the greater the investment, the greater the sense of loss and the deeper the grieving. This can be compounded when those who are not invested in the parish demonstrate that by looking for a different parish. This is really. People who have moved frequently have learned to let go more easily. Those who never really invested themselves in their parish have nothing to grieve. Try to understand that people are different and they have different needs. Being one who is invested, I need to remind myself of this so I don't react out of hurt or anger when I hear of those who have chosen to find a new parish. And if we need to grieve or not, we should be sensitive that this is a difficult time for people, not just because of covid.

What happens now that we have reached this stage in the pastoral region process? That’s hard to say at this moment because in 2005 when the present pastoral regions were formulated, projections were that we would need to scale down the Archdiocese to 100

pastoral regions, each served by a pastor. Then each priest was to serve about 1000 Catholics each. Today the projections have changed. Over the next 15 years the number of pastoral regions will be reduced further to 60 to 75 pastoral regions. Ordinations of new priests have not kept pace with retirements and deaths. Speaking recently with the Archbishop he also mentioned that trying to rush new priests into positions as pastors after only two years is just too soon for a number of reasons.

What about our seminary that we hear is full? While this is true, it's a little misleading. Our seminary serves dioceses and religious order from all over the country. 60 of the 100 men studying there are studying for Cincinnati, 40 are not. And not all 60 will be ordained. I believe the present percentage is about 70% of those who enter are ordained. As the Archbishop pointed out, over the next 10 to 15 years we will be retiring the last of the baby boomers. Toward the end of that time, things should level out and ordinations should keep pace with retirements.

As I started to say, what happens now? The Archdiocese is in the middle of the next Pastoral Planning Process which will determine how we will go from 100 to 60 pastoral regions. How that will impact the three parishes in our pastoral region or if we will be left as we are has not been determined as yet. One thing I am certain about is that we can't go on as we are at present. Yes, 2020 has been a difficult year for both parishes for several reasons. We can whine and cry and despair about that. But that's not what we are called to be about. We have been asked to join with other parishes to help make difficult situations more workable. We will need to reorient our personal thinking and praying to this new reality in which the "us vs. them" that we are used

to becomes instead a Catholic, grace-filled and outward focused, “we”. I offer this as a vision for the future because my experience is that parishes who have been where we are now which try to stay just as they are and have been, (that is, the parish island unto themselves,) end up slowly shriveling and fading away.

Covid offers a blessing in disguise. We need time to grieve and reorient our thinking and our identity about who we will be. That takes time. These next months of relative inactivity due to the virus give us time to grieve that our parishes will never be the same, and to begin envisioning in them something new that will still be Catholic and still address our needs and the needs of people in our area as part of a broader effort. That new vision is an unfolding thing that is a distant vision. For now, what you need to do is what you've been doing all along, at least if covid allows. God is still, God. You are still you. Your parish is still here and isn't going anywhere, at least as far as I know and not for the foreseeable future. There is no need to panic.

The parish council at Holy Name has asked about an adjustment in the Sunday Mass times that we will be looking at over the next few months. One priest spread over two parishes makes any such change more of a process. Please keep an eye on the weekly bulletin for updates on this and on the Archdiocese's planning process.

One last thing, please pray for each other. Try to be gentle and understanding with each other. These are difficult time and they tax all of us. You may think, the other parish has it better or worse, but both are facing much the same challenges. While covid and the Archdiocesan planning process make things more uncertain, I don't see anything in our response that gives me cause to be overly concerned. God has all this in hand. We will be okay.