

REPORT TO PARISH – JULY 19, 2020

Good morning! Today I want to give you a brief update on what has been happening in the parish since March, and bit of a look ahead.

First of all, thank you for your continued commitment to our parish in this trying time. This has been a difficult time for everyone. Most of all, obviously, it has been a terribly difficult time for those who have gotten sick, those who have had to care for the sick or to mourn loved ones who have died alone in such isolated circumstances without the usual benefits and comforts of one another's presence and the familiar customs which we usually rely on to help us through these difficult situations. It has been difficult for those whose work, livelihood, or education have been disrupted. And it has been difficult in varying degrees for all the rest of us, who have had to navigate our way through this unfamiliar and unwelcome experience.

This pandemic also challenges us – as perhaps few other world events recently have – to focus on the care that we owe to ourselves and to one another. As you all know, cases of infection are increasing dramatically, especially in this part of the country. So we need to be even more, not less, careful to observe proper precautions – wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, washing our hands - not just here in church but all the time, not just the one hour a week we are here in church but the other 167 hours of the week. “See how they love one another,” was how some described the early Christians. We haven't always lived up to that as well as we should. We are being especially challenged to do so today by wearing masks whenever we are near others. It may be a bit burdensome at times, but living in society, being in communion with others, imposes burdens, and the love we should have for one another as followers of Jesus should make those burdens more than bearable.

Since the pandemic took over our lives in mid-March, I have tried to keep in touch with as many of you as possible – formally through my daily emails and the parish website and informally as opportunities have arisen. It took time for the parish to get up to speed on how to live stream Mass, which we started doing on Facebook on Palm Sunday. Since then, we have livestreamed one Mass every Sunday and on some other special occasions, including a Memorial Masses for former pastor Bill Brimley. To continue livestreaming, and also to show the Mass simultaneously in the parish hall, we have invested in new camera equipment, internet connectivity in the church, and a copyright license for live streaming, all of which (spread over the next three years) will cost some \$7000+, much of which we hope to have reimbursed from the Diocesan Catholic Education Trust fund.

As you know, the dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation remains in effect and so no one is obliged to come to Mass at present. Public Masses and sacramental celebrations resumed after Memorial Day, with strict protocols to be followed for everyone's health and safety. We have marked off limited seating in church and arranged for any overflow to be able to see and hear the Mass in the parish hall. We also reduced the weekend Mass schedule to allow sufficient time for cleaning between Masses. So far, Mass attendance has averaged about 35% of the average Sunday attendance for the same period in 2019. If one counts those watching on Facebook (either live or later that day), we could claim to have 87% average attendance compared to 2019. Also, you may have noticed that the "cry room" has been reconfigured as a safer and easier-to-clean confessional. Likewise the cantor now sings behind a protective barrier.

The catechumens and candidates who should have been welcomed into the Church at Easter did so this year at Pentecost. The children who were scheduled for 1st communion and confirmation received those sacraments in June. To make sure no one missed out on confirmation, the bishop has given priests permission to celebrate the sacrament in his place. I will be doing a second confirmation in August for those who missed it in June.

You may remember that the church's heating system broke down in December just before Christmas. A short-term fix was installed to get us through the winter at a cost of \$11,552. A permanent replacement has since been installed at a cost of \$68,094. Hopefully the heating system is now up-to-date. We are presently investigating installing an air-purification system in the air-ducts.

Although the Pandemic was already on its way, we were, of course, still relatively oblivious in January when I spoke on behalf of the 2020 Paulist Appeal. So far, Immaculate Conception parishioners have pledged or contributed **\$20,306** to the Paulist Appeal, compared with **\$19,734.71** in 2019. So far, Immaculate Conception parishioners have also pledged or contributed **\$45,508.25** to the Bishop's Appeal, which is **87%** of our annual goal Bishop's Appeal goal of **\$52,200**. (In 2019, we reached **94%** of our goal.) Before the pandemic, we were also preparing for the Paulist *Hope for the Future* Campaign. The Campaign was due to begin here in May, but has been postponed for now. Even with the Campaign temporarily on hold, plans are proceeding, however, for the new seminary building in Washington, the ground-breaking for which will hopefully occur in October.

Despite the pandemic and the suspension of public Masses, our total collections for the 2019-2020 fiscal year, which ended June 30, were actually higher than the year before, for which we are all very grateful. On-line giving has increased significantly since March, and that has been especially helpful. A year ago, on-line giving was about 15% of the total. Now it is up to 22%. Whether you have been giving on-line, by mail, or in person, thank you. Your continued support and commitment to our parish is a vital sign of the parish's present life and our hopes for the future.

This month, the Diocese of Knoxville has switched to a new Safe Environment program - CMG Safe Haven, which replaces the familiar Virtus program. All employees and volunteers will be required to take the new training, and updated background checks may also be required. The training is online and takes about an hour and a half to complete. If you volunteer in any parish ministry, we ask you to plan on doing this as soon as possible.

Finally, as you may have already heard, several members of the Paulist Formation community in Washington and 2 other Paulist priests outside of Washington became sick with Covid-19. All have recovered, except our Novice Director, Fr. Rich Colgan, who died on May 25. Fr. Mike Kallock has been appointed to replace him as Novice Director. The students are presently at Lake George, NY, taking courses on-line, and hope to return to Washington for the beginning of the school year next month. Also, Paulist Deacon Paolo Puccini, who was originally scheduled to be ordained a priest in May, will be ordained this Saturday at Saint Austin's parish, Austin, TX, The ordination Mass will be livestreamed on the Paulist Fathers' You Tube and Facebook pages at noon Eastern Time. Fr. Puccini's First Mass will also be livestreamed next Sunday at 9:45 a.m. Eastern Time. Please join the Paulist Fathers in praying that Fr. Paolo will experience and long and fruitful and fulfilling priestly life and ministry.

In a normal year, we would be busy right now getting ready for our 13th Annual Irish Fest on the Hill. For over a decade now, Irish Fest Weekend has been the highlight of the summer season and one of the genuine highlights of the entire year at Immaculate Conception and in downtown Knoxville. Its absence leaves a big hole in our summer. I deeply regret that we were unable to hold an Irish Fest this year. I certainly hope that this wonderful tradition will be able to return full strength a year from now!

Meanwhile, let us continue to pray for and with one another:

Almighty and eternal God,
our refuge in every danger,
to whom we turn in our
distress;
in faith we pray look with compassion on the afflicted,
grant eternal rest to the dead, comfort to mourners,
healing to the sick, peace to the dying,
strength to healthcare workers, wisdom to our
leaders,
and the courage to reach out to all in love,
Through Christ our Lord. Amen